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How to make your e-resources earn their keep

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How to make your e-resources earn their keep

Based on a paper given at the UKSG seminar 'The radical library: taking up the challenge', London, 13 November 2003'

This paper outlines how Loughborough University Library ensures that the bibliographic and full text databases it subscribes to are used to the maximum. This is done through the collection of statistics, promotional activities including training and the introduction of a portal (MetaLib) and linking technologies (SFX). The article will concentrate on the introduction of MetaLib and SFX and discuss how successful the new services appear to be.



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E-resources can mean a multitude of things, including web sites, e-books, e-journals and databases. This paper will concentrate on how to ensure your databases (both bibliographic and full text) earn their keep through monitoring usage, through marketing and through allowing easy access to databases.

Loughborough University Library monitors usage of databases quite closely. An Academic Librarian is responsible for collating statistics from suppliers on a monthly basis and the Library as a whole reviews these reports quarterly. COUNTER[1] should make the collation of these types of statistics much easier. Every time a database comes up for renewal, the usage statistics are examined and a cost per search or log-in is ascertained. Discussions then take place on whether a subscription to a database is renewed. These discussions include the proposed audience, how the database fits into the Library service structure, plus cost per use. Thanks to these efforts, no database subscription is automatically renewed. On occasion the Library may continue to purchase what is considered to be an expensive database because it meets the specific needs of a particular department (e.g. Chemical Abstracts) or because it is felt that usage could be increased through marketing of the service.

The Library promotes all services, including databases, quite heavily. This promotion is done through leaflets and posters within the Library and the provision of training sessions. The Library delivers both customized courses within modules and generic training sessions known as 'Lunchtime in the Library'[2] and 'Database of the Month'.[3] The 'Lunchtime in the Library' sessions illustrate how to find particular types of information (for example, books using the Library catalogue) and resources for particular subject areas (for example, finding company information). 'Database of the Month' is different and concentrates on one particular database that the Library wishes to promote, either because it is new or under-utilized. Analysis of database statistics shows that usage of a featured database does go up for a short period of time (approximately three months) after these training sessions.

More importantly however, the Library introduced MetaLib and SFX, sister products to Ex Libris's library management system, Aleph. What are MetaLib and SFX? MetaLib is a library portal and is described by Ex Libris as "an effortless way" for patrons "to find and use electronic resources relevant to their area of interest and to search simultaneously across a range of diverse resources".[4] MetaLib allows a library to list databases by category and then using Z39.50, ZING or similar technology, cross-search more than one database at the same time. SFX[5] utilizes

OpenURL technology to dynamically create links from MetaLib and the native interface of some databases to either the Library catalogue (to show where the print journal is stocked in the Library) or the electronic full text. Thus MetaLib allows the reader to carry out a search and SFX then allows them to link to the full text of the article in those journals to which the Library subscribes. As a result of using these two products, the Library is beginning to provide a seamless service.

The Library took five months to implement MetaLib and went live with the service in September 2002. A large team assisted in the introduction of MetaLib; nine academic librarians and a representative from the Systems Team and Support Services, who purchase the databases. Now a smaller team of four maintain MetaLib. SFX was implemented in a slightly shorter time-scale and by a small team of Library staff, three of which were on the MetaLib team.

Both products do allow local customization, but the Library decided not to make too many changes, as these have to be re-introduced after each upgrade. However, the Library's logo was included on both products and changes in terminology were made to reflect local customs. MetaLib allows a library to present databases by category. The Library chose to use the same categories as its subject guides – these were really departmental lists of databases. Resources which are not web-based (print abstracts and CD-ROMS as an example) were also included. Because of this the Library has decided not to maintain its web-based subject guides, but for the present has continued to preserve the web-based A – Z list of databases.

So how do you set up MetaLib and SFX? The process is relatively easy but can be time-consuming. Both MetaLib and SFX have a KnowledgeBase of resources and in many instances all that is required is to activate a particular record for the item to be available from the service. In other instances details of the item (database or e-journal) need to be entered on the system by Library staff. In the case of MetaLib, details of the item are entered onto a form within the product. With SFX the e-journal details are entered onto a spreadsheet and then uploaded onto the KnowledgeBase. For a database to be cross-searchable in MetaLib it needs to be configured. This requires some knowledge of MARC and an understanding of how the product is working. Some databases, such as Web of Science, allow links to the full text of journals a library subscribes to from the bibliographic record. This can be activated either by filling in a form under the administrative section of the particular database in question or requesting that they activate the service.

