

WHY CAN'T I EVER FIND ANYTHING IN THE LIBRARY?

Introduction:
The desire to find and locate library materials is a fundamental aspect of academic and personal life. For many students, the ability to access a well-stocked library is crucial for research and study. However, finding the right item in a library can be a challenging task, and many students report difficulties in locating the materials they need.

Methodology:
Following a pilot study in 1981, the main study was conducted during seven weeks equally spaced over the period from June-November (excluding weeks of vacations or exams). For each day, in each survey week, the University of Sydney's Sample Survey Centre provided a schedule specifying the time period(s) in which the survey should be conducted, which part of the Library it should cover, and the number of interviews which were to be obtained. The Centre's advice, which was designed to ensure that a valid and representative sampling of all Library users in all appropriate parts of the catalogue and collections, was based upon data of patterns of use supplied by the Library. The advice and assistance of the Sample Survey Centre was invaluable, and is gratefully acknowledged.

For the catalogue component of the study, interviewers observed users at the catalogues according to the schedules drawn up by the Sample Survey Centre and approached users who had just completed a search for a missing item, by not cataloguing it correctly, or by not reshelving it promptly in its correct place, to determine the extent to which they had been searching for and not being able to find wanted material and the reasons for their failure. Other interviews sought to ascertain, if possible, the reasons for the user's failure. If the item could not be traced in the catalogue with the information given an attempt was made to verify the bibliographic details in standard sources.

The study investigated failure both at the catalogue and at the shelves in the main library of the University (the Fisher Library). The University of Sydney Library (Fisher and fifteen branches) is Australia's largest and busiest university library, with holdings approaching three million volumes.

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Results:

Overall,
a total of 2,991 library users was interviewed, of whom 2,497 provided information relevant to the study. The other 504 were either not seeking a specific known item or declined to cooperate.

Table 1 summarises the data relating to the success or failure experiences of the 2,497 users whose activities fell within the scope of the study. The overall failure rate was 35.9% but undergraduates, the largest group of library users, experienced a slightly higher failure rate, 36.9%. Postgraduate and academic users had failure rates of 21.9% and 20.8% respectively. The failure rate for known-item searches was 16%, and for other types of searches, it was 41.9%.

Table 2: Catalogue Searches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Failures</th>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>(35.4%)</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduates</td>
<td>(33.9%)</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>(21.9%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>(33.9%)</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>(35.9%)</td>
<td>1,106</td>
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Because of differences in methodology it is difficult to compare these results with findings elsewhere. Third, in the present study, that in 26.2% of searches, users were not able to locate the item, the failure rate for known-item searches was 16%, and for other types of searches, it was 41.9%.

The findings of the Sydney study, that in 32.6% of attempts the users of its catalogues fail to find known items they are seeking, are generally in line with the findings of similar studies.

More important than the rate of failure are the reasons for failure. The study investigated failure both at the catalogue and at the shelves. The Fisher Library has a number of catalogues, the three most common being the Name Catalogue (i.e. authors, titles, and books about authors), the Serials Catalogue and the Subject Catalogue. The study, being concerned only with searches for known items, covered the Name and Serials Catalogues. Failure rates in both were almost identical, being 26.3% and 25.2% respectively. The overall catalogue failure rate was 26.2%. Table 2 summarises the data relating to the 1,281 catalogue users whose activities fell within the scope of the study.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
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<td>639</td>
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<td>Postgraduates</td>
<td>(29.9%)</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>(23.9%)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>(29.2%)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>(25.2%)</td>
<td>945</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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A number of studies of catalogue use and the success and failure of users have employed the questionnaire approach and have based their findings on a self-selected sample of respondents. Several studies, however, have used the observation and interview approach of the Sydney study, and it is with these that the Sydney results should be compared. The largest was the American Library Association's 1958 analysis of 5,404 interviews of catalogue users in thirty-nine libraries of all types and sizes. The overall failure rate for known-item searches was 34%. If we consider only the data from the seventeen academic and research libraries which were part of the study the failure rate was 31.1%. A similar multi-library study was conducted in 1968-69 at the University of Michigan (covering its General, Undergraduate, and Medical Libraries) and the nearby Ann Arbor Public Library. The overall failure rate for known-item searches was 26.1%, and if we compare this with the results of the Sydney study, that in 26.2% of searches, users were not able to locate the item, the failure rate for known-item searches was 16%, and for other types of searches, it was 41.9%.

