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Understanding academics: a UX ethnographic research project at the University of York

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Understanding academics: a UX ethnographic research project at the University of York

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Abstract

In Spring 2016 the University of York launched a research project to better understand academic staff. Ambitiously titled 'Understanding Academics' the project centred around the use of specific ethnographic methodologies and in particular two UX techniques: cognitive mapping followed by semi-structured interviews. The use of UX methodologies put the academics at the centre of the interviews, focussing on what they wanted to talk about rather than working through a pre-determined set of questions. Following the interviews, a five-stage methodology for managing and analysing the research data was developed. Ultimately, the research has led to a number of key outcomes: a set of 'quick wins'; a set of longer-term practical recommendations; an evidence-based synthesis which seeks to define and explain academic life and understand the key motivations, frustrations and aspirations for academics; and finally an analysis of the key themes from the interview data.

Keywords

Academic staff

University libraries

Usability

UX

Ethnography

Introduction

In Spring 2016 the University of York launched a research project to better understand academic staff. Ambitiously titled 'Understanding Academics' the aims of the project were threefold: to gain a better understanding of how academics at York approach their research and teaching activities; to consider how Library services currently facilitate and support those activities; and to integrate the 'academic voice' into future service planning and de-

velopment of support for academics, ensuring that the Library continues to engage departments in innovative ways that respond to both current and future needs.

The project centred around the use of specific ethnographic methodologies and in particular two UX techniques: cognitive mapping followed by semi-structured interviews carried out by Academic Liaison Librarians (ALLs). The project was firmly rooted in evidence and what was happening at York, focussing on what practical steps the Library could take to support its academic community. The interviews carried out in Spring 2016 are a snapshot in time and encapsulate and represent the commentary and thoughts of a set of academics at York at that particular moment. Since then, events and circumstances have moved on, both in the world of academia and beyond (the TEF and Brexit, for example).

Whilst this is not a literature review, the project reflected on the shifting trends and practices in academia nationally and internationally. Lanclos, for example, writes about the “mess of academia¹” today and explores changing landscapes in academia, highlighting how new and emerging digital practices are fundamentally shifting the ways in which academics research, teach and access resources. The research carried out by Lanclos into these ‘messy’

¹ Lanclos, D. M. (2016). Ethnographic approaches to the practices of scholarly communication: tackling the mess of academia. *Insights*, 29(3), p 239.

shifts is reflected in the much broader UK Survey of Academics 2015, the 'Ithaka' survey².

The survey analysed responses from nearly 7000 UK researchers to a questionnaire about behaviours and expectations of researchers in today's scholarly environment. The results from the Understanding Academics project aligned with findings from the Ithaka survey and research undertaken by Lanclos amongst others³, defining new directions in which academia is moving and ways in which information services are starting to respond.

The project had two key outputs; a synthesis of what it means to be an academic at York (motivations, frustrations and aspirations) and an analysis of the key themes emerging from the interviews.

Due to the sheer volume of data generated from the interviews it is not possible to present the themed analysis as part of this paper. Instead this article focuses on the first output, namely the synthesis of academic life at York.

Methodology

User Experience or UX, as it is defined in the library context, is a suite of techniques based around first understanding and then improving the experiences people have when using our

² Wolff-Eisenberg, C., Rod, A. B., & Schonfeld, R. C. (15 June 2016). UK Survey of Academics 2015: Ithaka S+R | Jisc | RLUK. Retrieved from Ithaka S+R website

<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/uk-survey-of-academics-2015/>

³ Including Adams (1998), Bazar (2006), Boyd, P., & Smith, C. (2016), Darabi, M., Macaskill, A., & Reidy, L. (2017), Gregory, M. S.-J., & Lodge, J. M. (2015), Hoffman, A. J. (2016). For a full list please see the bibliography.

library services. It utilises ethnography and design to achieve this. Andy Priestner defines says ethnography “is simply a way of studying cultures through observation, participation and other qualitative techniques with a view to better understanding the subject’s point of view and experience of the world. Applied to the library sector, it’s about user research that chooses to go beyond the default and largely quantitative library survey, with a view to obtaining a more illuminating and complex picture of user need. These are often hidden needs that our users do not articulate, find it difficult to describe, are unwilling to disclose, or don’t even know that they have – which special ethnographic approaches are perfect for drawing out.”⁴

This project used two ethnographic techniques: cognitive⁵ maps and semi-structured interviews. To prepare for the project, ALLs received training in neurolinguistic programming, business analysis tools and effective questioning and listening skills. The methodologies were tested on three volunteer academics. Minor changes were subsequently made to the process and 97 interviews were carried out across all three faculties (an average of four per department). The project drew on an additional 45 interviews that had been carried out immediately prior to the formal project using more traditional interview techniques. All academic departments⁶ took part in the project.

