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"Access to Research": how UK public libraries are offering access to over 15 million academic articles for free

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to describe a unique service offering by UK public libraries that provides access to over 15 million academic articles for free.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is descriptive.

Findings – The service has been a success with users, but more training for staff, as well as promotion, is needed.

Social implications – The study will be potentially important for enabling access to a vast amount of published academic articles for a wide section of UK citizens.

Originality/value – The first article on this service is aimed specifically at the LIS community.

Keywords Electronic journals, Journal publishing, Open access, Publishing industry, Finch report, Local libraries

Paper type General review

1. Introduction

Access to Research (A2R) is a publishing industry initiative that delivers nearly 9,000 journals and 15 million academic articles to public libraries throughout the UK. The content comes from a broad range of high-quality and prestigious research journals. When the pilot service was launched in 2014, the then Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, declared that A2R "will connect people to a wealth of global knowledge – maximising its impact and value". Neither the libraries nor the public are charged for access to this content. What follows is an explanation of how this has come about and what impact the service has had since its launch.

2. Origins

A2R has its origins in the open access debate, which, put simply, is about how to widen access to publicly funded research. In the UK, the recent evolution of open access has been shaped by the "Finch Report". This report, entitled "Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications", was published in 2012[1].

The Finch Report envisaged that the move from subscription-based publishing to open access would take time, and so indicated that an interim solution was needed. To quote the Report:

Very few public libraries provide access to journals, and then only to a very small number – such as Nature or the British Medical Journal – in printed form. For most members of the public, the only way in which they can gain access to journals is through the walk-in service provided by some university libraries. (p. 51)

[Therefore the] proposal is that the major subscription-based publishers should license public libraries throughout the UK [. . .] to provide access to peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings at no charge, for "walk-in" users on library premises [. . .]. At a time when public libraries are under severe pressure such a move will help to strengthen their position in the communities they serve, and lead to increased usage and value. It would have an immediate effect in extending access to the great majority of journals for the benefit of everyone in the country. (p. 80)

This proposal (known as the public library initiative and later renamed as A2R), and the other recommendations in the Report, were accepted by the government.

3. Development of a pilot project

Publishers invited the Publishers Licensing Society (PLS) to lead a steering group to implement this recommendation. The steering group included publishers, public librarians (represented by the Society of Chief Librarians, SCL) and the British Library.

The steering group had to tackle a wide range of issues. What follows is a summary of the main issues and the solutions that were worked out.

3.1 Could a licence be developed that was acceptable to publishers and libraries?

PLS worked with six publishers to agree to the scope of the licence and acceptable terms for accessing publishers' content. The draft was then reviewed by librarians on the steering group to reach a form that would be workable for all parties.

3.2 What IT platform could be used to deliver the service?

Although this could have been a major sticking point, ProQuest generously offered to host the A2R web service for free on its Summon discovery platform. Summon was already widely used for journal content searching in university libraries worldwide, and ProQuest also agreed to provide technical support for any adaptation of the software to public library users.

3.3 How were the costs of preparing and delivering the project to be met?

PLS made the financial commitment on behalf of the publishing industry to cover the costs and provide staff to run the project. So, the project could proceed immediately without any need for external funding.

3.4 How could publishers be persuaded to provide free access to their content?

It was expected that it would be difficult to persuade publishers who had not been directly involved in the Finch working group to participate. So, PLS, supported by the Publishers Association and the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, undertook an extensive promotion of the initiative to the publishers. The sign-up process was made highly flexible. Publishers could select parts of their portfolios they wanted to make available and for what time periods. They could also opt out at any time.

3.5 How could the service be effectively promoted to public libraries?

It was decided to run a technical "pre-pilot" to address any issues with library implementation. It was recognised that public libraries and their staff would generally not be familiar with the technology for accessing academic journal content, so it made sense to carry out a three-month pilot with ten library authorities to work through technical difficulties.