More important than the rate of failure are the reasons for the failure. Table 3 summarises the results of post-interview searching by library staff to ascertain them.
It is clear that the majority of failures occurred through user failure. More than one-third of the failures occurred because, although the item was listed in the catalogue and the user had sufficient information to enable him to find it, he had not taken the trouble to search the shelves. The user failure rate was 62.2% of all failures. Almost half of the failures can be categorized as user failure. The failure rates in the two collections were identical, being 46.9% in the Research Library and 46.8% in the Undergraduate Library. The overall failure rate of 46.1% is similar to or higher than that found elsewhere. At the University of California, Riverside, and San Jose State University, 43% of searches were due to user failure. A study at the Science Library of Case Western Reserve University found shelf failure rates of 46.2% and 43.6% respectively. The fact that almost one in two searches at the shelves for known items which are on the shelf are unsuccessful is a worrying hindrance to the work of students and staff. Pinpointing the failures that are due to the user's inability to find the item is the cause of a larger proportion of failures than the second cause of user failure, an inability to find the shelf on which the wanted item is located. This result is in accord with the findings of many other studies. The present authors are unable to guess the reason for this success.

There are lessons in the present study for other libraries. As with failure at the catalogues, it is clear that a majority of shelf failures occurred because of mistakes made by the user. Nearly one-quarter of the failures in the latter situation were due to the user having wrongly or incompletely transcribed the book's call number from the catalogue card. This represented the most important single reason for failure at the shelf. The incidence of 23.9% for this error is very considerably higher than that found in other studies, which have generally been of the order of 10%. The present authors are unable to guess the reason for this significant discrepancy.

More than seventeen per cent of the shelf failures were due to the user having sought a book in the wrong collection. As all books located in collections other than the Research Library have their locations indicated on the catalogue card (e.g. by a "U" prefix for books in the Undergraduate Library or by the name of a branch library), this amounts to a failure on the user's part to appreciate the significance of the location information provided. The library must take the initiative in ensuring that the various location symbols employed are understood by its users.

The third cause of user failure, an inability to find the book on the shelf where it was located, even when the item was being searched in the right collection, resulted in 15% of all shelf failures. Clearly, some users are unable to understand the arrangement of books on the shelves of a library, a finding in accord with other studies which have found that, generally, 15-25% of items reported as not found are in fact on the shelf.

Of the reasons for shelf failure which cannot be blamed on the user, the unavailability of the item due to its having been borrowed by another person is the most significant. In the present study 18.4% of shelf failures were caused by the book being in circulation. Other studies have generally found a circulation failure rate of about 15%.

The effect of shelf failure can be expressed in another way. Nearly half of the known items which readers seek on the shelf will not be found, and more than half of the failures can be categorized as user failure.

The results of the study could be summarized thus: The Fisher Library holds 90% of the items its users seek, but more than a quarter of the searches in its catalogues end in failure. Overall, 36% of those who enter its doors seeking a known item will leave without finding it, and half the time the failure will be the user's own fault. The findings are generally in accord with those of similar studies in other libraries.

There are lessons in the present study for all who seek to maximize the benefits from the very considerable investment in the acquisition and cataloguing of items in libraries.
The heart of the university, and that a first quality library is essential to a first quality university. However, the library must be much more than a singular ornament in this university,' to quote Sir Thomas Bod­

ley's hope for the library he gave to Oxford. It should be a partner in the processes of teaching, learning and research, but it will be a weak partner unless it can deliver the goods.

REFERENCES


15. See, for example, Sarasvici, op. cit., and J.A. Urdy­

16. See, for example, Sarasvici, op. cit., Smith & Gra­nade, op. cit., and Palmer, op. cit.