

# INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGEMENT WITH READING LIST SYSTEMS

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## Introduction

Defining what a Reading List Management System (RLMS) is may seem simple, but there are many variations available in the UK market. Put simply an RLMS should allow all key users (students, academics and librarians) to manage their respective reading lists. This management includes initial creation and editing of lists, sorting and viewing lists and stock acquisition.

An RLMS should make the management and undertaking of all tasks associated with reading lists easier than if there was no system in place. It should provide a better educational experience for students, time efficiencies for academics (and more) and allow libraries to carry out critical tasks, as opposed to keying in data.

In this paper, we will consider why we even have RLMSs, and then for academics and students in turn, consider what engagement even means, and then how to attain and maintain this.

## Main Goals of the RLMS

1. Improve student engagement
2. Improve student access to **appropriate** library resources (this requires good academic engagement)
3. Improve the student experience

And these goals make sense. A RLMS and the collection, management and then delivery of reading lists to users exist in order to improve learning. It is to improve the student experience of reading lists, and the ancillary benefits from this.

There is often a misconception that the main goal is it actually to make the library's job easier, in managing reading lists, in ensuring an appropriately stocked library. That is potentially short sighted because all that is for the benefit of the libraries main user (and customer): the student.

That is not to say that an RLMS should not make library tasks easier – it should – but just providing a simple bibliographic list to students is no longer enough.

So an RLMS exists to improve the experience of the student, in accessing and utilising reading lists, and in the system's integral secondary benefits, having access to the resources contained within the reading lists.

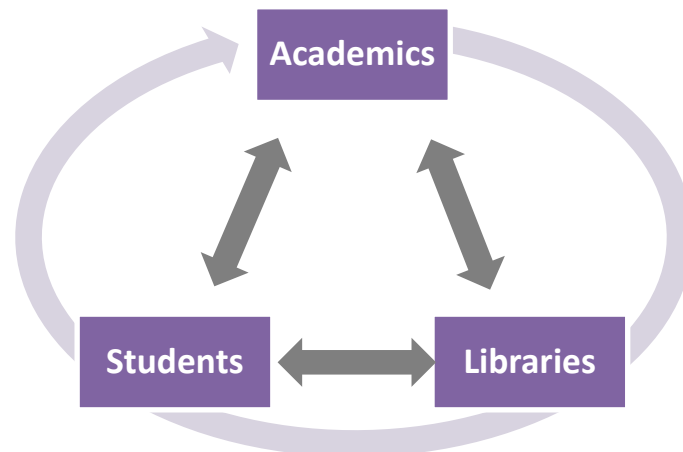
## The engagement cycle

There is little value in implementing a RLMS unless everyone is going to use it. To increase your return on investment you need all the stakeholders on board.

The first step in the engagement cycle is the academics. Without having academics on board and providing you with the lists, you don't even get to think about student engagement. Of course, there are ways around this but they usually consist of significant usage of library resources.

The next step has traditionally been librarian engagement. Most institutions consider this stage to be sound. In the future, sophisticated systems will be able to automate the majority of library workflows directly related to reading lists, i.e. quality checking and resource acquisition. This means the engagement cycle becomes leaner and library staff can carry out more front line services.

Third in the cycle is student engagement. It is always important to remember, as will be frequently stated during this paper, that without remembering student engagement there simply is no point in this system existing.



1: The RLMS Engagement Cycle

But what is engagement actually? The answer to this question and how we get and keep it will be covered in each of the next sections – addressing academics then students in turn.

### Academic engagement – what is it?

Effective academic engagement constitutes providing and appropriately updating accurate, high quality, tailored reading lists, in a timely fashion. There are, however, a number of levels and forms of engagement from academics currently present in universities.

- Negative engagement: Lecturers refuse to use new forms of technology, such as the RLMS. Whilst producing hardcopy reading lists had its place in education at one time, it is no-longer useful to the students or their respective libraries. In fact, it is not useful for the academics themselves, they just need to be informed of the benefits of using the system and opportunity costs of not.
- Reactive engagement: Providing reading lists through hard copies or an online system when prompted. Usually, this is the end of the engagement from the academic until they are prompted the following term, semester or year(s) for an update.
- Proactive engagement: Academics under this category provide reading lists independently of student or librarian prompt. The lists tend to be kept up-to-date continually, thus providing a better experience for the student, due to more appropriate, relevant material being suggested and this material being stocked in the library.
- Value-understood engagement: This category of engagement is rarely found across the academics in the UK. High quality and high accuracy reading lists are provided with a variety of resources and continually updated in order to ensure they are tailored specifically to the module. Brief but informative annotations are also provided across the lists to provide guidance to students.

Key to proactive and value-understood engagement is the use of a (relatively) sophisticated RLMS. A system allows for the easy and independent uploading and updating of reading lists. That is, without the help of librarians. Upon this update, the librarians can be notified of changes for checking processes and stock acquisition. Good RLMSs also allow for the reading lists to be high accuracy due to the limited requirement for manually inputted data. A system such as UNILIBRI takes information such as an ISBN or DOI and populates the remaining bibliographic details automatically. This not only ensures high accuracy but also time efficient creation of lists.

