Key issue

Researchers of Tomorrow study

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'Researchers of Tomorrow' is a three-year study, funded jointly by the British Library and JISC, tracking the research behaviour of 'Generation Y' doctoral students. The first year *Annual Report 2009–2010* (www.researchersoftomorrow.net) was published in June 2010 by the consultants Education for Change, who are undertaking the study.

Evidence for the study has been collected from three groups of doctoral students in the UK:

- in-depth commentary from a cohort of 60 Generation Y doctoral students in 36 UK universities
- a national, context-setting survey – completed by over 2,000 Generation Y doctoral students
- (the same) national survey – completed by over 3,000 older doctoral students.

Constraints on undertaking research

Findings of the survey published in the first annual report indicate that there is little difference in the research behaviour between Generation Y and older doctoral students. The main differences in behaviour are between subject disciplines. Time constraints, family issues, money concerns and the need to work to earn money are cited as constraints on research (only 5% of the Generation Y students are part-time students compared to 34% of the older students).

Information-seeking behaviour

When it comes to searching for information to support their research, only about 30% of both groups begin their search using Google. It would appear that Generation Y students are now good at information seeking and do not rely on Google. Science, technology and maths students certainly make use of specialized databases. Generation Y students are rigorous in their search for relevant research information and set themselves high standards in obtaining comprehensive coverage of their research area. The good news for librarians is that all doctoral students are heavy users of the university's library collections (both e-resources and printed journals, books and archives). However, many science students in particular rarely visit the library. Unsurprisingly, journals (electronic and print) are the most important resource for doctoral students but a significant number say that 'licensing restrictions imposed by e-journal and other e-information services' and 'difficulties of getting hold of relevant research resources' are constraints on their research. One might have expected to find that doctoral students would favour electronic resources but the study does not indicate that. Instead, printed journals are still seen by many as signifying quality and authority. Regular use of the inter-library loan service is higher among arts and humanities students – 42% of the Generation Y sample used the service regularly.

Training and support

Not such good news for librarians is that Generation Y students do not think highly of the general research skills training they receive, although around 50% said they had received useful training in areas relating to information

seeking. There was a strong feeling that training was more suited to Masters or undergraduate students and not pitched at a sufficiently advanced level. Strong preference is shown for informal, ad hoc training and support from peers and supervisors as and when needed – especially on using technology. Worryingly for librarians, 57% of Generation Y students have never consulted a library subject specialist; older doctoral students are much more likely to seek help and advice in the library.

Use of technology

All doctoral students rely heavily on IT and the networked environment. The majority identify themselves as 'elite technology users'. However, when it comes to using newer technologies, both groups of doctoral students demonstrated low use and take-up of Web 2.0 technology, including RSS feeds, text and data mining and social bookmarking,

in their research. Indeed, they may even be said to be sceptical about the inherent merits of new technologies; they certainly do not equate 'easy to find' with quality. Evidence suggests that this is not down to lack of skills but that they do not see them as relevant to their research. Given that doctoral supervisors seem to have a significant influence over their students – particularly in relation to use of technology and information resources – this may be students simply replicating the behaviour of their supervisors.

Next year's agenda

On the basis of the first year's finding, the study team intend to focus research in year two on a number of specific issues. These include: training and support; the role of supervisors; understanding of scholarly publishing (including open access); and attitude to, and use of, specialist library services.