⁴ Priestner, A. (2015, May). UXLibs: a new breed of conference. CILIP Update, p. 31.

⁵ For an explanation of cognitive maps and how to use them see Asher, A. , Miller, S. (2011). So You Want to Do Anthropology in Your Library? or A Practical Guide to Ethnographic Research in Academic Libraries. The Erial Project. Retrived from <http://www.erialproject.org/publications/toolkit/>

⁶ All departments were included with the exception of the Hull York Medical School (HYMS)

At the start of the interviews, academics were asked to draw a cognitive map of how they prepare for a new module or a new research project, showing each of the key stages, along with the systems or tools needed to make them work and how they link together. The task was deliberately broad in order to understand how academics worked, what they prioritised in their thinking, where the Library fitted in with research and teaching activities and where any missed opportunities for support might be.

Academics were asked to talk through their cognitive map and a semi-structured interview took place using open questions to facilitate discussions based on what academics wanted to talk about rather than going through a pre-prepared set of questions.

In order to help process, analyse and manage all the project data, a five-stage methodological approach was developed which involved: conducting and writing up the ethnography; coding and analysing the data in NVivo qualitative software (against a set of key themes); assigning themes for further analysis; developing project outputs and recommendations; and finally disseminating results for wider comment. The key themes of resources, digital skills and tools, research support, and digital and virtual spaces were central to the project and created all the main streams of work and subsequent actions.

Synthesis at York

Academic life at York is at once varied, rich, challenging, pressured, all-consuming, stressful, energising and motivating. Each academic interviewed for the project experiences their job and the University in their own individualised way depending on the department they are in, whether they are carrying out research or teaching (or both), what their previous experi-

ence in academia has been, how well supported they feel in their professional development, what feedback they receive from students (either individually or through local and nationalised surveys), and how individual personal circumstances impact on their work-life balance. It is perhaps not advisable to overly generalise about what it means to be an academic at York; however there were enough similarities emerging from the interviews to be able to articulate some broad themes and issues that help identify and explain the shifting scholarly environment in which academics now operate.

Motivations

The opportunity to be part of a scholarly research community, and in particular working with students and colleagues, is central to what motivates and enthuses many of the academics interviewed in the project. Academics talked with real passion about their research areas in particular, their collaborations with colleagues around the world, and being able to encourage and motivate new students into that world:

“The academic conversation is extremely important and, following it, taking some of it and pitching it to students.” Social Sciences researcher

The nature of the academic role provides some academics with a challenging and stimulating balance between their own research activities and teaching students:

“I don’t think I’m a researcher who is forced to do teaching, I don’t think of myself as a teacher who fits in a bit of research. I think they’re pretty equally important to me and I enjoy them both ...The idea of just being a researcher would send me round the bend,

and the idea of just teaching would send me round the bend. I like being an academic. I like the public, sociable side and I like then going away and shutting the door and getting on with my work.” Humanities researcher

Academics are genuinely motivated by their research activities and providing their students with the best possible student experience. That may partly be the inevitable result of national surveys such as the NSS and PTES/PRES, as well as internal University targets and drivers; however there was an overwhelming sense from the academics interviewed that they enjoy working with their students, that they are committed to teaching them in the best ways possible, and that they invest a huge amount of time and energy in supporting and developing departmental teaching agendas and initiatives. Many put the needs of their students above their own needs, working long hours to accommodate student requests, respond to feedback, prepare for classes and mark assignments.

“Start of this term was manic. I had practicals this term on Monday and Friday that finished at 6pm in the evening, that takes out big chunks and there’s nothing you can do. You either work out of hours or it doesn’t get done.” Science academic

Motivations around research and teaching may help to explain the long-hours culture within which many academics operate; yet that long-hours culture is often an accepted part of academic life.

The Library as an enduring, appealing physical space was also commented on by many academics interviewed. They enjoy working in the Library when they get the chance to because

it is possible to get more work done without being interrupted by a knock on the office door. Some said that they would like to work more in the Library, however, but were not able to due to noise levels or guilt about taking precious study space away from students.

“I think it’s amazing [the Library] and I sometimes come here just to work, to get away from the department. At the moment it’s a bit full so I have been over to the Library in town instead.” Social Science Academic

This importance of York’s physical library at York is captured by one of the academics in a recent blog post (Beer, 2017)⁷.

