

Audience Research

A briefing paper for education and research practitioners

JISC Content

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Researching your audiences is essential to deliver services which provide the maximum public value.

This is a briefing paper for practitioners in the education and research sectors delivering online digital services, who wish to research their audiences but may have limited resources to do so.

Digital services for education and research

Education and research are essentially concerned with the dissemination of knowledge, and the internet provides an unparalleled opportunity to disseminate. Properly used, the internet can allow for efficiency and effectiveness in delivering the core missions of the education and research sectors.

Across the sectors, a broad range of organisations, institutions and individuals have devoted significant time and resources to making content and services available online. Most publishers have digitised their back issues, and initiatives such as the HEFCE e-Learning Strategy, the DCSF Harnessing Technology Strategy and the JISC Digitisation Programme, recognise the demand and benefits of online services to support flexible learning. Pressure from those funding the research is leading to extensive digitisation of research outputs.

Why is researching digital audiences important?

Learners, researchers and teachers expect information to be available online, at their fingertips, when they want it and in an easy-to-use format. Furthermore, with high tuition fees in higher education, students have evolved into 'paying customers' with increased expectations.



Whether you are producing your own digital content or providing a gateway to other people's, simply offering products and services is no longer enough – you must provide learners and researchers with a satisfactory experience.

Increased demands and expectations, coupled with budgetary constraints and the requirement to demonstrate *value for money* and *impact*, mean that it is imperative that you are delivering services that are *wanted, needed and valued* by your audiences. If you do not research your audiences you may not be able to demonstrate value.

Where can I get support from?

As well as The Guide to Researching Audiences, which this briefing paper supports, a range of other services and publications is available to help you to understand your audiences, and the impact you are having on them.

eVALUED is an evaluation toolkit 'designed to support information services staff in higher education institutions with the evaluation of electronic information services'. The focus is on investigating users' experiences in order to improve library services (eg access, user support, promotion) and meet their needs more effectively. It covers topics such as audience research, impact measurement, and broader evaluation techniques.

Becta has a range of useful guidance for e-learning content providers under its learning and resource development library. This includes an 'Introduction to usability for websites' and a guide to 'designing e-learning resources to meet the needs of users'. The latter provides some useful starting points for service development, many of which are equally relevant to post-16 education.

A JISC project entitled 'Digitised Resources: A Usage and Impact Study' is currently developing a best practices toolkit for the **assessment of impact** of digitisation resources. Their project website has further details.

The **Market Research Society** internet research guidelines are helpful: they interpret the MRS Code of Conduct and provide best practice guidance to promote the professionalism of research on the internet.

There is also a wealth of support available on the creation and management of digital materials from sites such as **JISC Digital Media**, and JISC TechDis provides guidance on making sure e-learning material is accessible to its target audiences.

Links to all these resources can be found on the next page.

Audience research in the education and research sectors

Sustainable services

A wide range of development projects and services is funded in the education sector, not all of which can be supported by funders long-term. This does not mean that they are not valued by their audiences and should not continue to be delivered, but they need to be financially sustainable.

Audience research can help you develop new funding streams, either by proving the potential market, or by demonstrating value to potential funders. For example, you may be able to get funding from a professional by providing evidence that you serve their niche audience.

You may also want to open up to wider markets where you can charge for your services. Higher education institutions are increasingly working with businesses, industries and the wider public, and audience research can help you assess the viability of opening up your services to these wider audiences.

In addition, evidence of end-user benefits and attitudes can be a persuasive tool in marketing and selling a service, for example e-learning tools to schools and other institutions.

Self-improvement

Increasingly, the focus in the sector is moving towards self-regulation and self-improvement amongst individuals and service providers. The strategy focuses on delivering services which meet the changing needs of users. For example, one of the principles in the LSIS New National Improvement Strategy is 'every single service provider activity is directed towards providing each learner with just what they need'. Working with your audience to understand their needs and requirements will be essential to deliver this principle.

Service enhancement

An in-use service typically has a long 'wish list' of potential improvements, but a very limited budget for service development and enhancement. Audience research can make it easier to decide which to prioritise. It is important to consider who your target audience is – for example, you may already have close links with institutional librarians, but very little direct contact with end-users: who are your enhancements for?

Digital libraries

Library and information services underpin research, learning and teaching. Moving from the physical to the virtual world brings new challenges for understanding users' opinions of service quality and use of resources. A useful paper by the Association of Research Libraries reviews the evolution of measurement and evaluation in libraries, including discussions on LibQual+, DigiQual and Measuring the Impact of Networked Electronic Services (MINES).

Finding out more about audience research

The Guide to Researching Audiences, developed by the Strategic Content Alliance, provides useful and practical information about researching digital audiences.

The Guide sets out the key activities in the lifecycle of audience research, which are driven by your target audience. It provides information on topics such as deciding where to outsource your research, and discusses various research methods such as surveying and web analytics.

Further reading

The Guide to Researching Audiences

<http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/2009/02/05/download-audience-analysis-toolkit>

HEFCE e-Learning Strategy

www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_12

DCSF Harnessing Technology Strategy

http://localauthorities.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=ndi&catcode=la_ht_01&rid=15484

JISC Digitisation Programme

www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitisation

eVALUED toolkit

www.evalued.bcu.ac.uk

Becta learning and resource development library

<http://industry.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=1713>

Digitised Resources: A Usage and Impact Study

www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/project.cfm?id=51

Accessibility in learning

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/page.aspx?o=jiscstechdis>

Market Research Society internet research guidelines

www.mrs.org.uk/standards/internet.htm

JISC Digital Media

www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk

LSIS National Improvement Strategy

www.dius.gov.uk/further_education/fe_improvements/nis

The evolution of measurement and evaluation of libraries: a perspective from the ARL

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/library_trends/v056/56.4.kyrillidou.html

The Strategic Content Alliance

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This briefing paper and The Guide to Researching Audiences have been prepared by Curtis+Cartwright Consulting Ltd on behalf of the Strategic Content Alliance. They are part of a series of guides developed to support people in the public sector understand their digital audiences and deliver audience-focused services.

This work is part of a wider initiative led by the Strategic Content Alliance, which aims to support UK citizens gain best value from the public investment that has been made in digital content.

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