Research at the library: young adult outreach in a public library

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examines the impact of research-related outreach to young adults as a means of engaging with them and improving their attitudes toward the public library in Ireland. Taking the opportunity offered by the Leaving Certificate History curriculum, a public library gave an online presentation on research skills and library resources to fifth-year history students embarking on their Research Study Report (RSR). Questionnaires were completed before and after the presentation, asking respondents a range of questions on library membership, library use, library resources and their research skills. Teachers were interviewed on the supports available to them and their students through the library. Young adults were found to have a broadly positive attitude toward the library, but to underutilise the library's resources and to have simplistic approaches to research. The importance of libraries' relationships with teachers and the effectiveness of targeting schools was evident. The outreach event had positive, if limited, effects on respondents' attitudes toward the library, notably on how welcoming and how helpful with research the library was perceived to be. Recommendations are made, including targeted communication with schools, a change to the enrolment process for young adults aged 16+, and an education drive aimed at young adults to reacquaint them with the library after COVID-19 restrictions.

Keywords:

Young Adult; Outreach; Questionnaire; Information-seeking Behaviour; Research Skills; Public Library

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Attracting active young adult membership to public libraries is a longstanding challenge (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 2010), and the Central Library of this Midlands county town is no exception. The largest and busiest branch of the Library Service, it serves four secondary schools in its immediate area. In 2019, young adults aged 12-17, as defined by the national Library Management System, made up 10% of its members, while children aged 0-11 made up almost 26%. The number of child members has been between 2 and 3 times the number of young adult members since 2012. Though not directly comparable as the child age bracket is broader than the young adult age bracket, this does indicate a significant contrast in library engagement in the teenage years.

Efforts to engage young adults at the Library Service have focused mainly on leisure-related activities and resources: young adult literature, computer games, Wi-Fi, etc. The Central Library, along with two other branches, offers the MyOpenLibrary (hereafter MOL) service to members aged 16 and over, allowing access to the library and many of its facilities during unstaffed hours; 18% of young adult members in the Central Library in 2019 were MOL members. Considering this is open only to young adult members aged 16-17, this comprises a large proportion of the Central Library's young adult membership, reflecting its enthusiastic uptake by local second-level students as study space. Their use of the library seems focused on space for work and use of Wi-Fi, as issues of young adult materials

comprises only 2% of the library's issues. While the borrowing of books does not offer a full picture of young adult use of the library, it is an indicator of a lack of engagement with its resources. A Comhairle na nÓg youth online focus group held in April 2021 as part of the Library Service's consultation for its forthcoming Development Plan complained that much of what the library does is for children or adults, and that they feel neglected. It is this dearth, whether perceived or actual, that requires amelioration.

In an effort to engage better with young adults and perform valuable outreach, this research will look at the possibilities offered by partnership with local secondary schools through workshops for senior-cycle history students. The Leaving Certificate is the final examination in Irish second-level education, and history students research and prepare a Research Study Report (hereafter RSR) which is submitted in advance of their final examinations and makes up 20% of their final mark. Essential to this project is the identification and use of two or three specific sources, depending on whether the student is taking Higher or Ordinary level History. Among the guidelines for teachers, the curriculum recommends a visit to the local library as part of the preparation for this assignment (Department of Education 2004). This has not taken place in any formalised manner for several years in the Central Library.

By working with local schools to facilitate a workshop that demonstrates the resources and services relevant to the RSR alongside instruction in information-seeking more generally, this study seeks to show young adults that the public library is a place with much to offer. By building on the existing perception of the library as a space for work, young adult members can be supported in gaining more effective information-seeking skills that will stand them in good stead for their future. The question at the centre of this research is how public libraries can establish themselves as relevant to young adults, and whether strengthening relationships with schools is a useful way to go about this. The library service in question has been anonymised and will be referred to as the Library Service throughout.

1.2 Rationale

In 2012, children were 40% of the Library Service's membership, while young adults were 11%; in 2015, children were 32% of members, while young adults were 12%; in 2018, children were 25% of members, while young adults were 11%. While there is a broader age spread in the 0-11 bracket, children do not generally join until they are of reading age. This looks to be a notable decrease of membership levels between childhood and young adulthood, and focusing attention on the latter is justified. Membership must be renewed annually, so it appears that young adults often allow childhood membership to lapse, and lack of use of the library during the teenage years could impact on adult library use. The Library Service has county-wide membership of just over 15% and, with the national strategy demanding national membership of 30% by 2022 (DRCD 2018), increasing membership is a priority. Young adults offer a demographic that, if better engaged, could provide long-term membership to the library.

Separate, if related, issues are young adults' critical thinking, information literacy, and research skills. Information literacy is here meant as a broader category than just digital literacy. In this context, such information literacy is mainly concerned with online information, but the library's own resources offer some analogue information sources, from books to photographic collections. The ideas of an 'information society' and the advantages of access to and ease with information go back to the 1960s (Crawford 1983). Today, information access and literacy are seen as central to social, economic, cultural and personal development. In contrast to information literacy, information poverty can have long-lasting and wide-ranging impacts on the quality of life for young people. Information poverty is described by McKeown (2016 p. 3) as "a scarcity of information that is vital to citizens' ability to engage effectively in society and make informed life choices". For young people, this information poverty may include lack of reliable internet access, or it may be based in an inability to easily use available

resources, through lack of education, confidence or interest. Engaging young adults with the library offers the chance to introduce them to the information, resources, and training accessible through the public library. Something as simple as using a library PC to access resources in a way that is more difficult and less encouraging on a handheld device may be important. McKeown (2016) considers information access and knowledge acquisition foundational to libraries and their staff, and this is an opportunity for public libraries to build on their reputation as places to learn (Harding 2008).

It is widely reported in the media (O'Brien 2017) that the Leaving Certificate does not teach or encourage higher level thinking or critical skills, and a 2018 study bears this out (Burns et al. 2018). The critical research skills that are required in third level education and, indeed, by many occupations after school can be taught and encouraged and the public library can play a role in this. Although second-level schools in the county town have libraries on site, their focus is fiction and reference collections, and they are not staffed by library professionals.

The RSR offers an excellent opportunity for the public library to work with second-level students and teachers by offering to present on research skills and demonstrate the relevant resources available through the library, including inter-library loans, digitised local newspapers, and a specialised local studies collection. In return, the library may gain better understanding of the young-adult demographic, enrol new members, and increase engagement with existing members. The findings will feed into future outreach plans for secondary school students, and form the foundation of future research and local studies workshops for young adults and other user groups. This may also strengthen relationships with teachers and schools, opening up the chance for further interaction and collaboration.

1.3 Research Strategy

This study aims to find out if a research skills presentation to young adults can demonstrate to them the use and relevance of the library, thereby encouraging them to join and engage with the library.

Its objectives are:

1. To obtain information on how young adults use and perceive the library
2. To obtain information on what change, if any, such a presentation can bring about on young adult use and perceptions of the library

The strategy to implement these objectives is the creation and facilitation of a presentation related to the academic requirements of certain secondary-school students which will interest students, but also attract their teachers, through whom the library can access the students.

1.4 Note on the impact of COVID-19 on this study

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland, public libraries and secondary schools, among other institutions and services, closed their doors on March 13th, 2020. Since then, Irish society has experienced varied levels of restrictions. Libraries have been variously open to limited numbers by appointment, have offered collection services, and have offered online-only services in the time since then, with the latter restrictions in place from January to April 2021. No on-site events have been offered since March 2020. Schools returned to the classroom in September 2020, but remote learning for students was in place from January to March 2021. Over March and April 2021 secondary-school students have returned to the physical classroom. These restrictions have affected this study. Membership rates from 2020 are anomalous, and 2019 rates have been taken to be more typical. Rather than having two-hour on-site workshops in the library for students, where they could handle the collections and conduct their own searches on library databases, an hour-long presentation was offered online to students studying remotely. Rather than delivering consent forms via the school and having students fill out surveys at the library directly before and after the workshop, consent forms

and surveys were delivered online to students via their teachers. These limitations are likely to have negatively impacted the effects of the workshops and certainly affected the survey participation rate. Similarly, while it would have been useful to conduct focus groups and/or interviews with students, social restrictions made this impossible. While the effects of COVID-19 restrictions will be mentioned later, particularly in the methodology discussion, it should be noted that its effects are assumed to have permeated much of this discussion, and it will not be discussed exhaustively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Young adults and strategy

Reference is made to the decrease in young adult library use in national policy documentation (for example, McGrath, Rogers and Gilligan 2010), but young adults do not appear at all in the current national public library strategy (DRCD 2018). The importance generally of consulting young adults in the planning of services for them is acknowledged in national policy (Office of the Minister for Children 2007). The Library Service has been without a development plan for some time (currently under review), but its most recent plan (2009-2014) specified resources and spaces for teenagers (The Library Service 2009). In the absence of a development plan, the Midlands County Council Corporate Plan 2019-2024 offers guidance to the library service; it makes scant reference to young people and, where it does, it focuses on fostering civic participation and community engagement (Midlands County Council 2019).

2.2 Research skills

Research skills for the purposes of this study is a broad term which encompasses a myriad of processes and abilities, including, though not limited to, information-seeking behaviour, information literacy, analysis and critical thinking.