Frustrations

Many frustrations were raised during the interviews with staff acknowledging that the interviews themselves were a cathartic process. There was a genuine appreciation from academics that someone was taking an active interest in them, and affording them the opportunity to reflect on their work and their lives as academics.

In particular, a number of academics interviewed outlined the range of different roles, tasks and responsibilities that they are increasingly expected to take on in response to a new fi-

⁷ Beer, D. (2017). Writing in the Library: some brief reflections on an evocative writing space. Medium. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@davidgbeer/writing-in-the-library-9222ef73753f>

nancial reality and rising student expectations. For academics who have been in the profession for many years, there has been a significant shift in responsibilities and accountabilities which can feel overwhelming at times.

“If you speak to most academics they will probably be at capacity or overworked. We are a very different place and academics like me have seen things change rapidly.” Humanities academic

Many academics are juggling a variety of demands at once and this can be particularly acute for academics in smaller departments who still have the same number of demands on them but demands which have to be carried out by fewer people:

“We’ve got the same number of significant admin roles as a big department but far fewer people to spread them around. They roll them around a lot more. They tend to say - spend two years in this role and then you can have time without an admin role but that’s just not happening with us.” Humanities academic

In particular, increasing administrative tasks are placing a considerable burden on academics who have to balance these with their ongoing research and teaching activities.

“I’m spending most of my life at the moment doing all the planning for this department’s research strategy and other performance supervision and all sorts of other admin. It’s that, that’s the big issue. And of course having time for that is very, very difficult because often you’re in permanent crisis mode. You think you’ve got time

for some research then suddenly it's 'by the way we need this document by tomorrow' and suddenly that time is gone." Humanities academic

Departments have workload allocation models which allocate time to academics for administrative tasks, research and teaching activities. Some departments seem to be better at organising these allocations for their staff than others. The reality for most academics, in fact, seems to be much more pressured, with many finding it difficult to maintain an even balance, particularly at certain times of the year. Term-time is inevitably focused on teaching and administrative work, with research activities often falling during the long summer vacations. Academics evolve their own systems for managing workloads and spreading things out across the year.

"I've been writing an article for two years now. It could take ten years to write a [named subject] monograph. People don't realise that. But that's also with the very, very heavy teaching loads we have in [name of department]. Effectively the biggest time for research I get in a teaching year is August, and if you've got a family, the time is very restricted." Humanities academic

"Research really only tends to happen at the weekends. For a normal member of staff, the week is pretty filled with things which are not necessarily conducive to research, especially during term-time, it's rare that you finish a paper. You're always hoping for these breaks. I think just for this reason, research is always where you can take time away from urgent things that need to be done. I'm not sure how good we are at noting when people take their annual leave but there's a well-known tendency that people tend to

work 50-60 hours per week and have maybe half their holidays just in order to bolt on the ordinary demands, some research activity, because that's always the thing that comes last. You can never say 'I'm not going to mark these scripts because I have some research to do', you can never say that, there's always a deadline for marking, it's always tomorrow, you can't say 'I'll bring them in two days later' to do some research. But the other way is perfectly legitimate and it's up to you how you do your research."

Science researcher

Linked to these pressures are the challenges of having to publish a specific number of research outputs in any one year, where to publish, metrics as an individual and bringing in research income which is vital for individual departments and the institution overall:

"... there's a certain subset of journals, three or five journals, that everyone should publish in. It's good for your CV, good for your promotion and everything, to publish in those journals." Social Sciences researcher

"If you're bringing in money, that's all they care about...You're only worth something if you're bringing in money." Humanities researcher

"And they're constantly REF REF REF funding funding funding, and you end up working all your evenings and weekends." Humanities researcher

Such pressures and demands can ultimately impact on academic creativity and innovation:

“It is very important to say that the creativity is the hardest part because as an academic you get almost no time to think. I work part time, most of my time is taken up with admin, teaching and supervising students.” Science academic

“Absolutely, we have guidelines as to how many papers we have to publish every year because of these assessment exercises so, yes, but we try to implement them very softly as research is something which isn’t happening linearly, research requires that you just sit there and stare into the air for hours. And then after three weeks, maybe something happens! You can’t force it. The more you are under stress, the less creative people are so it’s really hard to find these empty spaces for continuous reflection on the problem.” Science researcher

“I taught a course on [topic] which is a notoriously difficult piece of work, it’s brilliant but difficult. And for that I was reading through with 3 or 4 commentaries every week, reading and writing lectures for 2 and a half days solidly. That was a different kind of preparation, it was actually quite exhilarating but you can only do that if you have no other responsibilities which at the time I didn’t. When you’re constantly seeing students, you’re constantly interrupted, you’ve got administrative responsibilities, you have a stack of emails waiting to be answered, you just can’t do that.” Humanities academic

There would appear to be no easy solution to the pressures of time and workloads. Nearly every academic interviewed for the project talked at some point about the challenges and pressures of modern academic life.

