

Middlesex University

Putting the Focus
on Writing Rather
Than Formatting



The library staff at Middlesex University enjoy the “wow!” moment when they introduce RefWorks, but their greatest satisfaction is in providing a tool that allows scholars to focus on writing, discovery and knowledge.

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Adam Edwards, Middlesex University



About Middlesex University

Located in north London, Middlesex University serves 19,000 students in London representing 140 different nationalities, and employs a staff of 5,000. The University also has established international campus sites in the United Arab Emirates, Malta and Mauritius. It is ranked among the top 100 universities in the world under 50 years old. To support the school's scholarly work, the library maintains relationships with nearly 100 different information publishers and resources.

An “Oh Wow” Kind of Moment

Library staff don't often get the opportunity to “wow” students. But when a master's student is preparing carefully crafted scholarly research and facing the tribulations of getting everything cited correctly, clicking a button and seeing the citations populate is as close to magic as it comes.

“There are not many resources that a librarian teaches where you get, dare I say it, an impressed reaction from the customer,” confirms Adam Edwards. He heads a team of liaison librarians at Middlesex University that cover multiple subject areas in science, technology and law. As part of his duties, he often instructs advanced undergraduate and graduate students in doing their scholarly writing. That includes the use of RefWorks from Ex Libris. “The fun point in the teaching is when RefWorks Citation Manager generates the citation and the bibliography. Somebody clicks the cite button from RefWorks Citation Manager, and it generates the citation in the text, and produces the entry in the reference list. There are always people in the Ph.D. class who stop, and I watch their jaws drop. I've seen it with academic staff as well, where they sit frozen at the keyboard and have this ‘Oh, wow’ kind of moment.”

There's one instance in particular that he often shares at conferences. “Several years ago I was demonstrating how to generate references, and one student's response was to look quite stunned and say, ‘Dat is well sick, man, innit?’ That's North London urban slang which translates to ‘That's jolly good, ol' chap.’”

The Move to (new) RefWorks

One reason for the enthusiasm around RefWorks is the fact that the university has made the transition from legacy RefWorks and Write-n-Cite to the latest RefWorks version and RefWorks Citation Manager. “With Write-n-Cite, you could do what RefWorks Citation Manager accomplishes, but it was clunky,” states Edwards. “RefWorks is about dragging and dropping and one-clicking. We're in a world where people expect that.” The transition is nearly complete, as he explains. “I'm not aware of anyone using legacy RefWorks. We have some numbers, but they're very small. I'm waiting until I'm confident that nobody is using it and then we'll turn it off.”

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Relief from the Details of Referencing

Edwards sees the positive difference RefWorks makes for Middlesex students. “I think for an awful lot of students, there's a degree of apprehension about referencing and the fear of getting it wrong,” he shares. “Certainly in my experience, some people overcomplicate it. For those who stress, they just want something that's reassuring. RefWorks provides that reassurance. It's doing the work for them. It's taking away the pain and the pressure.”

RefWorks also makes it easier for students in joint or major/minor programs grappling with different referencing styles for different subjects, as Edwards explains. “A good example would be criminology with psychology. They're using Harvard style for the criminology classes and the APA referencing style for the psychology classes. Having Harvard and APA built into RefWorks is brilliant. It makes life a lot easier for those students.”

The ability to instantly switch between referencing styles also generates some buzz. “As a live exercise, I've had a student take a paper he was working on and use RefWorks Citation Manager to change the references from Harvard to IEEE, which is numeric, and then back to Harvard again,” describes Edwards. “We also had a situation where a faculty member submitted a paper. The publisher said they didn't believe it was suitable for their journal. So she used RefWorks to redo the references in the style of the second journal she submitted to. That was a big positive for her.”

Making the Most of RefWorks Features

What other features of RefWorks are a big hit with the users? Edwards recounts a few. “Students really like the different views in RefWorks, like the Normal View and the Table View. I also make a point of showing them the Citation View and tell them to look at it every so often, to make sure there aren't any missing bits that will mess up their references. The Lightning Bolt feature is well thought-of as well. If there's an imperfect reference, how do they correct it? Well, the answer is, click the Lightning Bolt for suggestions that will improve it. The other thing I'm always keen to demonstrate is dragging and dropping the PDF into their references. When they have a reference that they found through Library Search or a database, I always teach them to drag and drop the PDF into that reference, rather than dragging and dropping the PDF directly because sometimes publishers' metadata can be a bit flaky. Another hint that I share with the Ph.D. students is to share their folder with their supervisor, to show how much reading they've been doing. ‘Look, supervisor, I'm a dutiful student.’ That usually makes them snigger.”

The logo for ExLibris RefWorks. It features the word "ExLibris" in a dark grey serif font, with a rainbow-colored arc above the "i". Below it, the word "RefWorks" is in a blue sans-serif font.

Putting the Focus Where It Belongs

“Using RefWorks is about critical information literacy,” Edwards declares. “Why not use an automated tool that makes life easier? We don’t want students focusing on the minutiae of full stops and brackets. They need to deal with the complexity of writing, and make sure that the argument works. We want them to be critically engaging with literature and thinking about their information sources.”

Edwards ticks off the advantages that RefWorks offers to the members of the academic community. “If I’m an undergrad student, I’ve done the citations in the text. RefWorks generates

the reference list and I know I’m not going to get dinged for plagiarism, which is always in the back of peoples’ minds. A Ph.D. student can be confident that the eight pages of references at the end of the thesis are correct. A member of the academic staff who is doing research is able to focus on the research and the writing, not the referencing. That focuses time and energy where it should be.

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About Ex Libris

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