2.2.1 Information-seeking behaviour

There is no shortage of literature on information-seeking behaviour. Amongst the foremost authorities on this subject is Kuhlthau, who discusses information-seeking from the viewpoint of the user. She suggested the Information Search Process (ISP) as a way to see this practice, with a six-stage journey from start to finish (Kuhlthau 1991). It is a constructivist approach to learning, recognising that information seekers come to the information-seeking process with their own knowledge and issues, and that they are active in building a picture of knowledge that fits with their previous understanding and their learning requirements rather than receiving objective, immutable knowledge (von Glaserfeld 1989). An integral part of this process is uncertainty, and making this clear to students will be an important part of familiarising them with the information-seeking process.

Shenton (2007) doubts the accuracy of Kuhlthau's description of information-seeking behaviour when applied to young people, pointing to a tendency amongst young people to copy information and sources without interrogation. Rowlands et al. (2008) reject the idea that being comfortable with technology means that young people are good at using it to find information, and argue that young people (here meaning those born after 1993) have difficulty in creating effective multi-term searches.

2.2.2 Information literacy and critical thinking

Information literacy is an important skill, not just for students (O'Keefe 2016), and refers to the ability to effectively locate and evaluate information. This embraces digital and information capabilities as

well as literacy, as discussed by Reedy and Parker (2018), signifying the need to be able to obtain, understand and utilise online information and resources. The apparent accessibility of the internet gives the (erroneous) impression that the right information is easy to find and does not require specialised searching or evaluation skills (Wilder 2005). The limitations of simple online searches are explored by Shenton (2007), who remarks on the lack of critical thinking brought to the process and that finds that users often find the results of their online searches dissatisfying. A study of post-graduate students found that they were often aware of the limitations of their searching behaviours when using online search engines, but were reluctant to change their practices, suggesting that it is essential to impart and demonstrate why this is important (Martzoukou 2008). Although this study looked at older participants, its findings are useful as many of these habits are formed in adolescence. Younger adults are increasingly likely to seek general information, such as news, online (Marchi 2012), and a move away from traditional media such as newspapers and television, with their – aspirational, at least – journalistic standards, necessitates the ability to parse information and think critically about sources and agendas. Marchi's US-based study interviewed 61 young adults on their news habits, making the point that the teenage years are often when people begin to form their habits regarding news and politics (Marchi 2012).

McKeown (2016 p. 72) looks at the democratic right to information as an equality issue, and points to information literacy as essential to "interpret and evaluation information sources and apply them appropriately". The lack of critical thinking, problem-solving and research skills in second level students is noted on their entry into third-level education in the US by O'Sullivan and Dallas (2010), who present an excellent example of teaching information literacy and research skills at second-level. Studies differ on young adults' information literacy and critical research skills, but a lack often becomes apparent after they leave school (Boatman 2003). A 2018 study asked first-year students in an Irish university what skills and tasks were demanded of them at third-level, and whether they were prepared for them at second-level. Among those for which a large discrepancy was reported were the following: identifying sources, using technology, and critically evaluating information (O'Leary and Scully 2018). There is great potential for public libraries to contribute in this area (Harding 2008).

2.3 A library welcome

Snowball (2008 p. 25) discusses how to encourage teenagers to use libraries, explaining that great effort is expended to "hook" children as members, but that teenagers are often neglected. This neglect, also characterised as a lack of interest and even, at times, hostility toward young adult library users, may account for some fall-off in membership (Corradini 2006; Joseph 2010). A study of young adults and Irish public libraries references the perceived unwelcoming attitude of library staff and the intimidating impression of library buildings as a barrier to use (McGrath, Rogers and Gilligan 2010). Fines, and the fear thereof, can be an obstacle to young adult library use (Agosto et al. 2015). While Irish public libraries removed fines completely in 2019, this may not be apparent to non-members. Other library policies may hinder young adult use, however, as remarked by Campos (2020), who points out that joining a library often requires the presence of a parent/guardian or paperwork that may not be easily available to young adults. Indeed, Irish public libraries require the presence and membership of a parent/guardian to enrol members under the age of 18, which presents a substantial barrier.

Libraries can be daunting to those unused to them or those that feel self-conscious about asking for help, and certainly studies have shown that young adults don't always understand how to navigate libraries, especially as they move from the children's areas to more adult resources (Brown 2004). While the Dewey Decimal system used in most Irish libraries is intended to aid the location of desired items, it can be intimidating for those unfamiliar with it (Shenton 2007). Library users may experience

what Shenton (2007) calls the paradox of needing to have information on a topic to be able to locate it in a library, when the need to locate it is predicated on the lack of such knowledge. It is important that libraries convey to users and potential users that they are not intimidating, silent places that require special knowledge to use (McKeown 2016).

Among the barriers to information examined by Hayter (2005) are individuals' and communities' unwillingness to engage with bureaucracy, fear and distrust of institutions, and lack of confidence. This research explores the information world of a disadvantaged community in the UK. Although different in setting and extremity, the county is home to many disadvantaged communities, with a very low rating in the national Deprivation Index and the lowest rate of third-level education in the country (Haase and Pratschke 2017). Hayter (2005) found that approachability and familiarity among staff were positives in encouraging people to access information, factors that are within library staff's control.

2.4 Outreach

If young adults will not come to library, the library must approach them (Snowball 2008; Velasquez 2019). McGrath, Rogers and Gilligan (2010 p. 21) highlight a clear difference between strong primary school engagement with public libraries and poor secondary school engagement, stating that commitment to the latter is required "on both sides". Cooperation between schools and libraries enables the latter to support the former through targeted services, and schools can provide libraries with a captive audience (Witteveen 2017). Campos (2020) emphasises the value of collaboration between libraries and schools. McKeown (2016) examines the macro, meso and micro level ways in which libraries can engage with their audience and, while his study focuses on Northern Ireland's public library service, its exploration of the public library's role in supporting social inclusion, combatting information poverty, and engaging hard-to-reach communities is very relevant to this research.

2.5 Library relevance

Presenting the library as a relevant place for young adults can be a challenge. Declining library membership in young adulthood is at times taken as a given, but there is literature to support it internationally. Brown (2004 p. 265) describes patrons as "vanish[ing] between fourteen and twenty", and Snowball (2008) remarks on teenagers who had frequented libraries as children, but not subsequently. Simultaneously, as young adults' interests change and freedoms increase, reading (with which libraries are traditionally associated) can move down their list of priorities. There are plenty of reasons for this – changing interests, less reliance on adults to guide their activities and bring them places, seeing books and libraries as hard work, rather than recreation, etc. There is evidence that young adults, particularly boys, have less interest in reading than younger children (Nippold, Duthie and Larsen 2005), as other interests take up more of their time. Too frequently, young adults see libraries as places with a monolithic function – the lending of books (Agosto et al. 2015). Getting young adults into the library, even if only to use a gaming console, is positive in allowing them to see other available resources and facilities (Snowball 2008).

The improvement in online services has helped libraries reach users who might otherwise not avail themselves of library services, whether due to inaccessibility or lack of interest. In the 2020-2021 period, almost twice the number of people joined/renewed the library as in than in the previous year, and use of online services such as eBooks, online classes and eMagazines vastly increased (Carbury 2020). However, a focus solely on digital resources is not the only way through which libraries can deliver to their young adult patrons. Studies in Singapore have found that among young adults who enjoy reading, there is a preference for print over digital books, although both media are used (Loh and Sun 2019; Lee 2019). As Singapore is a particularly internet-saturated country with extremely high

levels of internet access and internet-accessing devices (Loh and Sun 2019), this is all the more noteworthy, despite its non-Irish context. Agosto (2016 p. 344), in discussing future trends in young adult librarianship in a US context, argues that it will be "what the library *does* rather than what the library *has*" that will keep libraries relevant.

2.6 The challenge of the RSR

The Leaving Certificate History RSR is a challenge for students and teachers, so whatever support can be given by the library should be made available (Dredge 2005). The syllabus aims to develop knowledge and understanding of human activity, to develop a range of research skills, and to develop critical thinking, but this is not necessarily borne out in practice (NCCA 2003; Burns et al. 2018). Even before the current syllabus was put into practice, concerns were raised regarding its practicality, with no in-class time allocated to the RSR (Lucey 2001). While the work of O'Sullivan and Dallas (2010), who point to the need for second-level curricula to include more research requirements, is US-based, many of the same concerns apply in an Irish setting. Considering the criticism of the current history syllabus as over-reliant on text-books, discouraging critical thinking and focusing on accepted narratives of history (Limond 2020; Eagleton 2014), the RSR is an excellent opportunity for students to better understand the role of historians (Deignan 2014; Limond 2020). Indeed, one report noted that history is among a small number of Leaving Certificate subjects that includes a non-examination element which encourages the use of "higher-order skills" (O'Leary and Scully 2018 p. 4). According to the State Examinations Commission (2017), the RSR tends to achieve high grades for students; when issues appeared, they were often relating to the research process or justification of the topic and sources, issues upon which libraries have the expertise to educate.

2.7 Data-gathering

This is a mixed methods research study, using literature review, questionnaires and interviews to obtain data and draw conclusions. Mixed methods can offer a fuller picture of an issue by combining qualitative and quantitative data-gathering methods. Lieber and Weisner (2010 p. 561) state that using different evidence "enhances any researcher's ability to discover, understand, and communicate findings", but also warn of the challenge of integrating information and conclusions drawn from different methods.