“It’s very difficult to do anything in term time because of teaching and admin. It must do that for everyone and there isn’t an easy solution. If there is I’d love to know it!” Social Sciences academic

There were a number of comments about dealing with a new generation of students coming through and some of the associated frustrations that academics feel when teaching them. Academics are adjusting to a generation who are used to reading in a very different way, if at all! Interactions with the Library have changed and those changes need to be recognised. The extent to which academics must then adapt their teaching to accommodate such changes remains unclear.

“Very difficult to get students to read whole books - they just read a section or an article but not the whole book, the wider context.” Social Sciences academic

"I don't really know how to describe it. It's kind of like we've kind of given them a drug or something and they are never going to go back now to looking at bookshelves. They just won't do it. Maybe if I was stricter or something but what's the point in that? If I did that they just wouldn't come to the seminar and then it's just a losing battle so it's got to be presented in a, I understand in a way it should be, really accessible, in an appealing and systematic way...But if we can't teach them to, that's such a skill, one of the best things about a [named Humanities] degree is to know nothing about a subject and then have a grooved way of approaching the material which includes asking the right questions, looking in the right places, being able to form a picture then analysing it and

writing about it and that's what we teach them. So if they don't learn to use the Library then they are just not learning to do a big section of that." Humanities academic

Aspirations

Academics have aspirations for themselves, their colleagues and their students. For themselves, many aspire to have more time for research activities in particular. There is a strong sense that York should be a research-led teaching institution and that teaching is greatly improved and informed by a strong research culture. Aside from comments about administrative burdens, the importance of a continued focus on research-led teaching was one of the key themes raised by academics across all three faculties.

"Research-led teaching? We like to think so. Sometimes it happens in 3rd or 4th year. Although there are modules I can think of that the research edge is too far from the material that needs to be taught." Science researcher

"All of this makes my teaching easy because all of the subjects I teach tend to be rapidly moving. Everything we have been using for teaching has been published within the last year. It's just moving so fast. Therefore I'm using very current papers to design my teaching, and I'm thinking – I'm thinking about what conferences I have been to. All the time I'm melding my research and teaching, that's why I have so much time compared to other academics! It is so collaborative and content-rich that I am constantly learning from my students." Humanities researcher

Conversations with students can be hugely stimulating and productive, and can ultimately help feed into the wider research process for academics:

“Can the teaching shape your research? Can the students add to this? I’m hoping so! Because, based on my experience with 3rd year students, doing dissertations etc., the biggest contributions are not so much questions asked but case studies. If I think about the questions they asked, they weren’t earth-shattering, great, but it was kind of the selection of empirical cases or specific questions they asked about those things that were interesting and illuminating. The questions they ask are often better than MA students! The kind of conversations I’ll have, especially with three seminars, will actually be really helpful. Now how will they concretely help me and affect how I do research? Maybe not, but I’m sure two or three years from now I can look back after having done an interview, would I have asked that question if I hadn’t had that experience in a seminar years ago? I found that days after I do seminars in the morning, I often do much more writing that afternoon even though it’s often unrelated.” Social Sciences researcher

One academic in the Social Sciences is actively working on new ways of developing research-based teaching in the department to ensure that the course is attractive to current and incoming students. The department had previously made much more of a distinction between teaching activities and research activities, but now the two are working together in a much more blended and integrated way. Postgraduate students taking this particular course are able to experience live-action, research-based teaching, as they are taken through practical research projects and encouraged to develop real world knowledge and a new skill-set which is already proving more engaging to the students. Real research is inherently interest-

ing for student recruitment and creates attractive, practical courses. More academics are wanting to work in these ways.

A number of academics expressed a need for better personal support for their work and their professional development. To some extent, academics feel left to get on with things themselves which, for new academics in particular, can feel stressful.

“I’m finding the balance of teaching and all the other responsibilities of different jobs that I’ve been given and new modules and all sorts of things, have severely restricted what I’ve been able to do. And also getting a sense from anywhere of what is sensible and what you should be able to achieve, how to do that? You might get as far as ‘you should be writing two articles a year’ but HOW do I write those, should it be projects I’m already working on, do I need to find time to go and start some research?” Humanities Researcher

For many academics, active collaborations with colleagues both within and outside the institution are highly valued and help make them feel less isolated; indeed working with others is often seen as a strong motivation and aspiration. Across all three faculties, collaboration has become a central and highly active part of the academic research process:

“There’s pretty much no project I do that isn’t collaborative. There’s almost nothing I sit and do on my own.” Science researcher

Collaboration is often built in inherently from the start of a research project and is part of the initial thinking around the project:

“Is it small-scale enough to do on my own or would it involve others, if so who?”