The Library sought clarification from many publishers concerning the compatibility of their products with MetaLib and SFX. In mid 2002 there appeared to be a lack of awareness amongst publishers regarding cross-searching requirements and OpenURL technology. This situation now seems to be changing, as more libraries are purchasing portals and linking technologies and requesting these facilities from the publishers. When Loughborough University Library purchases a new database or renews a subscription, its compatibility with MetaLib and SFX is always considered and does play a major role in the decision process.

So how do the readers use MetaLib and SFX? The Library requires readers to log-on to MetaLib. This enables readers to create a list of 'favourite' resources and maintain their own personalized e-shelf, so they can actually save their results and keep them on MetaLib if they wish. However, the Library does encourage readers to clear their e-shelf on a regular basis and to store their references in a bibliographic software system. Once logged-on to MetaLib, readers can select which subject category they wish to use (see Figure 1). They are then presented with a list of databases for that subject area. They select the databases they wish to search within MetaLib and enter the search terms (see Figure 2). Next, they are presented with a list of results that includes: full bibliographic citation, abstract if available and the SFX button (see Figure 3). If they click on the SFX button they will discover whether the Library subscribes to the journal in print or electronic format (see Figure 4). Some databases are not cross-searchable within MetaLib. Readers can access these files through MetaLib, but then will have to search them in the original/native interface.

When the Library introduced MetaLib, it was envisaged that it would mainly be an undergraduate tool. Informal feedback shows that this is not the case. Undergraduates do indeed seem to be accessing databases more regularly (it is quite noticeable when you walk through the library