2.7.1 Questionnaires

There is ample practical literature on designing research questionnaires. Pickard's (2013) detailed discussion of questionnaire design is detailed and extremely practical. Her attention to detail on matters of question construction, questionnaire etiquette and scaled questions is helpful in the creation of questionnaires for this project, and her accessible tone and advice makes this book an excellent guide to conducting research.

Dole (2001 p. 38) states that "the fewer and more specific the questions, the more likely the recipients are to respond", and this remains true two decades later. Dole recommends keeping questionnaires brief, using appealing fonts and layout, and moving logically from the general to the specific, and from the objective to the subjective. Lietz (2010) conducted a thorough literature review on questionnaire design, remarking that several different approaches to the process of creating, answering and analysing questionnaires agree that small changes to the design can have large implications for the results. It is generally agreed that shorter questions are preferable as they are easier to understand, although longer questions may encourage respondents to put more consideration into their answers (Lietz 2010). Other advice offered by Lietz's review includes asking demographic questions at the end and avoiding vagueness, negative questions, and double-barrel questions. Van Mol (2017), looking at third-level students, agreed that reminders can help improve survey completion rates.

The need to conduct surveys online was due to external circumstances (COVID-19 and its resulting social restrictions), and this method has positive and negative characteristics. It increases the level of anonymity and is very cost effective, but Van Selm and Jankowski (2006) also warn that online surveys may seem longer than they would in print, which can concern respondents.

Inaccurate answers are inevitable in questionnaires, and may result from poorly-phrased questions, unconscious biases on the part of respondents, or even conscious avoidance of sharing certain information. Brace (2008) discusses social desirability bias, explaining that respondents may wish to appear more socially responsible, knowledgeable and cultured than they are. This must be taken into account in the design and analysis of the questionnaires, as respondents may wish to appear as frequent users of the library, or may over-estimate the value they place on library collections or resources.

2.7.2 Interviews

Interviews are a form of qualitative research, as the information given by the interviewee must be interpreted. The researchers themselves influence the interview, from the discussion points and follow-up questions, to time given for responses and prompts and encouragements. The importance of creating a positive open atmosphere is highlighted by Brinkman and Kvale (2018), who also discuss semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer has a list of topics and suggested questions, allowing the interviewer to use their judgement as the interview unfolds.

Telephone interviews are separated in place, but synchronous in time, as the interviewer and interviewee interact in real time (Opdenakker 2006). While face-to-face interviews offer the added information of social cues, they are more demanding of an interviewee, and telephone interviews can offer some of these social cues, such as intonation.

2.8 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations in investigating issues concerning minors are paramount. The juxtaposition between a responsibility to prioritise the learning opportunity for the students involved and the desire to maximise data quality and participation must be navigated, as discussed in Roberts and Allen (2015). This research focuses on university students as research participants, and emphasises their status as a 'vulnerable' population, as is the case with minors, highlighting the care with which the population under scrutiny here must be treated.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The suitability of a research method can dictate the relative success or otherwise of the research project. Options in this case include qualitative and quantitative research, and methods including focus groups, observation, interviews, surveys, case studies, etc. A mixed methods approach was deemed appropriate, as either a qualitative or a quantitative approach individually might not give as full an understanding of the issues. The data obtained is to be integrated to give a full picture of how public libraries can interact with schools in a meaningful manner. It is an approach that combines positivist and interpretivist approaches, using quantitative and qualitative data collection to arrive at conclusions and seeking to understand and predict trends and tendencies, while also recognising that people and their motivations are complex and multifaceted (Johnson and Gray 2010).

While focus groups would likely return in-depth and useful data from students, they are time- and resource-heavy and, particularly pertinent at this time, best conducted in-person; current restrictions

mean that groups cannot attend events in the library. Busy school schedules, further pressured by remote teaching in the January-April period in 2021, make even online focus groups a challenge and participation in students' own time is unlikely to be large. Similarly, student interviews would enable deeper investigation into the opinions and attitudes of participants, but access to individual students is challenging and a broader understanding of the opinions and attitudes of a larger group was reckoned to be more desirable. Interviews are more demanding upon individuals, and the ethical considerations involving interviewing minors are great. Short interviews with teachers do form part of this project.

A case study looks at a group or individual in a specific setting, often its usual setting. Here, classes are not being observed in their 'natural habitat', as it were, but are in the atypical position of dialling-in remotely. While it might be possible to conduct a case study of young adults in the library by arranging a series of visits and observing and interacting with the group(s), it would require extensive time, cooperation and resources, and the end result might not be of particular use to either party. Additionally, current restrictions make it impossible.

By relying on a questionnaire to students from specific classes that participate in an outreach event with the library, several challenges may be met. A set of participants exist. The presence and involvement of their teacher, and the link to their own course-work, is expected to encourage participation. They may even be motivated by the prospect of influencing future library outreach. There are risks in using questionnaires, including low participation rates, social desirability bias and reliability. Questionnaires also remove the option of delving deeper with a respondent, with no opportunity to ask for more information or clarification (Pickard 2013). Questionnaires are best used to obtain information about recent behaviour (Lietz 2010), but the public have been unable to use libraries in their usual manner since March 2020. These disadvantages must be born in mind.

Having considered various possibilities, this study was determined as comprising the following: a study of the impact of a public library's provision of a research skills presentation to secondary-school students, using teacher interviews and two student questionnaires. It is a concurrent nested mixed methods approach, seeking quantitative data and qualitative data. The presentation, entitled 'Research at the library: what can the Library Service do for you?', was offered by a member of staff at the Library Service. Links to an online questionnaire and consent forms were sent via teachers in advance of the presentation, and the link for a second questionnaire was sent afterwards. Teachers were then interviewed.

3.2 Study Limitations

Due to the small numbers involved, it is not be possible to generalise from this study, though it may present a jumping-off point for further research. Out of concern for brevity and participation, certain demographic information was not sought, such as age, socio-economic background, parental use of the library, etc. The student participants are almost all aged 16-17 (though there are outliers at either end), which clearly does not include all young adults, and the study deals solely with history students. Whether this group may be deemed representative of young adults more generally is important to the reliability of the conclusions reached. Almost 21% of 2019 Leaving Certificate students took the history examination at higher or ordinary level (State Examinations Committee 2019). It cannot be guaranteed that the cohort studied here are truly representative of their age, many of whom are no longer in the school system. History is not considered an easy subject, being essay-based at examination level; only 6.7% of students who took higher-level history in 2019 received a 1H grade, and 5.2% of those taking ordinary-level history received an O1 grade (State Examinations Committee 2019). The high literacy levels demanded by essay-based examinations may deter academically weaker students from taking this subject. The county's population scores below the national average in third-level educational attainment and above the national average in early school leaving (LOETB

2018), indicating that those studying history at senior level may not be truly representative of their age group.

This is also a geographically limited pool of participants. Young adults in other parts of the county may have other challenges in accessing the library, such as distance from a library and lack of public transport. While all of the service's branches have a Local Studies section, smaller branches have a far smaller selection than the Central Library, which holds the county Local Studies collection.

Despite these limitations, it is hoped that the findings will have a wider application in engaging with schools and young adults in a public library setting.

3.3 Participants

The attitudes and behaviours of young adults are the main focus of this study, using a subset of this group for investigation. As preparation for the RSR generally begins in the second semester of fifth year (the first of the two-year Leaving Certificate senior cycle), fifth-year students are the target participants. Random sampling was considered, but the nature of the project, requiring school engagement, made using a specific class far more likely to successfully gain cooperation.

Sourcing participants through schools has multiple benefits. The theme of the presentation, research skills as they relate to the Leaving Certificate history curriculum, is education-specific. Recruiting a class gives a larger number more easily than attempting to recruit individuals, and engagement from the school and teachers adds support in the eyes of students and parents. Retention of participants over the surveys and the presentation is also helped by school attendance (Bartlett et al. 2017).

All four secondary schools in the county town area were contacted in May 2020 and asked to refer on their fifth-year history teachers for the 2020/21 academic year. Initially teachers from all four schools responded, but ultimately three of the four secondary schools in the area agreed to take part in this study, providing potential access to the majority of the fifth-year history students in the locality, comprising 62 individuals across the three schools.

3.4 Presentation

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the presentation was offered online to schools. At the time in question (January 2021), all secondary school students were working remotely, and so the presentation was provided over Zoom or Microsoft Teams via the teacher, to whom the link was sent and who then provided it to their class. This move online removed the need for schools to release students from the school grounds, which always adds safety and time management concerns.

There are disadvantages, however, the primary being the lack of access to the library resources offered by an online workshop. While the Local Studies collection can be displayed and discussed, it does not equate to handling items in person. Similarly, while searching the database of local newspapers and JSTOR can be demonstrated online, it is not the equivalent of sitting down oneself and searching for a topic. The challenges inherent in online learning, such as lack of engagement and difficulties interacting (Humphrey and Wiles 2021), particularly for those unused to it, also caused issues. The presentation was cut from two hours to one hour, and students were very reluctant to engage online, with all keeping their cameras off.