### Academic engagement – getting it?

The facts are now that negative and reactive engagement to reading lists is not acceptable. This is without taking into account the new tuition fee levels. In the digital age, there is no excuse, even for senior-position academics to not take an appropriate interest in their reading lists. Students are used to and expect to consume electronic information whilst libraries have invested huge amounts of time and financial resources to bring about other software infrastructures that support a university. This makes them more competitive in the now global education market. It is time academics met their own responsibilities.

Getting academics engaged with the system is one of the most difficult but important tasks facing a university. It is important to note that libraries are not on their own in this process. Most RLMS providers produce documentation to help with implementations. Furthermore, help should be found within the university itself from top management. The following is a good start to get academic engagement:

- Multi-faceted approach: Libraries should employ the numerous options described here in order to have the most effect. Simply running an email marketing campaign to your academics is too easy to ignore.
- Emails: Email your lecturers to prompt them to update or create their lists. Emails should be sent from the librarians but also from a supportive contact within the academic's department. UNILIBRI is also able to send emails to academics to support this process.
- Notifications through the VLE: Messages and links to the RLMS.
- Top management buy-in: Having the Vice-Chancellor email staff about the need to manage their lists is invaluable. Having the management of reading lists tied to academics' appraisals is one step better and has been used at a few universities to great effect.
- Documentation: Written information about the use and advantages of the system online is essential. UNILIBRI actually provides its universities with documentation and screencasts to support this process. Our research has shown that academics value the written content strongly. This makes sense as they spend large amounts of their career preparing and

reviewing journal papers: academics are used to absorbing and understanding written content.

- Training: Workshops on the use of the RLMS. These allow for face to face contact that can not only help quickly resolve technical problems, but allow the librarians to proactively promote the system and change a reactive or proactive academic into an advocate for the system. Try and hold these workshops within departments; sometimes it is a lot of effort to get to the library.
- Webinars: Producing short training webinars that academics can digest in their office and easily return to for refreshing their knowledge are vital for maintaining any initially generated engagement. These are a supplement rather than a replacement to the screencasts that UNILIBRI provides. It is effective to use these webinars to answer specific queries from academics.
- 1-to-1 conversations and training: This is a last resort due to large time requirements, however it does provide the particular academic with the best chance of understanding the system.
- Department admin staff: Placing some responsibility for creation and management of lists with clerical or admin staff in departments can be an effective step. It is not wise for them to be creating the lists themselves long-term but they are a contact close to the academics that can encourage the process. Delegating responsibility to departments is also an excellent way to reduce the workload on librarians.

### **Academic engagement – keeping it?**

The process of initially getting academic engagement can be very time consuming. It is therefore vital to undertake steps to maintain this engagement. This means the academics need reasons to return and use the system again. The best reasons are for self-motivated causes, but it may take some time for the academic to realise the value of the system and get to this stage. Therefore the following steps help maintain engagement:

- UNILIBRI provides visualised analytics to the academics showing them how their students are interacting with the content they have prescribed. For example, they can use this to compare student engagement across their different reading lists and identify items which are not being used by students.
- Reminders: Sent through the same channels as for initial engagement: VLEs, emails, 1-to-1 conversations etc.
- Ensuring the system continues to work with various reference management software be it reworks, endnote, Zotero, Mendeley or others.
- Ensuring the system you have implemented allows the creation and management of lists to be carried out as rapidly as possible.

- Periodic training: Continually providing the forms of training described above is also important in maintaining and promoting more engagement with the system. This should include workshops and webinars.

**A self-motivated cause through UNILIBRI: Following other lists - UNILIBRI also provides academics with this unique feature. They can add lists created by their peers to their “watched lists” section. These lists could provide anything like a great template to work off for their own lists or contain work they are interested in reading and following.**

### **Student engagement – what is it?**

Student engagement with reading lists is often forgotten in current university practices. The focus is heavily placed on actually producing the lists and keeping them up-to-date - insufficient attention is paid to the students. The first part of this paper clearly outlined that without the students there is no point in a RLMS or a library or even lecturing, obviously. Therefore, ensuring student engagement is vital to the success of all of these and ultimately the university. Traditional student engagement is made up of activities such as accessing lists, interacting with pieces of content (eg. clicking through to the library record) and using the content in assignments.

As with academics, there are various levels of student engagement. These may seem obvious, but are worth noting:

- Negative engagement: Students do not access reading lists, whether prompted by academics, librarians or peers.
- Reactive engagement: Students access lists when an assignment is created by an academic, or when they are prompted.
- Proactive engagement: Students access their reading lists ahead of assignment creation or module start dates in order to read ahead to better prepare themselves and ensure they can get resources for free and on time.
- Advocate engagement: Whilst displaying the activities of a proactive student, advocate students look to create reading lists themselves when they are not present.