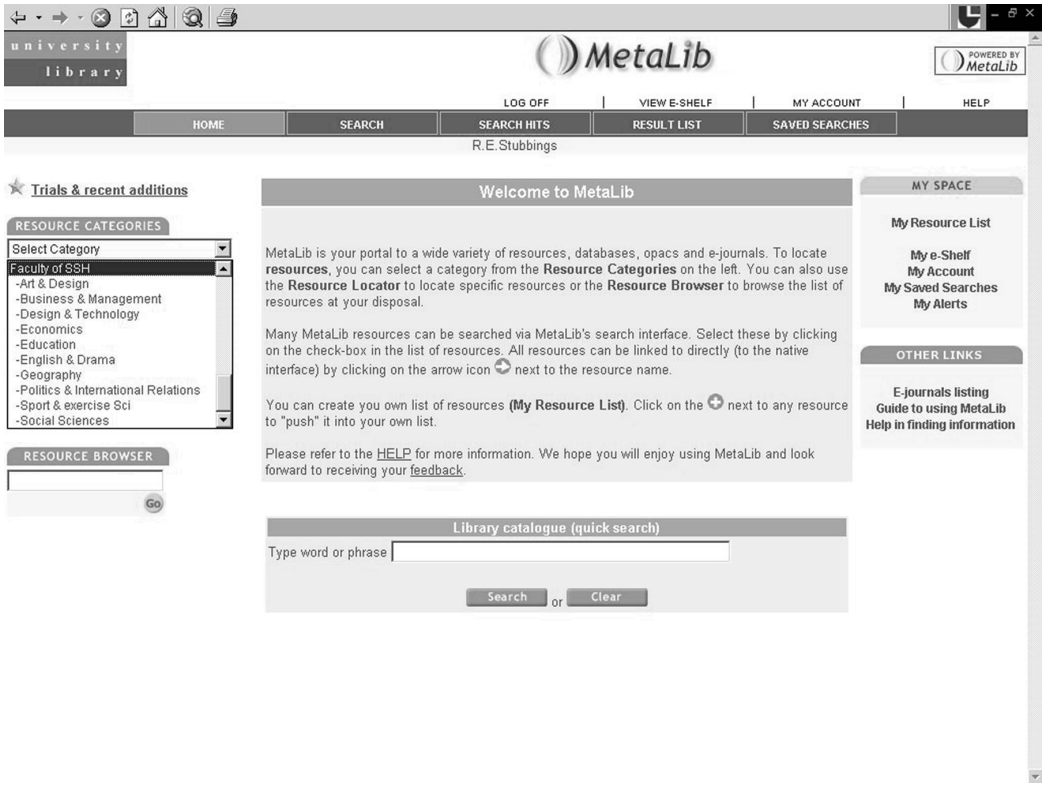


Figure 1. Selecting resource categories within MetaLib

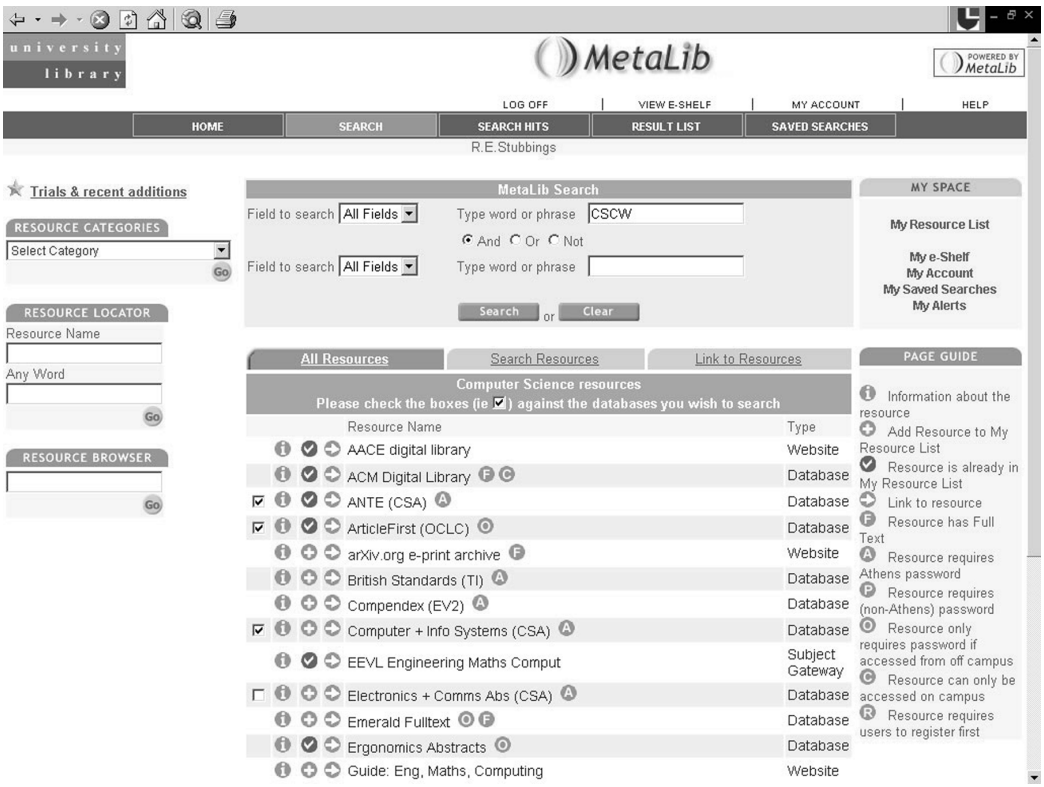


Figure 2. Searching databases within MetaLib



Figure 3. Bibliographic record within MetaLib

how many students are using MetaLib) but both academic staff and post-graduate researchers also appreciate the cross-searching facility within MetaLib. They use it to carry out quick searches and also as a selection tool. They also carry out a search across more than one database to find the most suitable database for the required topic and then carry out more detailed searching within that database's native interface. When the Library carried out a survey in Spring 2003 on the use of electronic information, the results were surprising. It became apparent that amongst the respondents to the survey, undergraduate use of MetaLib was lower than that of postgraduate and academic staff, as a third of respondents in these last two categories use MetaLib regularly.

Enquiry work and reader training has benefited by the introduction of the portal. Library staff can now illustrate one access point to the databases, rather than the three access points previously available. As readers log-on to MetaLib, there is now one storage point for specific access information and passwords, thus part-time and distance learner students have less difficulty in finding this information. In general students seem to relate more easily to the search process within MetaLib and are very happy with the links to the full text.

Feedback to the portal has been very positive with comments like: "*I love playing with it*" or: "*It has really helped me with my studies*". However, there have been some criticisms, some of which have come from readers who have not always been able to decide which resource category to select (mainly because their topic could be considered to be multi-disciplinary), not all databases being searchable within MetaLib and the Library not subscribing to every journal indexed by the databases. The Library is now looking at how to manage the expectations that have been raised by providing easier access to the databases.