The presentation took the form of a PowerPoint presentation and database demonstrations. It covered the following: coming up with a topic; concept-mapping; formulating a research question; deciding on keywords; Boolean operators; searching databases; evaluating sources; citing sources; accessing online library resources; and joining the library. It also exhibited the local studies collection

of the library, highlighting local history as a possible topic. The sessions were recorded to preserve questions and interactions with the participants.

The slides used in the presentation are included in Appendix 4, and the sessions were recorded with the permission of all participants.

3.5 Data Collection

Data was collected in three distinct stages:

1. Questionnaire 1 was distributed online in advance of the presentation to the students.
2. Questionnaire 2 was distributed online at the end of the presentation to the students.
3. Participating teachers were interviewed over the telephone.

3.5.1 Questionnaires

Data was collected with two questionnaires, one in advance of the presentation and one afterward. Some questions were repeated in both questionnaires for comparative purposes, and the questionnaires sought to elicit information from respondents on their use of and attitudes toward the library, and whether attending the presentation affected their attitudes and potential future use of the library. Questionnaires were carried out online through www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk, a GDPR-compliant survey website run by Jisc, and were anonymous.

A link to Questionnaire 1 was sent to the teacher of each class several days before the presentation for dissemination to students. A link to Questionnaire 2 was sent to each teacher directly after the presentation for similar dissemination. Reminders to fill out the questionnaires were sent via the teachers two and one day in advance of the presentation, and up to three times after the presentation.

3.5.1.1 Designing the questionnaires

The information sought by the questionnaires concerns young adult use of the library, young adult attitudes toward the library, and whether a research skills workshop might improve young adult use of and attitude toward the library. Careful consideration of the priorities of the Library Service and of the literature reviewed contributed toward the questions devised. The topics to be covered included the following: membership, visiting the library, resources and services available, and research skills. Asking for unnecessary or possible identifying data, such as age or school, was avoided (Roberts and Allen 2015).

Questions were devised and phrased to avoid ambiguity, vagueness or unnecessary complexity. No questions had to be answered to continue the questionnaire, as recommended by Roberts and Allen (2015). A 'Not Sure' option was offered on some questions to accommodate uncertainty. The questions were ordered with the intention of easing respondents into the questionnaire, with a mix of question-types to maintain attention. The questions were divided into sections on different pages, with a heading explaining the purpose of the questions to the respondents.

The questions are mainly quantitative in design, although some open answer questions allowed for qualitative data. The quantitative questions concerned knowledge of library resources, self-evaluation of their research skills, perceptions of library staff expertise, and attitudes toward the public library. These questions took the form of multiple dichotomous questions, multiple selections, and scaled questions. The recommendations of Hanafin (2014) were considered in the creation of the questionnaires, such as the number of options offered.

The qualitative questions concerned whether respondents feel welcome in the library and what resources they believe to be useful to them. These questions, which offer blank space for the respondents to fill in are demanding of the respondent and, while offering valuable information, may

be skipped or laconically answered. Pickard (2013) points out that, although open questions are frequently described as qualitative, they are generally not lengthy or detailed enough to count as truly qualitative.

The data analysis was considered at this stage. Different question-types, such as the multiple choice, open and scaled questions used in this study, demand different forms of analysis; some are straight-forward while others require more thought and attention. Open questions, especially, require coding, and post-coding was selected to avoid any confusion on the part of respondents. The small number of respondents and the short answers offered to the open questions in these questionnaires resulted in a limited number of codes being required.

3.5.1.2 Questionnaire pilot

An important step in creating a questionnaire is its pilot. A pilot helps to ensure clarity of meaning and ease of completion, and generally examines reliability, validity and error testing (Brace 2008). In the absence of a separate cohort of young adults with whom to pilot the questionnaire, a mixed group of sixteen individuals was used. It included adults and young adults based mainly in the county town area and comprising library staff, members and non-members of the library, and students. Issues that arose and were resolved included a need for additional answer options to certain questions, simplifying the instructions in some cases, and a streamlining of some scaled questions.

3.5.2 Consent forms

Consent forms were administered separately from the questionnaires for the sake of privacy. These were also created using www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk, and separate consent forms were created for the teachers, the participating students, and parents/guardians. As the vast majority of participants were under 18, it was necessary to obtain parental consent for their completion of the questionnaires. Participation in said questionnaires was not required to attend the presentation, and the consent forms made clear that participation could be withdrawn at any time. The consent forms also provided information about the study. Links to the consent forms were sent via the teachers, and reminders to complete them were sent via the teacher in advance of the presentation.

3.5.3 Teacher interviews

After the presentations, the teacher of each class was interviewed over the telephone using a semi-structured approach. Telephone interviews were selected both to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions and for the convenience of the interviewees. The interviewees are anonymised as Teacher 1, etc.

The teachers were informed in advance of the topic and the purpose of the interview – to ask them their views on the library and its potential for their students; whether they felt the workshop was a useful resource for the students; and what they believed would encourage them and their students to make more use of the library. Notes were taken at each interview and two of the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the interviewees (the third interviewee declined to be recorded), and consent forms were collected for each.

A series of questions were prepared in advance, but were used flexibly to ensure the same topics were covered in each interview. The interview was conversational, with the interviewer encouraging the interviewee and asking for clarification when necessary. Some questions were answered in the flow of conversation, without the interviewer explicitly asking each one. The aim of the interview was to elicit the interviewees' impressions of both the workshop and the library, and to delve into opportunities for the library to forge relationships with these schools.

The interviews were recorded and www.oTranscribe.com was used to transcribe them, a programme that does not collect or keep the transcript or audio file used. These transcriptions and the notes taken were used to compare the three interviewees' opinions and experiences, and to obtain information

about their individual attitudes toward the library and the workshop. Due to the brevity of the interviews and the small number of interviewees, exhaustive coding was not required. Information they offered was compared and analysed thematically under several headings: attitude, knowledge and experience, use, and potential. Content analysis and meaning condensation were used to examine and communicate this data (Brinkman and Kvale 2018)

3.5.4 Data analysis and protection

The results of the questionnaires were compared, where appropriate, and analysed to see what the attitudes and approaches to the library and research skills the students initially profess, and what changes, if any, result from the presentation. The feedback and data obtained from the teacher interviews was added to this data and the results combined to draw conclusions as to the impact of the presentation. The quantitative data produced by the questionnaires is presented in graph form for ease of access and understanding. The content of the interviews is expressed in both graph and text form.

Data from the questionnaire will not be retained any longer than is necessary, and is anonymous. The teachers' names and their schools are anonymised in this study. It will be important to offer feedback and follow-up, both to discover if the teachers feel the workshop made a difference in the longer-term, and to let the teachers and students know what the findings are (Alibali and Nathan 2010). Questionnaires and consent forms are held separately and securely on a password-protected hard drive.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire results[1]

4.1.1 Participation and Questionnaire 1 (Q1) completion rate

45 out of a maximum of 62 students across three fifth-year history classes attended the online session remotely.
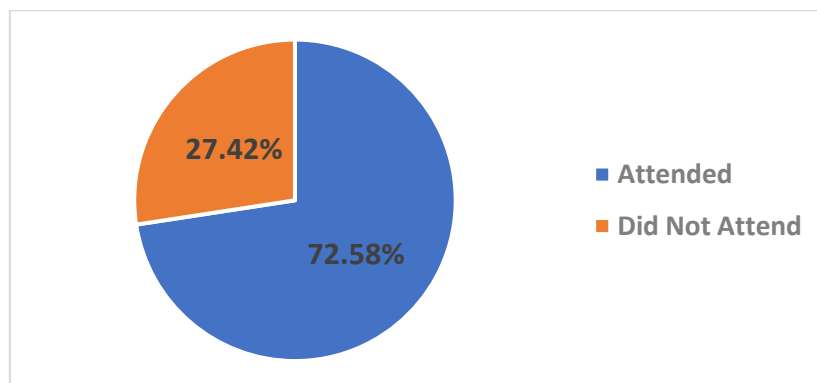
Figure 1. Student attendance at online presentation

23 students completed Questionnaire 1, just over half of the attendees.

