

LSE's "request a copy" service: widening access to research both within and beyond academia



*The 2016 introduction of HEFCE's open access research policy and specifically its "deposit on acceptance" message has led to a large volume of restricted-access items being placed in institutional repositories. **Dimity Flanagan** reports on how LSE Library's "request a copy service" has offered would-be readers a way to overcome this obstacle to research, and how the data the service provides offers rich insights into what items are being requested, where from, and even a glimpse into how they might be used.*

LSE Research Online (LSERO) is the home of all LSE research output. Since its launch in 2004, over 31,000 full-text items have been uploaded. A small team in LSE Library works tirelessly to promote open access and the benefits of depositing accepted manuscripts in the repository.

With the introduction of HEFCE's [open access research policy](#) in April 2016, the "deposit on acceptance" message has created a much higher volume of restricted-access items in the repository. There are currently 1,300 such documents in LSERO, with many embargoed for up to two years from publication. Repositories overcome this obstacle to open access through the "request a copy" functionality. This service allows users to request that a document is emailed to them if the author consents to share the manuscript peer to peer.

The LSERO team implemented this service in August 2016, and while certainly adding to workloads (as we're a fully mediated service), it seemed an important contribution to the goal of widening access to research. Often, we can provide the user with the paper within one day of the request.

Aside from our main goal of facilitating access, another positive outcome was the ability to better understand who was seeking content from LSERO and why. As part of the request process, users are asked (but not obliged) to provide the reason for wanting access.

Since implementation, we've collected one year's worth of data (>500 requests), which includes:

- domain of the email address
- item requested
- department of the lead LSE author
- reason for the request
- type of requester
- status of publication

The attempt to categorise requesters was a way to obtain an overall picture of the reach of LSE research beyond academia. Categories are:

- Government (a .gov domain address)
- International organisation
- Organisation (to differentiate from a larger international organisation)
- Professional application (practical application to a job: often law, finance, banking)
- Applying for study
- (Academic) staff
- (Academic) students
- Academic (when it was unclear whether they were a staff or student from a university)
- Unclassified (no conclusion could be ascertained from the data)

Analysis

It was clear from the outset that academic requests made up the majority (64.5%) of all requests. This data told us a few things: many universities in non-English speaking countries do not have subscriptions to the journals LSE authors publish in; researchers do not want to delay their research waiting for a paper to be published – they want the results now; and finally, many UK students, apparently with access to the requested papers via their own institutions, do not understand the difference between accessing something in LSERO and finding it on a publisher's website or the library catalogue. While the first two reasons speak to the importance of open access, the final point suggests that students' information literacy skills are not keeping up with the complexity of the scholarly communication environment. Such a lack of understanding is delaying their immediate access to research.

While LSERO can act as a temporary barrier to students, it reduces barriers for academics. Of the requests received over the year, 49% were for papers currently in press. There is still uncertainty over whether HEFCE will keep its deposit on acceptance requirement in 2018, particularly given the administrative burden. However, the fact that 49% of requests are for forthcoming papers, surely validates the HEFCE policy as it stands now. In the humanities and social sciences, there can be significant delays between acceptance and publication. Ensuring the accepted manuscript is accessible to those in the same field, leads to earlier citations and potentially to publicity for the paper by the time it is actually published. It has a positive impact for the researcher and publisher.

Of all papers requested, there is significant bias towards certain disciplines (see Figure 1). Media and Communications, Law, and International Development represent the largest proportion of requested papers. Media has a broad appeal, being relevant to academia but also to more everyday interests. Legal articles are typically difficult to access and legal publisher websites are less likely to be surfaced by Google. As for International Development, higher demand can be seen from developing countries, international organisations, and NGOs.