So, what has the introduction of a portal meant to Loughborough University Library? Are the databases earning their keep? The answer to this is a resounding yes! During the academic year 2002–03 the Library saw the use of databases increase by 609%. Initially, MetaLib did not provide statistics but, as previously explained, the Library has always collated usage statistics from the publishers. These statistics are based on either the number of searches or the number of log-ins,

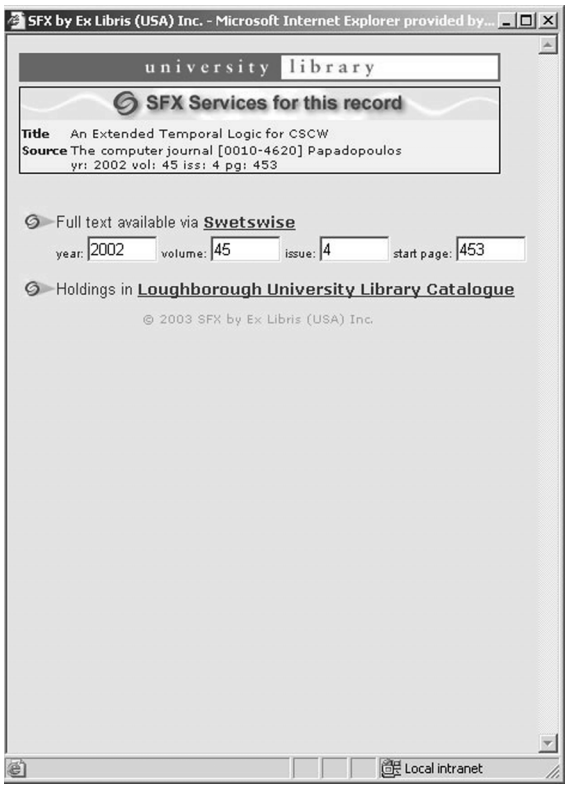


Figure 4. Illustrating the SFX (linking technology) screen

depending on the format used by a particular supplier. The statistics show that with the introduction of MetaLib, the number of searches within databases, in particular those on the Web, has increased dramatically (see Figure 5). The databases which collate log-ins to determine usage, however, show a decrease in usage of 13% (see Figure 6). It is assumed that there has been a drop in the number of readers searching the databases in their native interfaces and that readers are now choosing to search through the interface of MetaLib. The statistics shown in the following diagrams are based on figures collected in the academic years 2001–02 and 2002–03.

The CD-ROM network saw a drop in usage of 48% but this was not entirely due to the introduction of MetaLib; it followed a general trend as the Library made more CD-ROMs available electronically. Conversely, non-networked CD-ROMs saw a rise of 1.78% in usage for the same period and the Library believes this is due to the higher visibility they now have on MetaLib.

Some web-based databases showed a dramatic increase in usage, for example, Zetoc rose by 1,385% and SportDiscus by 1,207%. Even some of those databases that were not cross-searchable saw an increase in usage, for example, ICEA went up by 225% and ABES by 36%. This illustrates that MetaLib is a useful promotion tool. Those databases that showed a decrease in usage tended to be non cross-searchable in MetaLib and were often quite subject-specific. This illustrates that the readers are choosing to use less appropriate, non-subject specific resources that are cross-searchable. This is reflected in the data now available from MetaLib. MetaLib can now supply statistics on log-ins and the number of searches carried out in particular databases. Between July and September 2003 six databases nearly always appear in the top ten searched databases. They tend to be the more general type of databases, for example ArticleFirst, Zetoc, IBSS, the Library catalogue, ANTE and