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[1] Please note, percentages in the graphs are supplied to two decimal places but, in discussing the figures, the percentages are rounded up to one decimal place. Rounding may mean that some graphs appear to add up to more than 100%.
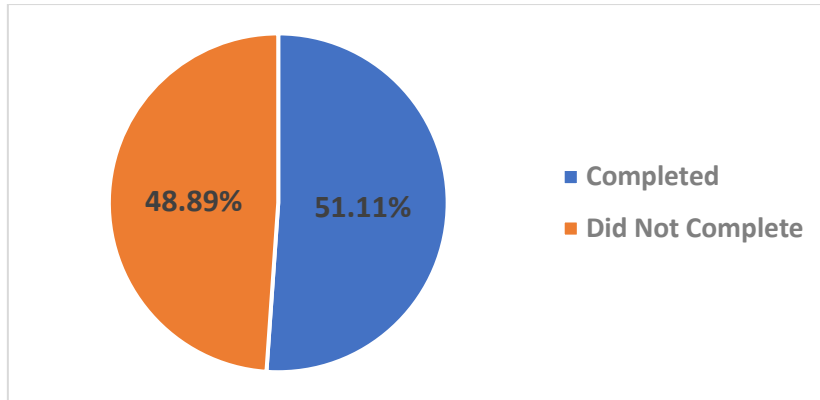
Figure 2. Completion rate (Q1)

4.1.2 Questionnaire 1 responses

Question 1: **Gender**

Over half of respondents were female, while 47.8% were male.
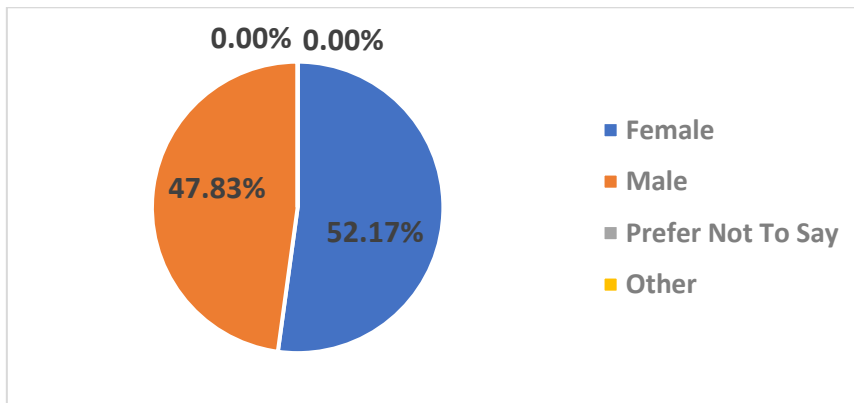
Figure 3. Gender breakdown (Q1)

Question 2: **Are you a member of the Library Service (or any other public library)?**

The majority of respondents were members, while 8.7% (2 respondents) selected No and the same number selected Not Sure.
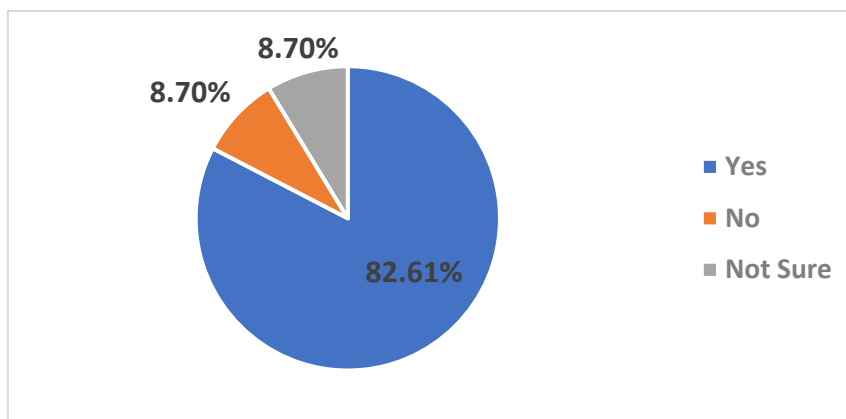
Figure 4. Are you a member of the library? (Q1)

Question 2 (a): **If yes, did you first join as a child (age 0-11). A young adult (age 12-17), or an adult (age 18+)?**

80% of respondents to this question had joined as children (aged 11 and under), and 20% as young adults (aged 12-17).
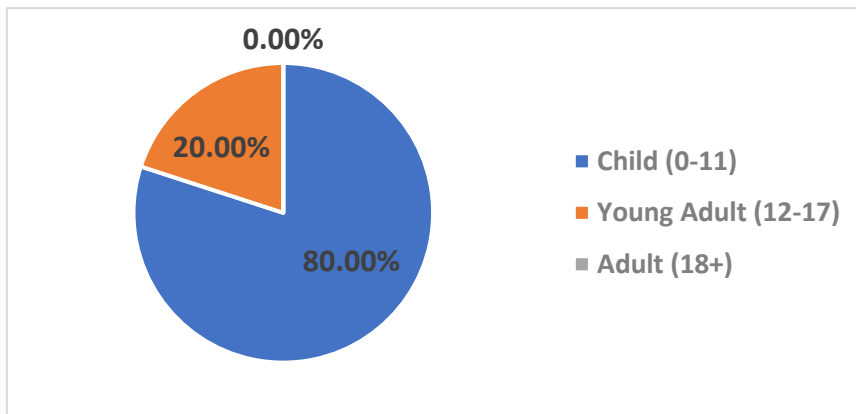
Figure 5. Age on joining the library

Question 2(b): **If yes, are you a My Open Library member?**

Only one respondent (5.3%) to this question is a MOL member. Over half of respondents selected Not Sure, and 42.1% selected No.
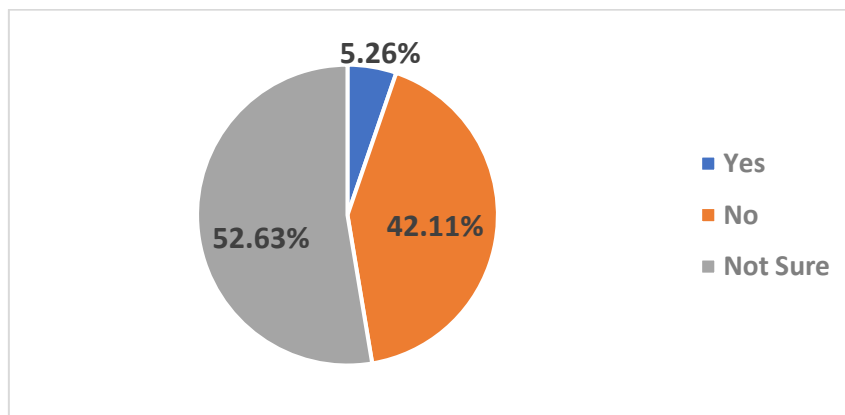
Figure 6. Are you a MOL member?

Question 3: **Whether or not you are a Library Service member, have you visited one of the Library Service's branches in:** (the past 6 months, past year, prior to last year, or never)

All respondents had visited the library at some point, with 13% doing so in the six months preceding the presentation (January 2021). 43.5% had visited in the last year and the same number had done so prior to that.
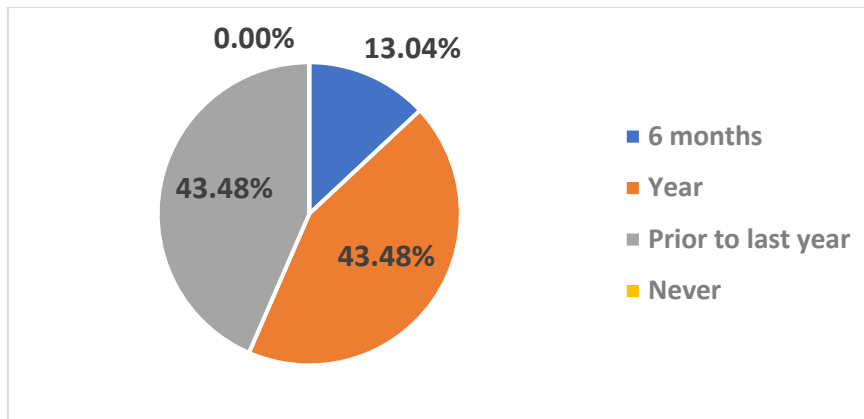
Figure 7. Last visit to the library (Q1)

Question 4: **If you ever visited the library in person or used its online services, what resources and services did you use? Select all that apply.**

Borrowing books was the most used service by respondents, with 82.6% doing so in the past. 52.2% had used study space at the library, 43.5% had used the printing or photocopying services, and 34.8% had used the Wi-Fi. Only 4.3% (one respondent) had used either the online databases or the online resources.
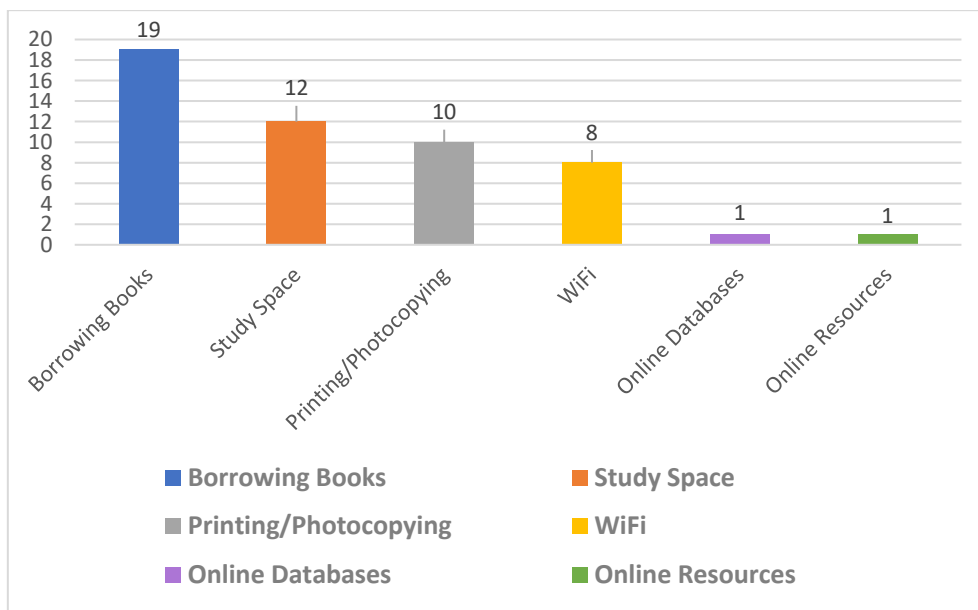
Figure 8. Resources and services used at the library