Once the pre-pilot was successfully completed, PLS, with support from SCL, approached all (206) library authorities in the UK to sign the licence on behalf of the libraries under their control. At the time of writing, 182 authorities have signed.

3.6 How could the library staff and end-users be trained?

The SCL representative on the steering group led various promotional and training activities. These included training sessions around the country, a webinar (recorded, allowing future access from the website) and the production of a range of promotional materials.

4. The implementation of Access to Research

The technical pilot ran for three months at the end of 2013. PLS signed up 14 publishers who provided access to nearly 8,000 journals, whereas SCL secured the involvement of ten library services and about 200 library branches. The pilot ran well, with a positive feedback and support from the libraries.

One major issue was identified. Access needed to be managed, as A2R was to be accessible from local library premises only. This could be done by allowing access to specific IP addresses. However, under the Summon system, these addresses needed to go to individual publishers. This potentially meant that a large number of individual publishers would need to handle thousands of library IP addresses. This would not only create an administration burden for publishers but also was likely to lead to errors.

A novel solution using a proxy server to manage the IP addresses was developed. This meant that publishers only had to give access to one address (the proxy server), and PLS could manage the individual library IP addresses centrally.

Once this solution was in place, the service was launched in January 2014.

4.1 Technical platform

The A2R service is typically accessed from an icon or link on a library's home page. This takes the library user through to the A2R home page (Figure 1). There is no requirement to log on, as authentication happens via the library's IP address.

There is a simple Google-type search box. However, there is also the option to browse journals by name or subject.

Once a search is run, the user moves from the site managed by the PLS team to the ProQuest Summon search results page (Figure 2). This delivers the results based on the Summon discovery engine's indexing of the content provided by participating publishers.

When a search result is clicked on, the user then moves on to the publisher's page (Figure 3).

Users can only access full articles from within library premises. However, it is possible to run searches and identify relevant articles remotely. So, it is only necessary to go to a local library to read and/or download the full text of any article. This means users do not make wasted trips to their local library.

4.2 Library participation

A2R is open to all public libraries across the UK. To participate, the local authority is required to sign a licence agreement. Once this is signed, they provide the IP addresses of the libraries they wish to participate, and access is activated. Over 80 per cent of library authorities have signed up, and around 2,500 libraries are providing links to the service (details of these can be found on the A2R home page).

Libraries that have signed up have been offered various promotional materials (e.g. posters and flyers) and training sessions. However, the onus has been on them to promote the service to their users.

When library users run a search for the first time in their browsing session, they are asked to agree to a set of terms and conditions. The key elements of these are that the user agrees to:

- use only the article for non-commercial research and private study;
- not download copies on to portable devices (e.g. data sticks);
- not print more than one copy; and
- not use the information as a substitute for a specific medical, professional or expert advice.