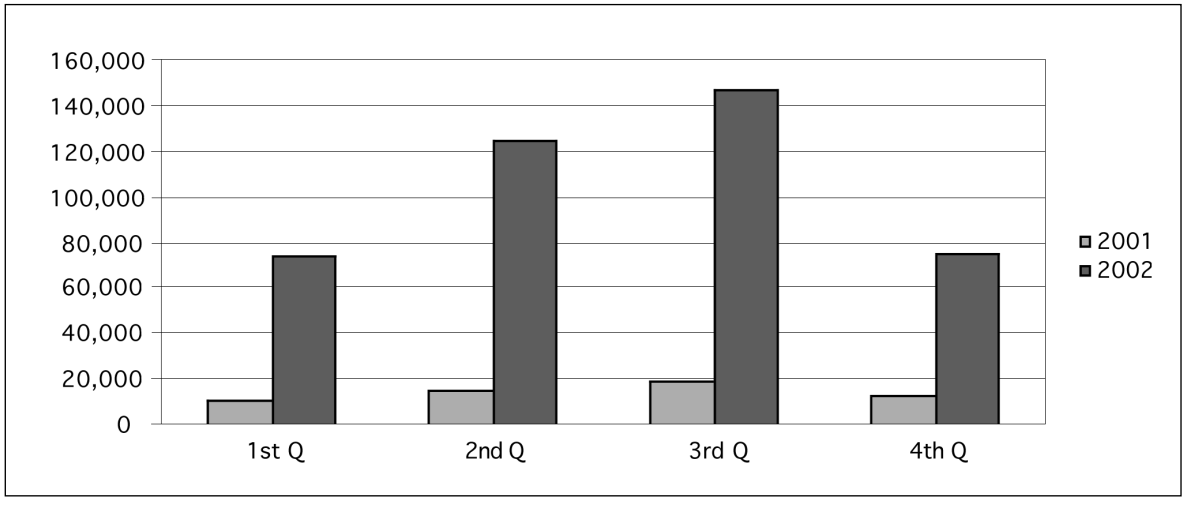


Figure 5. Databases by number of searches for the academic years 2001–02 and 2002–03

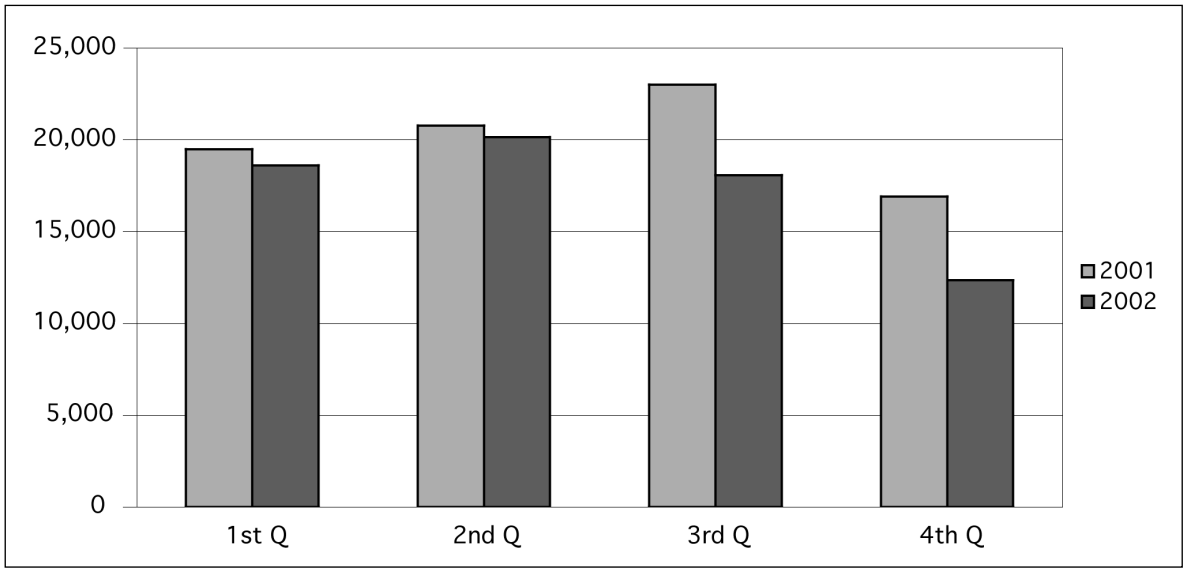


Figure 6. Databases by sessions (logins) for the academic years 2001–02 and 2002–03

ASSIA. INSPEC, COMPENDEX and SportDiscus then compete for the next three positions.

The Library will continue to carefully review all database subscriptions to ensure that most appropriate databases are purchased. Influencing factors will be: content of database, usage figures and compatibility with the portal. Loughborough University Library will also continue to lobby publishers to ensure that most resources can be cross-searched within the portal. This policy may mean that publishers who do not make their databases more accessible will see a decline in usage and perhaps in subscriptions.

In conclusion, the Library believes that MetaLib and SFX have played a major role in encouraging readers and in particular, undergraduate students, to make more use of the resources provided by the Library. Hopefully, the ease of cross-searching databases and linking to full text will mean less reliance on searching for information through search engines such as Google and, ultimately, a better standard of work. The Library now needs to enhance the portal by utilizing new features such as the e-journal facilities. It also needs to investigate more thoroughly how readers are using MetaLib and to ensure that readers are selecting the most appropriate journal articles for their learning and research.

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