Question 5: **Do you think people your age believe the library is for them?**

Over half the respondents, 52.2%, answered Yes to this question, while slightly more (26.1%) answered Not Sure than answered No (21.7%).
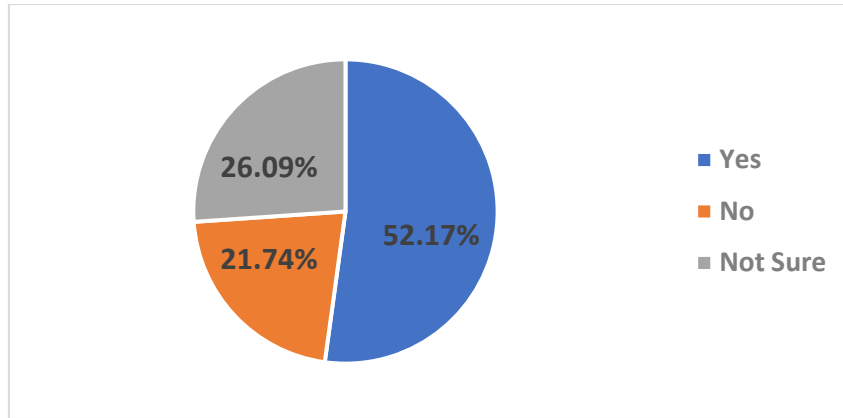
Figure 9. Do people your age believe the library is for them?

Question 6: **Do you believe the library is for you?**

The majority of respondents (69.6%) selected Yes for this question, and again a slightly larger number selected Not Sure (17.4%) over No (13%).
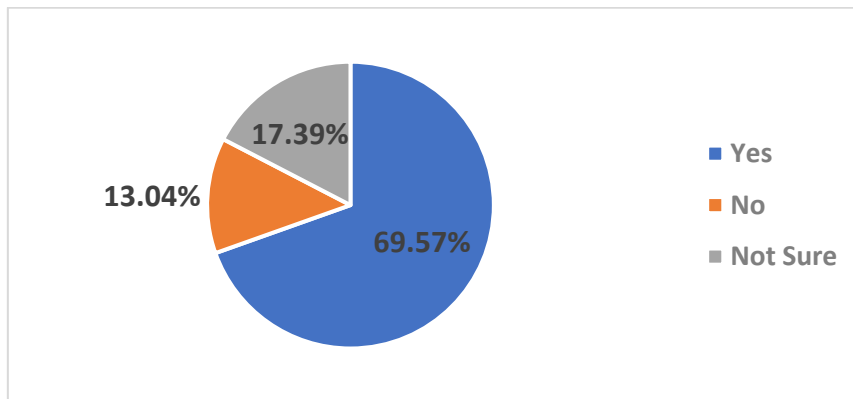
Figure 10. Do you believe the library is for you? (Q1)

Question 7: **Do you feel you are or would be welcome in the library?**

All respondents answered Yes to this question.

Question 7(a): **Why do you think that?**

There were 18 responses to this open question, which were grouped thematically. 27.8% of respondents answered that the library is an open, inclusive space, a "space for all". 16.7% specified the friendly staff and the same number the library as a space for learning. 11.1% (or two respondents) selected the library as an appealing space, their interest in books or a variation on Not Sure, and one respondent (5.5%) cited past experience. All were positive or neutral responses.
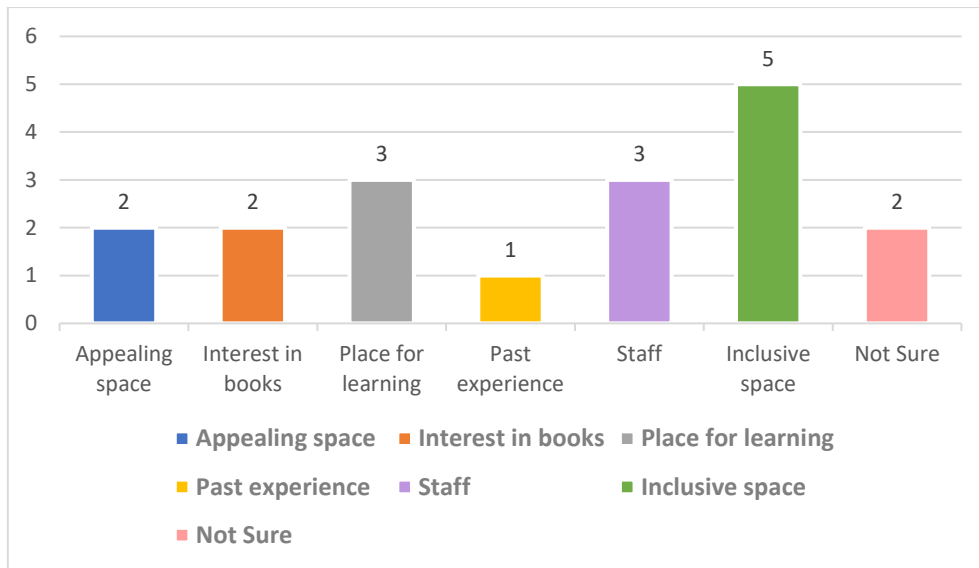
Figure 1111. Why do you or would you feel welcome?

Question 8: **On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is Not At All and 5 is Extremely, please indicate how much or how little you agree with the following statements: (please note some of these statements are positive and some are negative)**

Question 8(i): **The library is a welcoming place**

More than half of respondents agreed Extremely with this statement (56.5%). 39.1% agreed Somewhat, and 4.4% (one respondent) were Not Sure.
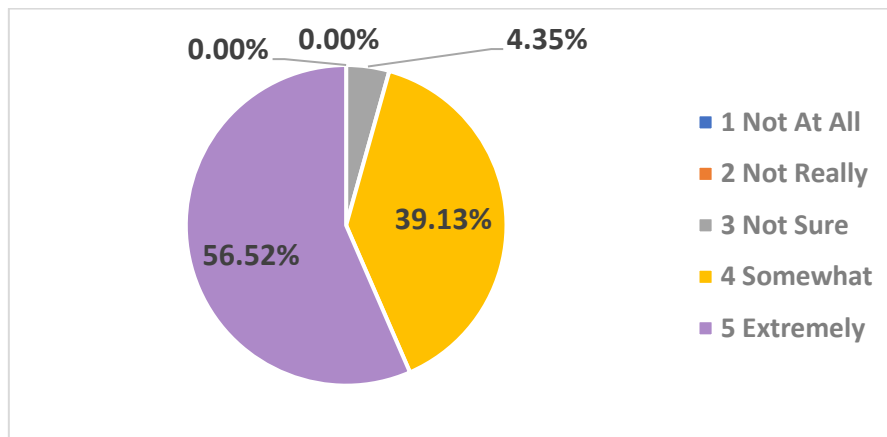
Figure 12. The library is a welcoming place (Q1)

Question 8(ii): **The library is a welcoming place for young adults**

Again, more than half of respondents agreed Extremely with this statement (52.2%). 39.1% agreed Somewhat, and 8.7% were Not Sure.
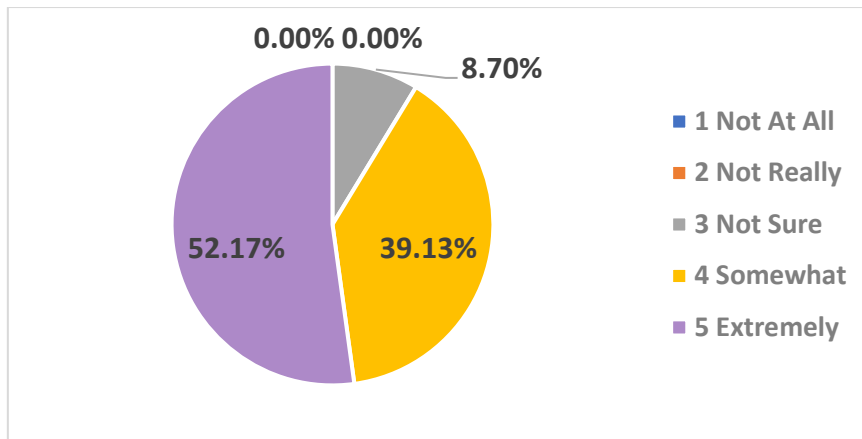
Figure 13. The library is a welcoming place for young adults (Q1)