4.3 Publisher participation

PLS and trade associations have promoted A2R to major research publishers, and the response has been overwhelmingly
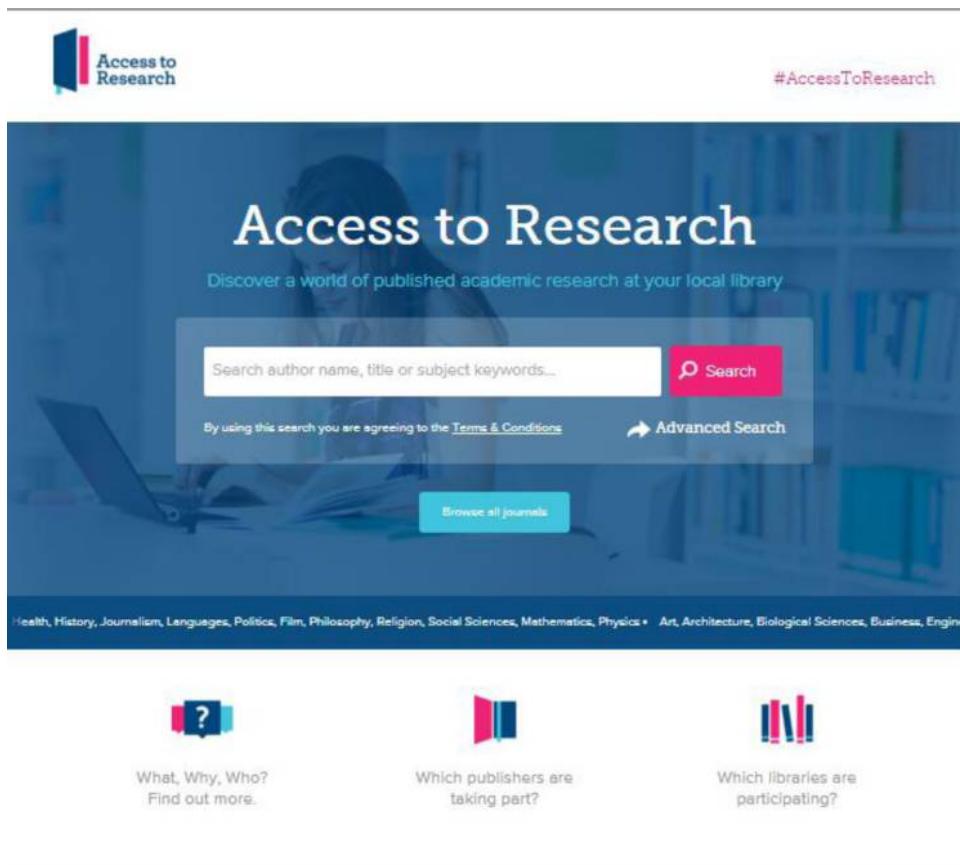
Figure 1 Access to Research home page