**UNILIBRI provides students with a previously unavailable option: to go beyond their reading lists in a structured, relevant way. The UNILIBRI system allows students to discover fascinating content that is directly related to their degree. UNILIBRI sources this content from reputable, world-leading websites, going beyond just UK sources. This exposure allows students to truly learn about their subject’s industry, attain higher grades and become more employable. This is providing a RLMS that allows students to fall in love with their subject again whilst giving them better career prospects.**

## Student engagement – getting it

Getting the initial student engagement with a RLMS is not too difficult. At the beginning of term, most students are interested in viewing their lists in order to see what content they need to get hold of. The key here is to let students know exactly *how* to access the reading list system. A number of approaches, some similar to getting academic engagement, can be used:

- Social media: The use of library accounts on Facebook and Twitter will allow for the system to be easily advertised to the students. Furthermore, these messages can easily contain a link to the login or sign up page for the system. Libraries should not only make use of their own account, but also post on the main university Facebook page and twitter account as more students are likely to follow these compared to the stand-alone library accounts.
- Advertisements in the SU: Leaflets, posters produced by the university.
- Promote in Fresher's greeting pack: Providing information in one of the first things students receive from the university is important. It sets a precedent that reading lists are important. This could simply be provided through a leaflet.
- Promote at fresher's fair: A library stand at the fresher's fair with leaflets but also library staff to discuss the RLMS is a great way of promoting initial usage of the system. Having a computer set up, and being able to walk-through the login and authentication process with the students (i.e. reminding them where they can find their university username and password) is useful. Of course, then going through the basics of the system is great. UNILIBRI actually provides a walk-through tutorial on a user's first visit.
- Lecturers: The first lecture of the degree, year, module, term etc is an optimum time to promote the existence of the RLMS and provide some guidance in its use and the content that has been placed on it.
- Emails: Emails in the first weeks will be particularly effective. Laying out instructions on how to get to the system and briefly how to use it has proven effective.
- VLE messages: Providing an obvious message referring students to the RLMS on the VLE and placing links within each module page.
- Links on student portals: Dedicated student portals should always have an obvious section about reading lists.

## Student engagement – keeping it

Maintaining student engagement is currently harder than most universities believe. Current systems, some costing up to £50,000 per year, are simply not produced in an "interactive" way. They are still focussed purely on solving the library, and to some extent the academic problems. The production of a list that is viewable to a student is almost an after-thought. RLMSs need to be interesting and



easy-to-use. A simple bibliographic list was adequate many years ago, now there is the potential and the demand to do so much more.

Whilst maintaining student engagement in a modern RLMS is predominantly controlled by the RLMS itself it is important for the following steps to be carried out:

- Academics continually updating their lists with additions and annotations.
- Continually marketing the system to the students through the same methods used to get them to initially use it. Therefore, continued use of social media, SU advertising, and emails is important.
- Workshops: The library should run workshops on using the RLMS to students. Just like with the academic workshops, these are an excellent way of solving specific issues and promoting the value of the system.
- Demos: RLMSs like UNILIBRI also provide screencasts targeted at the students taking them through using each part of the system, in short clips. Providing links to these through the VLE and emails is important.

**A key to maintaining engagement is the “user experience” of the site. UNILIBRI has been created with this as a central focus and driver. Reading lists are displayed in a previously unseen format: only the actual required information is displayed whilst full bibliographic information can be exported and created by the student for assignments. This creates a clean and easily understandable page for students to digest. The Discover page of UNILIBRI’s site is also displayed in a very interactive, streamlined and engaging fashion...truly bringing the RLMS into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

## Conclusions

Engaging the key stakeholders of reading list management systems is pivotal for short-term impact and long-term sustainability. Both academics and students must have their engagement encouraged using a multi-faceted approach in order to achieve the best results. The engagement cycle requires that academics engage with the system first – they are needed to create the lists. It is only then that students can engage with the system in a valuable way.

Most of the methods of obtaining engagement initially can be continually used throughout the life of the RLMS, in order to maintain and increase engagement further. Examples of this include email campaigns, use of social media and one-to-one conversations. These approaches can also increase the ‘engagement level’ of the students and academics. Taking them from a negative engagement level to an advocate or value-understood engagement level is a key benefit from these processes.

Your choice of reading list management system will affect this entire process. Different levels of support will be given from different RLMS providers. Incumbents in the market charge subscription fees for the service, using that as their main source of revenue. Because of this, they may not be as

inclined to provide extensive help with your engagement issues compared to a company that only benefits when engagement is high.

## **About UNILIBRI**

UNILIBRI was founded in late 2010 and has since carried out two years of research including the development of a prototype that went through private testing with students, academics and librarians. Based on that feedback, UNILIBRI has been developing its offering for universities and further education colleges in the UK and abroad. UNILIBRI will launch commercially during Semester 2 (February onwards) of the 2012/13 academic year.

The new-age reading list management system is all about improving engagement with, and management of reading lists. With UNILIBRI you can truly engage your student and academic bodies to get the best out of your investment. This is achieved through the use of an intuitive design that is streamlined for its functions; not only is it incredibly easy for academics to create lists but also for students to access the content through interactive features.

Whilst currently focussed on the higher education sector, UNILIBRI will expand its services to schools and 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges in order to better inform prospective students about the alternative courses available at university. This will set these students up appropriately for a better educational experience.

Get in contact for more information, a demonstration or answers to any of your queries.

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