Question 8(iii): **The library hasn't much I'm interested in**

21.7% agreed Extremely with this statement while the largest number agreed Somewhat (47.8%). 8.7% were Not Sure, 17.4% selected Not Really and 4.4% (one respondent) selected Not At All. Overall, 69.6% of respondents do not think the library has much to interest them.
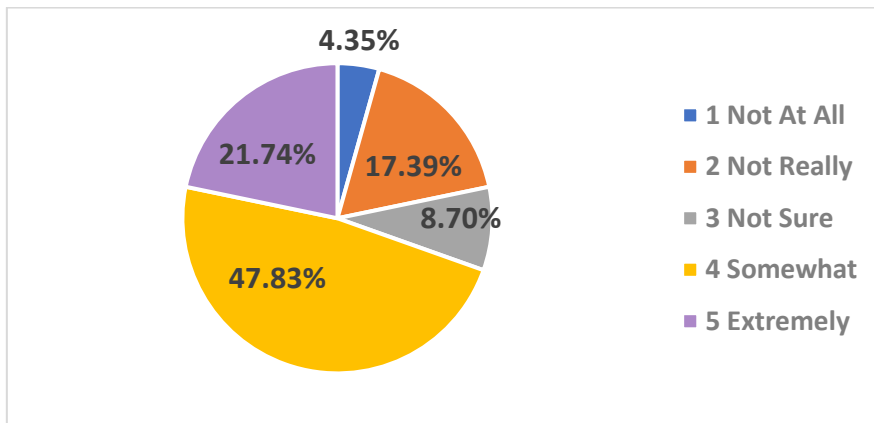
Figure 14. The library hasn't much I'm interested in (Q1)

Question 8 (iv): **I'm interested in local history**

21.7% agreed Extremely with this statement and 47.8% agreed Somewhat. Only 8.7% were Not Sure, while 17.4% selected Not Really, and 4.4% (one respondent) selected Not At All. 69.6% of respondents were interested in local history.
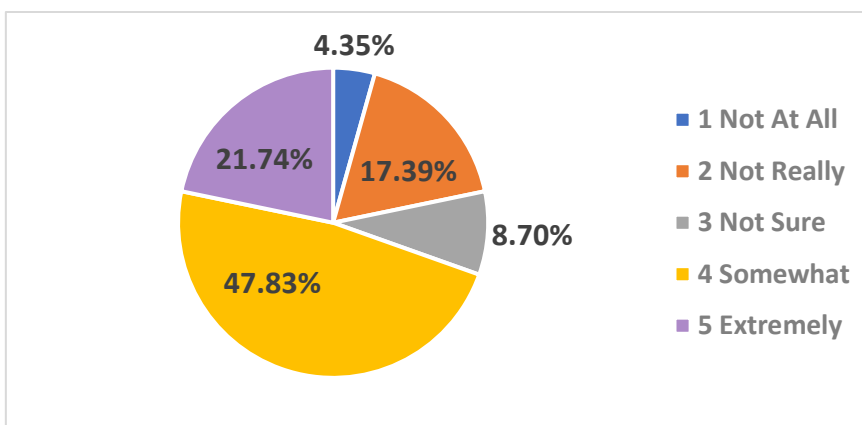
Figure 15. I'm interested in local history (Q1)

Question 8(v): **I don't think the library can help me with research**

Just 4.4% (one respondent) agreed Extremely with this statement, and 8.7% agreed Somewhat. 21.7% were Not Sure, 39.1% selected Not Really and 26.1% selected Not At All; together, 65.2% disagreed with this statement.
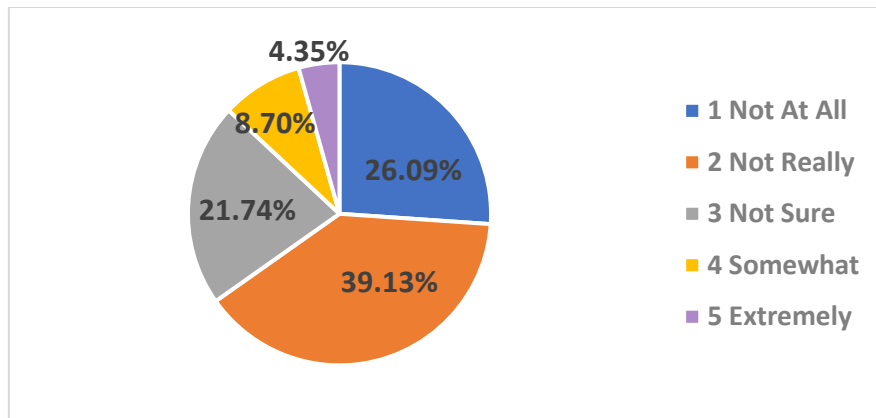
Figure 16. I don't think the library can help me with research (Q1)

Question 8(vi): **I have good research skills**

4.4% (one respondent) agreed Extremely with this statement, while 60.9% agreed Somewhat, and 34.8% were Not Sure.
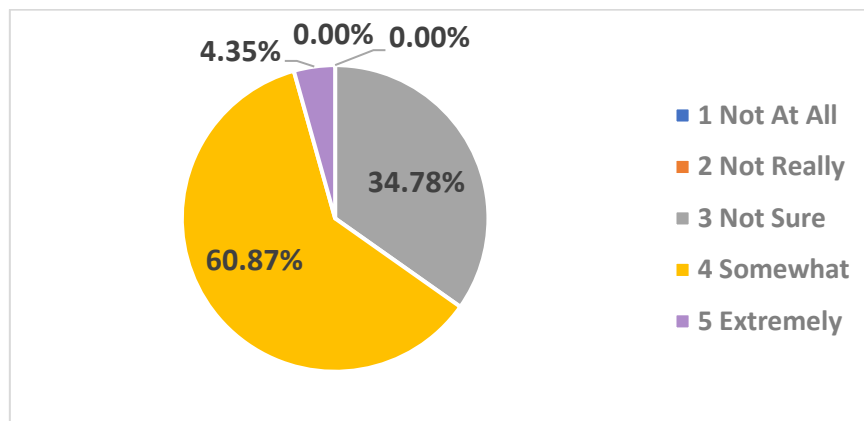
Figure 127. I have good research skills (Q1)

Question 8(vii): **I don't feel confident using library resources**

No respondents agreed Extremely with this statement and only 8.7% agreed Somewhat. 30.4% were Not Sure and 47.8% selected Not Really, while 13% selected Not At All. This results in 60.9% disagreeing with the statement.
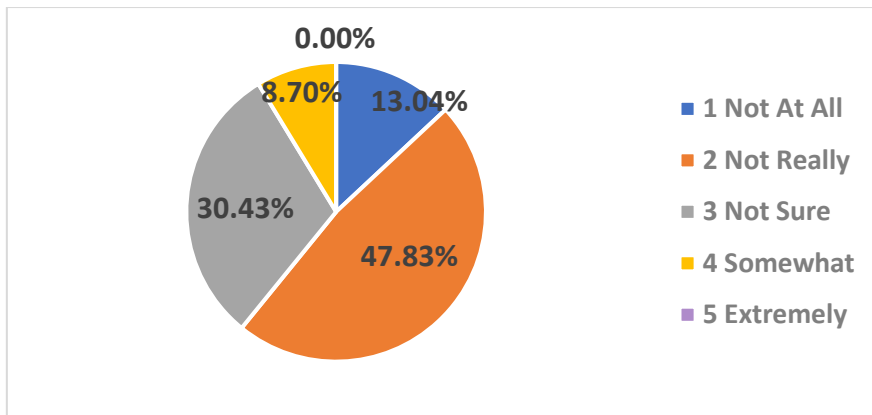
Figure 18. I don't feel confident using library resources (Q1)

Question 9: **Please rate the following existing library services as either important, unimportant, or neither important nor unimportant to you:**

Question 9(i): **Wi-Fi**

91.3% deemed Wi-Fi important at the library, and 8.7% deemed it neither important nor unimportant.
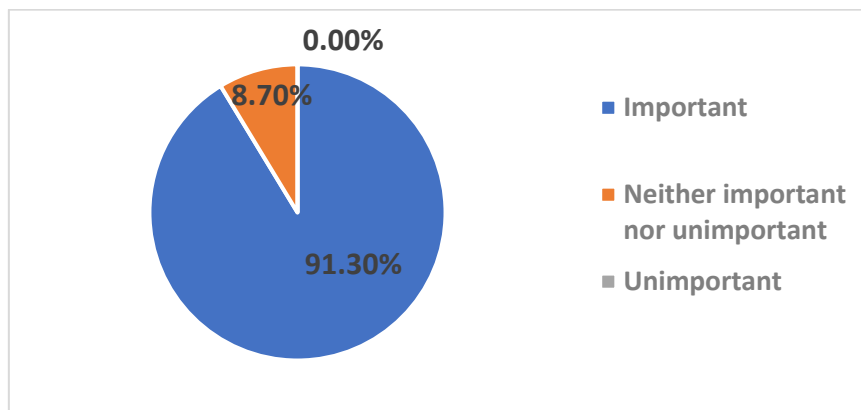
Figure 19. The importance of Wi-Fi (Q1)

Question 9(ii): **Study space**

95.7% deemed study space important, with only one respondent (4.4%) deeming it neither important nor unimportant.
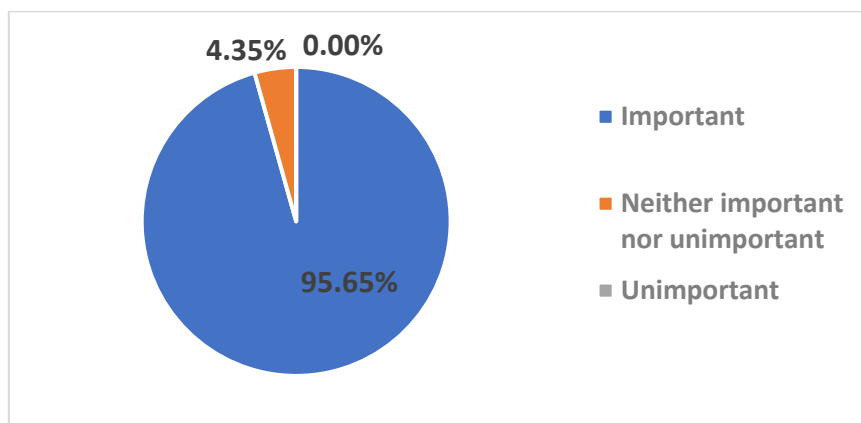
Figure 13. The importance of study space (Q1)