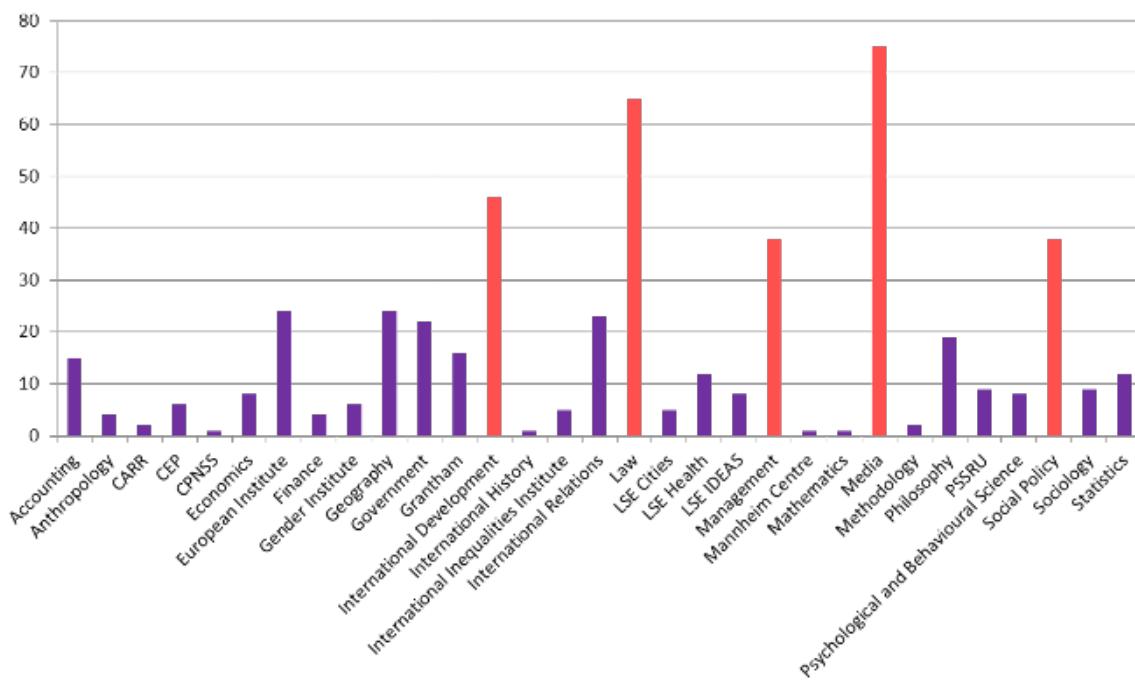


Figure 1: Number of requests by department and centre

If we drill down, to look at the top five requested papers (Figure 2), the [Blum-Ross and Livingstone article on sharenting](#) shows that academic articles can have a very broad audience. On the day I presented this data at a conference in August, BBC Breakfast featured a story on sharenting that same morning. It's something that can appeal to academics, organisations, and the wider public.

Paper	Link	Requests
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		Link	Requests
Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingston (2017)	"Sharenting: parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self"	http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67380/	17
Popular Communication, 15 (2). pp. 110-125. ISSN 1540-5702.			
Sara Hobolt (2016)	"The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent"	http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67546/	12
Journal of European Public Policy, 23 (9). pp. 1259-1277. ISSN 1466-4429.			
Robert Hunter Wade (2017)	"Global growth, inequality, and poverty: the globalization argument and the 'political' science of economics"	http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69764/	11
In: Ravenhill, John, (ed.) Global political economy. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 319-355. ISBN 9780198737469.			
M. Sandy Hershcovis, Babatunde Ogunfowora, Tara C. Reich, and Amy M. Christie (2017)	"Targeted workplace incivility: the roles of belongingness, embarrassment, and power"	http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68819/	7
Journal of Organizational Behavior. ISSN 0894-3796.			
Leslie Willcocks, Mary Lacity, and Andrew Craig (2017)	"Robotic process automation: strategic transformation lever for global business services?"	http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71146/	6
Journal of Information Technology Teaching Cases. pp. 1-12. ISSN 2043-8869.			

Figure 2: Top five requested papers from one year of data

Unsurprisingly, Brexit is the topic of the second most requested article. This struck a chord with our colleagues in the Research Division. Many academics would like to focus on Brexit for an impact case study for the next REF, but demonstrating impact in this area is likely to be extremely difficult. Having evidence of who has requested the article (particularly if from a governmental source) is a great line of follow-up to explore potential impact in more depth.

If we look at demand for subject areas from non-academic sources only, we see a change in the type of papers requested (Figure 3). Social Policy becomes the most requested area, and the Grantham Institute also gains in importance. Law and International Development both remain popular. Given open access is ultimately about broadening impact, it is encouraging to see that policymakers are able to access developments in social policy at point of need through this service.