Figure 2 ProQuest Summon search results

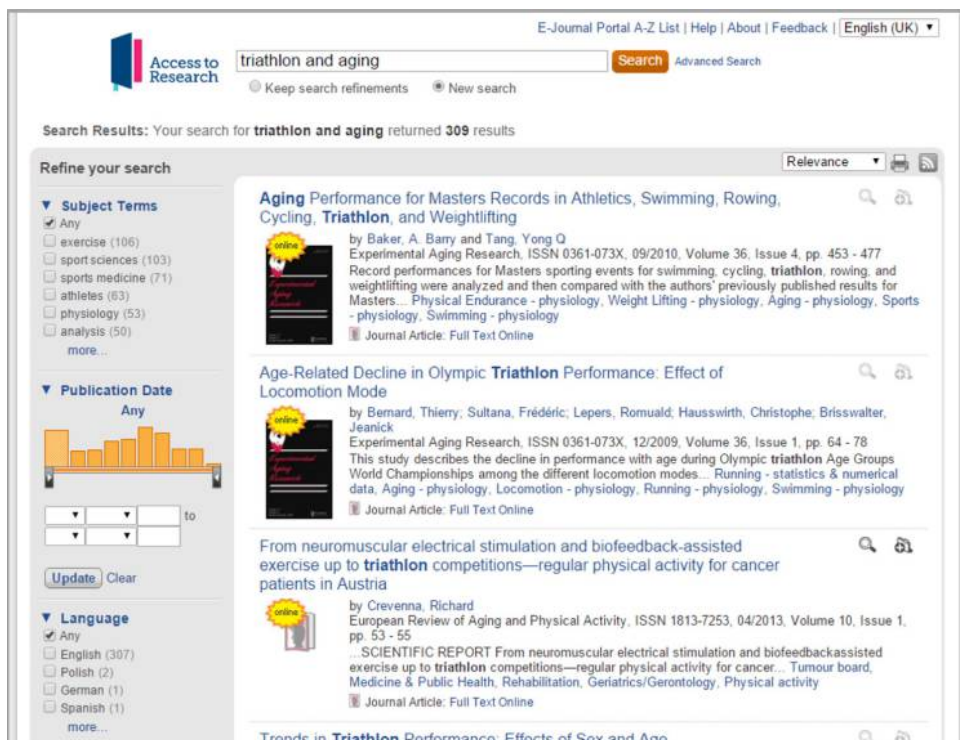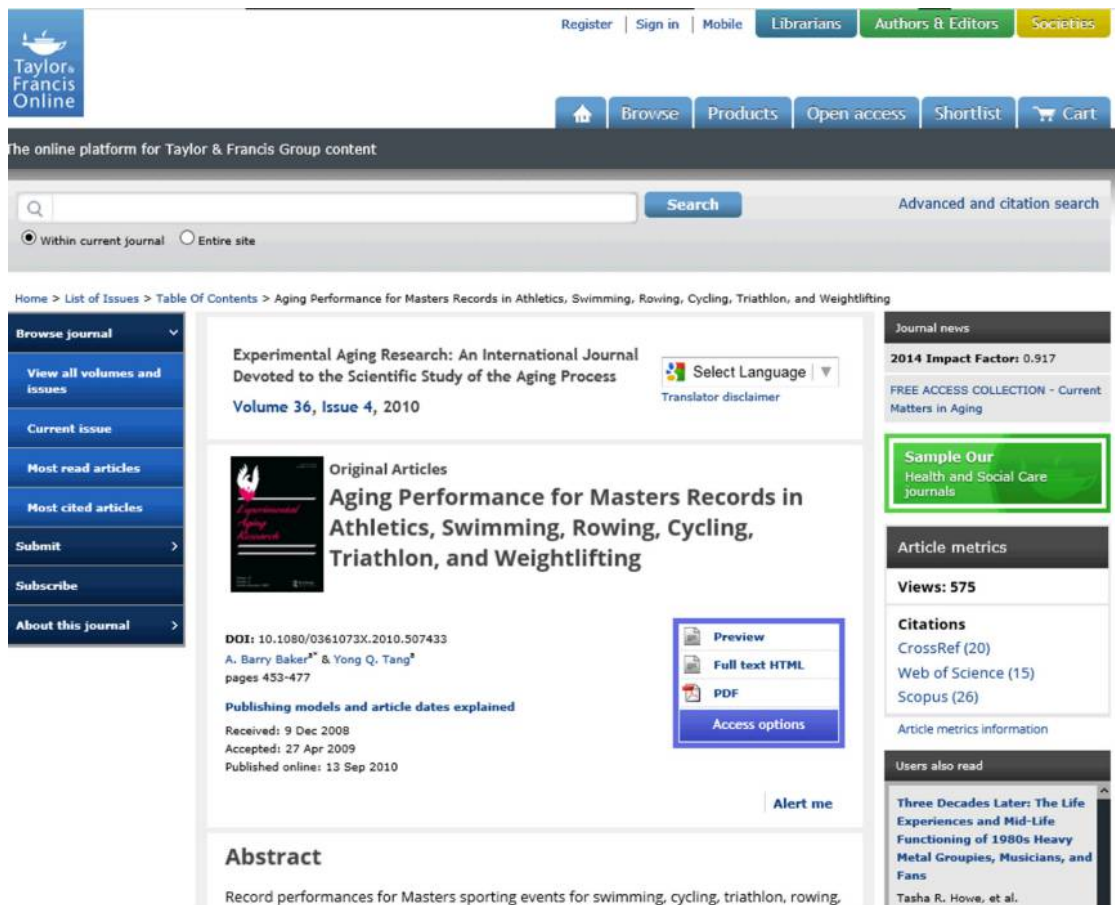| Access to Research | Interlending & Document Supply |
| Jonathan Griffin | Volume 44 · Number 2 · 2016 · 37–43 |

Figure 3 Publisher's page

positive. All of the largest subscription publishers have signed up (Box 1), and the content they have provided has not been restricted to publically funded research from the UK. It is difficult to be precise about the number of articles, but it exceeds 15 million.