Humanities researcher

Academics talked about the importance of being able to discuss new projects with their colleagues; however time pressures have meant that for some academics, they simply do not have the same opportunities for casual conversations with colleagues about their research. Where internal departmental collaboration works well seems to be where departments have actively considered how well their research themes work across the department as a whole, and have put in place various platforms for staff to discuss their research activities so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing.

Research funding is often the driver behind many collaborative research projects: *“Grants make research a much more sociable business!”* (Humanities Researcher).

Outside specific research projects, academics draw on wider research communities for discussion, networking and informal collaborations. A number of academics talked about the importance of attending conferences to find out and discuss new research taking place:

“You don’t want someone who is doing exactly what you're doing. What you want is complementary but non-competing [research]” Science Researcher

Membership of societies is another way of engaging with the wider research community. Academics talked about their use of internal and external email groups to facilitate regular discussion on their research fields. This can be particularly helpful for small research groups who are working in highly specialist areas.

Benefits and value of the research

The academic synthesis was a key outcome of the project and has enabled the Library to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of academic practice and needs. Having analysed the data about the lives of academics, it became apparent that many of their motivations, frustrations and aspirations have little or nothing to do with the Library, yet they can help us to understand what is going on in their world, what their key issues and priorities are, how these may impact on their relationship with the Library and ultimately what they need from us. Those that did relate to the Library formed the basis of a series of developments and initiatives to improve services and support for academics over the past year.

One of the key goals of UX is to be responsive and to be able to make immediate changes where you can rather than waiting for the project to finish. The Library implemented a series of 'quick wins' designed to address frustrations academics expressed. An example of a 'quick win' at York was changing the borrowing system to give all academics the same package as part-time staff, in essence giving them longer to return items if recalled.

Another significant issue arising from the interviews was around our reading lists system which was an old, in-house system no longer fit for purpose. Data from the interviews was synthesised into 28 user requirements. These were subsequently used as part of the supplier selection. The Library has

subsequently launched the new reading list system and a recent focus group with academic staff confirmed that the new software is meeting their needs.

Alongside, the 'quick-wins' are a series of longer-term recommendations which the Library is continuing to address. The themed analysis was condensed into three key areas which have formed the basis for the new Library Strategy (2018-2021):

Space: How do we make the physical library virtual? How do we create a go-to online presence that does the job of a physical library but in a virtual space?

Scholarship: How do we make information available in an increasingly open, virtual and collaborative scholarly environment? How can our strategy reflect and anticipate new directions in accessing and using resources?

Skills: What does it mean for us to be at the forefront of learning delivery? How will we ensure a culture of Digital Skills curiosity and engagement, and who ultimately has responsibility for developing digital skills literacies in staff and students across the University?

The project has had a number of benefits and confirmed why it has been so important to undertake. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, we have built up our relationships with academics across the university, many of whom we had not met before. We have new connections, and new and exciting possibilities for working with academics on emerging areas like digital scholarship. We have developed an NVivo dataset of academic views across a range of topics which we use in other library pro-

jects to ensure that our vision for integrating the academic voice into our planning becomes a reality.

One of the most tangible benefits of the project has been developing the confidence and experience of the ALLs. The team have built up a lot of knowledge and experience of UX techniques and can see how it works in practice. UX is now key to our approach and we have established a group of staff to oversee its use across Information Services and to promote its wider application across the University community. Our focus on UX has been highly commended by assessors for the Customer Services Excellence Award (CSE) which Information Services has achieved over the past few years, with the assessor in 2018 commenting that: *"the use of ethnographical research to help develop customer insight has come to fruition with recommendations in a number of projects."*

Finally, we are in discussions to partner with others to produce user personas based on behaviour (rather than based on role). This will maximise use of the data and allow further integration of the academic user voice into future service development both at York and at other UK HE institutions.

Conclusion

The project has been endlessly fascinating, opening a window into the world of academics and understanding more about how modern libraries can and should be supporting the academic endeavour in the twenty-first century. It has demonstrated the importance of effective relationships between the Library and its academic community, based on sound knowledge, understanding, evidence, respect and trust. Such relationships underpin all of the work that we do and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the University's drive for excellence for all.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

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