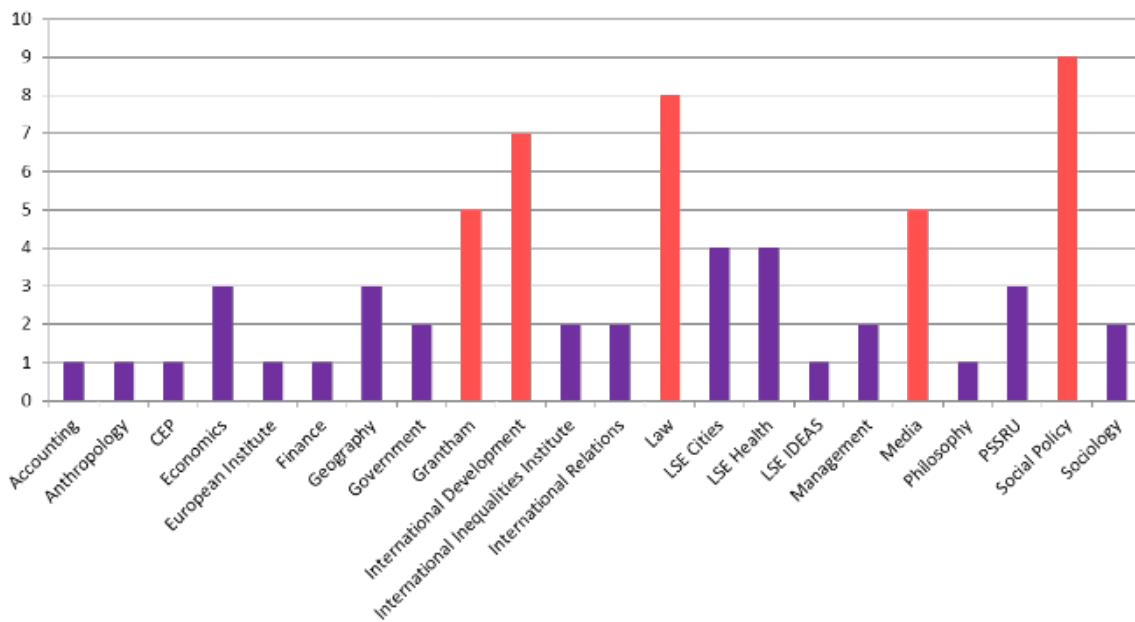


Figure 3: Number of requests by department/centre from organisations and government

One example of influencing policy was a request we received from an employee at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. They had requested the paper, "[Recomposing consumption: defining necessities for sustainable and equitable well-being](#)", so their team would be better informed when setting goals on future consumption. The requestor made it quite clear they had no access to this journal. A request for the paper, "[Brexit and EU financial governance: business as usual or institutional change?](#)", came from a UK MEP who sits on an EU committee and wanted to be well-prepared for its next meeting. It makes complete sense that we want our policymakers to be well-informed by the latest research in the field. These examples offer concrete evidence that open access is impactful, and without it those with influence may not receive the whole picture. Figure 4 is a sample of some of the bodies that have been in touch through LSE's request a copy service. Requests have come from as close by as North Somerset Council or the West Midlands Fire Service, and as far away as the TIB Development Bank in Tanzania or the New Zealand Treasury.

- Brazilian Chamber of Deputies
- CAF America
- Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, Canada
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States
- Cornwall Council, United Kingdom
- Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, South Africa
- Divecha Centre for Climate Change, India
- European Parliament
- European Patent Office
- Inter-American Development Bank
- International Trade Committee, House of Commons, United Kingdom
- Kent County Council, United Kingdom
- Lambeth Council, United Kingdom
- Law Commission, United Kingdom
- L'Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD), France
- National Geographic
- NHS
- North Somerset Council, United Kingdom
- OECD
- Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, United State
- South African Revenue Service
- The Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
- TIB Development Bank, Tanzania
- Treasury, New Zealand
- UNICEF
- United Nations
- UNESCO
- West Midlands Fire Service, United Kingdom
- World Trade Organisation
- World Vision

Figure 4: Sample of requesting bodies

This data is only from our restricted-access items; there are thousands more open items in LSERO that are downloaded every day across the globe. The problem in analysing use of these items is we do not know who is downloading them, and this can be an obstacle to encouraging more researchers to deposit their work. However, the request a copy service has given us some insight into who our users are and how every day we are helping LSE research move around the world and expand its potential impact.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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About the author

Dimity Flanagan is an Academic Support Librarian at the London School of Economics where she supports the Department of Economics and manages the institutional repositories, LSE Research Online and LSE Theses Online.