Each publisher provides a list of journal titles they wish to make available, with ISSN numbers and access start and end dates for each title. Publishers set their own dates for access restrictions, and most of them have set a cut-off date for access to the back catalogue (typically, no access to articles published before 1997), and, for some journals, they apply an embargo on new journal issues – that is, the current issue and possibly the previous issue are not full-text accessible.

Box 1 Current list of participating publishers

ALPSP, Cambridge University Press, De Gruyter Open, Dove Press, Edinburgh University Press, Elsevier, Emerald, IOP Publishing, Oxford University Press, Portland Press, Royal Society Journals, SAGE Publications, Science Reviews 2000 Ltd., Society for General Microbiology, Springer Nature, Taylor & Francis, Whiting & Birch Ltd., Wiley, Wolters Kluwer Health

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5. Use of Access to Research

Throughout the A2R pilot, PLS has collected and circulated usage statistics (Figure 4).

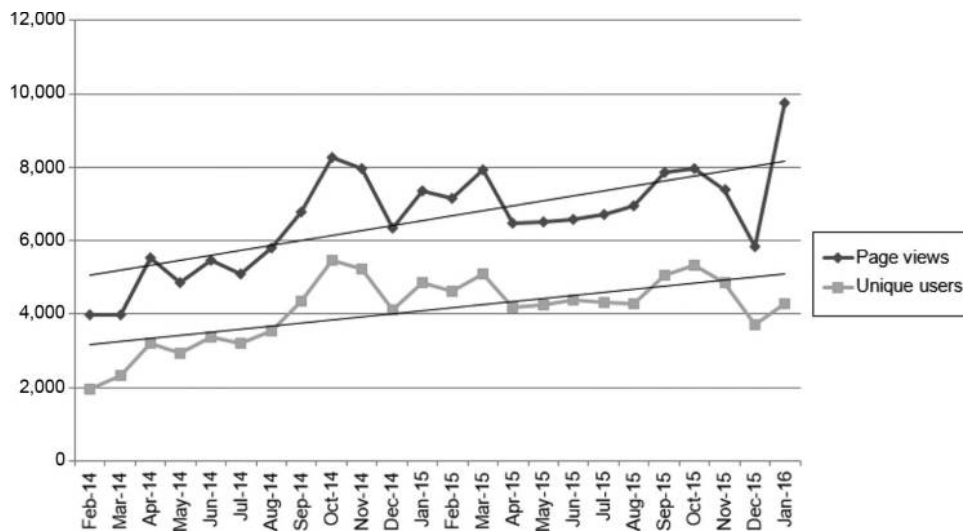Over the two-year period, the service has been used by 88,870 users.

Usage is relatively low when compared with university libraries. One possible explanation for this is that the level of promotion in libraries has varied. Although 80 per cent of library authorities had signed up in the first six months, usage was patchy, with only a few libraries showing heavy use (Figure 5).

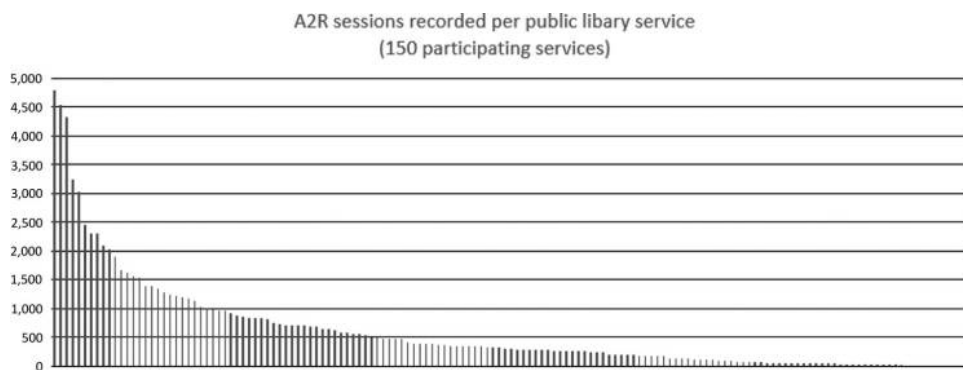## 6. Feedback from librarians and library users

A2R was run as a pilot for the first two years. The steering group decided to evaluate the service towards the end of that period to take a decision as to whether to continue the service after the completion of the pilot. To ensure that the participating publishers and library community had comprehensive and independent feedback, a research tender was put together. PLS and SCL led this process, but received financial support and expert advice from Arts Council England.

The tender was won by Shared Intelligence, who had successfully completed library-related projects in the past. Their brief was to go beyond the usage statistics and gain an

Figure 4 Access to research usage over two years

Figure 5 Access to Research sessions recorded per public library service

in-depth understanding of how the service was being used and what value was being derived from it.

They undertook a range of research activities, the responses to which are detailed in Table I.

The survey was used to collect demographic data[2] so that we have an insight into the profiles of people using the service.

In summary, what the data showed was that users came from all age ranges and economic backgrounds and included roughly equal proportions of men and women. However, they tended to be older than typical library users[3] and were less likely to be working.

A notable characteristic of users is that their level of educational attainment was much higher than that observed in the general population. Over three-quarters reported, they were educated to a degree level or higher.

Table I The number of survey and interview responses

Survey of A2R users	455 responses
Survey of library users who had not used A2R	99 responses
Survey of public library staff	612 responses
In-depth interviews with A2R users	10 interviews
In-depth interviews with stakeholders	10 interviews

In terms of ethnicity, there was little difference with typical library users.

Data have also been compiled on the types of searches undertaken. Based on a sample of the top 500 search terms, the following table was compiled. From this, it can be concluded that A2R is being used to research a wide range of subjects.
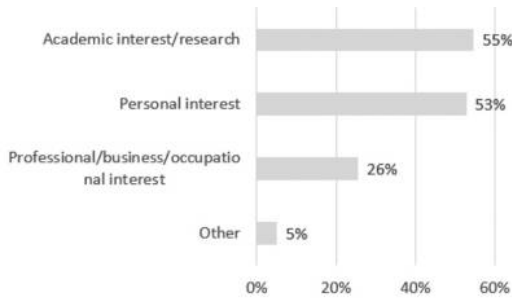
Users were asked their purpose for using A2R, and the most common response was for academic interest/research (Figure 6).

Their top five areas of interest were as follows (Figure 7).

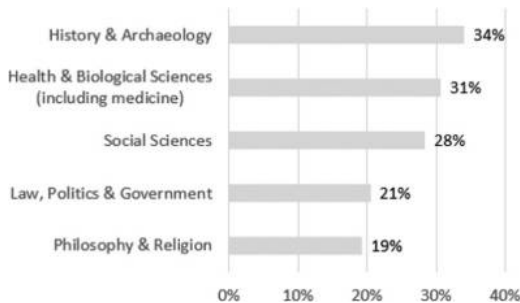Case studies of specific projects were collected, and these illustrate the range and value of use:

- a social entrepreneur setting up a social enterprise that tackles the digital skills gap;
- an inventor designing a new type of gyrocopter;
- an author researching a book on comedy and caricature;
- a local council employee developing a policy on dogs fouling pavements;
- a national trust volunteer preparing for a visitor tour of a stately home;
- a musician researching how to improve his/her composition technique;

Figure 6 Responses to the question ″What are you using Access to Research for?″

Note: *N* = 372

Figure 7 Responses to the question ″What areas or topics have you searched on Access to Research?″

- students at graduate and post-graduate levels who find it easier to visit their local library than the educational institution they attend;
- various continuing professional development activities ranging from music therapy to botany;
- an A-level student doing a project on pandas; and
- a farmer investigating crop yields.

Users also gave feedback on whether A2R delivered what they were looking for, and the results were generally positive. Of the respondents, 90 per cent said the information they found through A2R was useful or very useful (Table II).

Examples of verbatim feedback include:

"Excellent initiative, I'm surprised at how many good journals are included"; "It's brilliant to give the public instant access to a treasure house of information"; "A wonderful public spirited initiative"; and "Excellent resource, I can't believe it's free".

6.1 Library staff
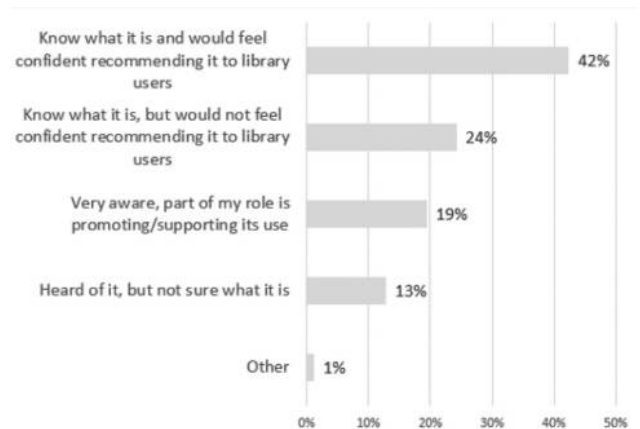The library staff survey received 612 responses, and 74 per cent of respondents said they had heard of A2R (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Responses to the question ″Which of the following best describes your level of awareness of Access to Research?″

Note: *N* = 413

More detailed questioning indicated that their level of awareness varied.

An inability or lack of confidence in promoting the service is at least partly reflected in the number of staff (27 per cent) who have received training in A2R (Figure 9).

These findings were supported by users' responses to a question asking whether they had received guidance or support from library staff for using the service, and 68 per cent said they had received no support or guidance.

When asked how helpful the training was, national training was seen as the most helpful, with 47 per cent of the respondents describing it as "very helpful" compared with 19 per cent who had taken part in local training.

When asked if they had helped anyone use A2R, most respondents (52 per cent) said they had not. Furthermore, among those who said they had helped, the biggest group was those who told people the service was available (32 per cent), as opposed to those offering more intensive support.

Staff suggested a number of ways to promote A2R. More training was clearly desired (mentioned by 42 per cent of the respondents), as well as more promotion (17 per cent) and publicity (15 per cent).

7. The future

The research detailed above was presented to the participating publishers and the Executive Committee of the Society of Chief Librarians in November 2015. The question both stakeholders considered was whether they would continue to support A2R beyond the pilot. The conclusion of both groups was that they would. Specifically, they agreed that A2R should

Table II Table of responses to the question about how useful Access to Research was?

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree (%)	3-Neither (%)	4-Agree (%)	5-Strongly disagree (%)	Not sure/Don't know (%)
Access to Research was easy to use	5	10	11	45	30	0
I was able to find the information I was looking for	5	7	11	60	17	0
The information I found has been useful/helpful	5	1	11	56	34	2

Note: *N* = 90/105

Figure 9 Responses to the question "Have you received any training around Access to Research?"

Note: *N* = 406

continue on a rolling basis, subject to annual reviews. Furthermore, they agreed that a number of initiatives should be undertaken to improve the service and libraries' promotion of it.

These include:

- Drawing up guidelines on how local libraries can effectively promote the service to their users. To this end, the SCL held a workshop in November 2015 with eight of the authorities that had the highest levels of use. They have also included A2R as a major component of the National Learning Offer, which was launched by Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, in November 2015.
- Recruiting more publishers. PLS and trade associations have started a promotional campaign to persuade more publishers to provide content for the service.
- Improvements to the usability of the service. These include merging the promotional site and the search home page so that it becomes clearer that it is possible to identify what articles are included in the service before a local library visit.

A2R is thus set to become a better known and more effective research tool for the users of public libraries in the UK. It will continue to contribute to the usefulness of public libraries and provide a source of insight and inspiration to library users.

Notes

1 Available at: www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/

2 These data were collected from the Shared Intelligence survey of 455 users of A2R.

3 National data from the DCMS Taking Part Survey were used as a point of comparison.

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