Question 9(iii): **Books**

95.7% deemed books important, with only one respondent (4.4%) deeming them neither important nor unimportant.
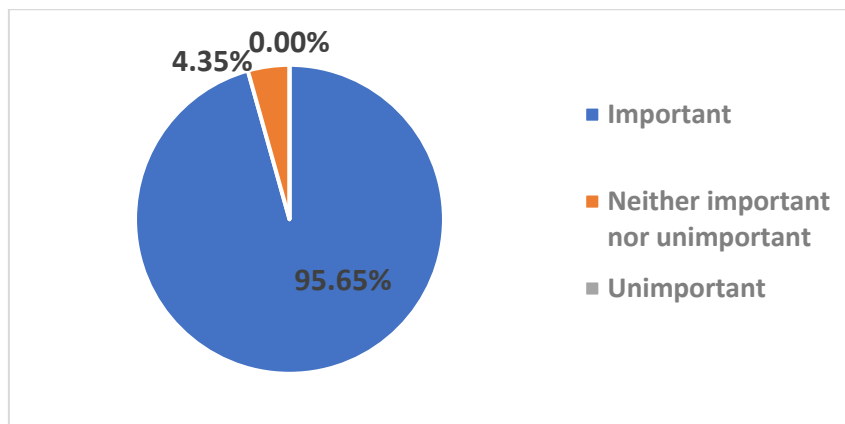
Figure 21. The importance of books (Q1)

Question 9(iv): **Online databases**

69.6% deemed online databases important, while 30.4% deemed them neither important nor unimportant.
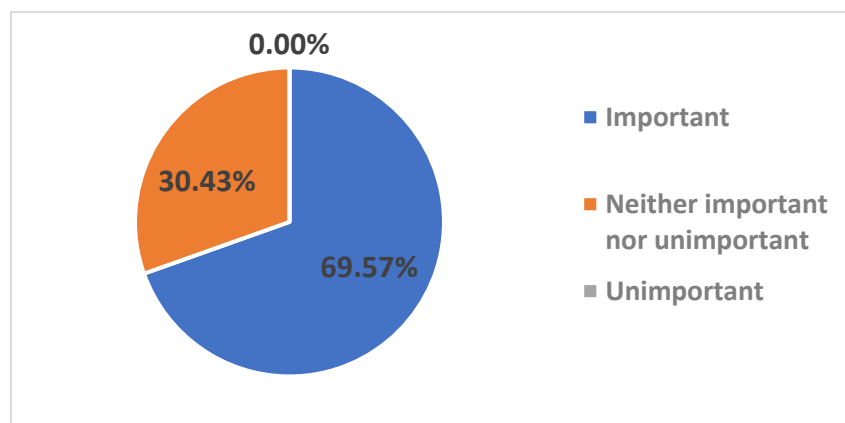
Figure 14. The importance of online databases (Q1)

Question 9(v): **Local Studies collection**

69.6% deemed the Local Studies collection important, while 30.4% deemed it neither important nor unimportant.
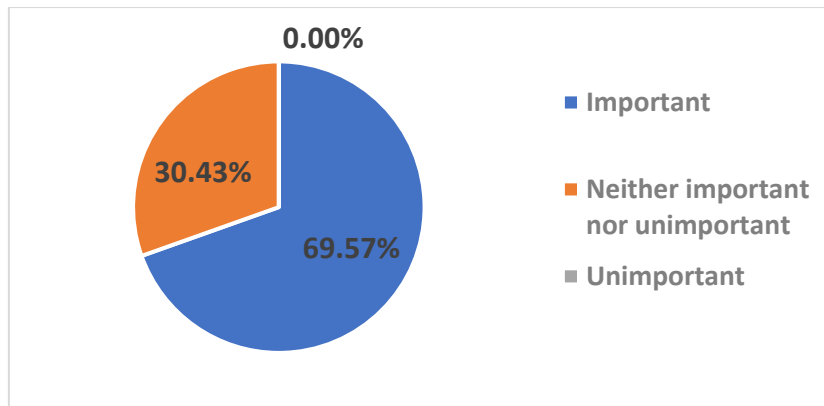
Figure 23. The importance of the Local Studies collection (Q1)

Question 9(vi): **eBooks**

47.8% deemed eBooks important while 43.5% deemed them neither important nor unimportant. 8.7% (two respondents) deemed them unimportant.
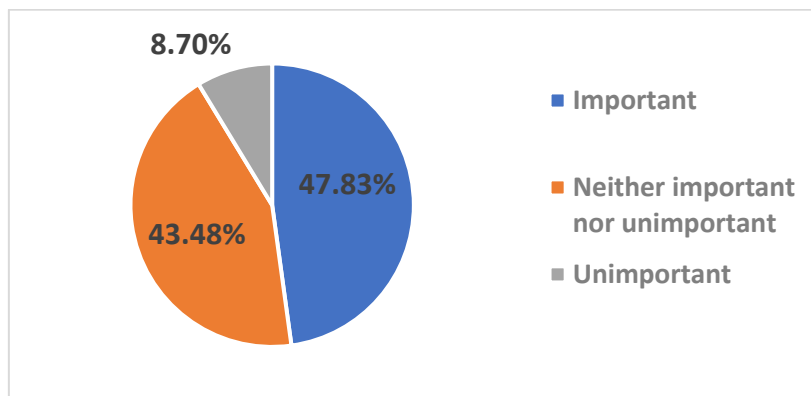
Figure 15. The importance of eBooks (Q1)

Question 9(vii): **eMagazines**

31.8% deemed eMagazines important, while 50% deemed them neither important nor unimportant and 18.2% deemed them unimportant.
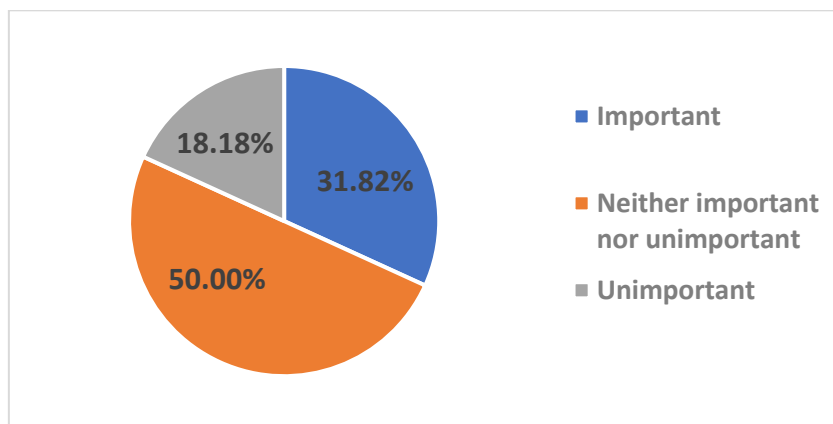

Figure 16. The importance of eMagazines (Q1)

Question 9(viii): **Online newspapers**

47.8% deemed online newspapers important. 43.5% deemed them neither important nor unimportant, and 8.7% deemed them unimportant.
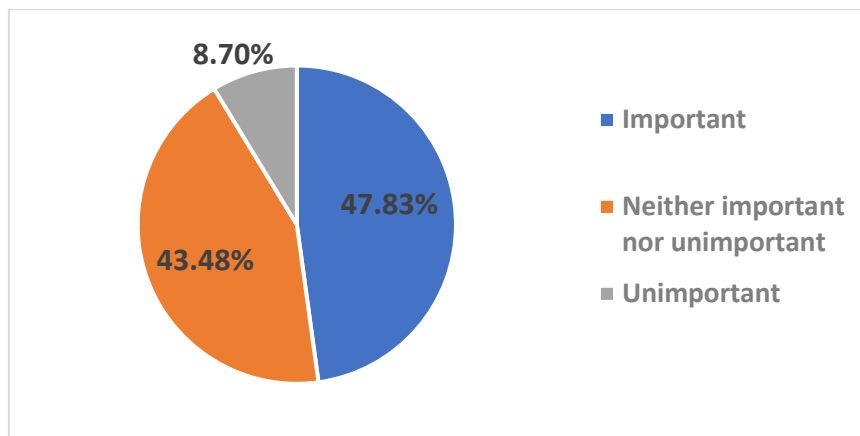
Figure 17. The importance of online newspapers (Q1)

Question 10: **Please select your preferred methods of finding information for your Leaving Certificate History Research Study:**

Respondents were asked to select up to three of their preferred methods. The most popular choices were firstly books and history websites (each selected by 60.9% respondents), and Google search (52.2%). School textbooks were selected by 34.8% of respondents, and 21.7% chose asking their teacher and chose Google Scholar. Newspapers and Wikipedia were among the least likely to be selected, with only 17.4% choosing either of those, and library databases were the least popular, with only 13% selected that option.
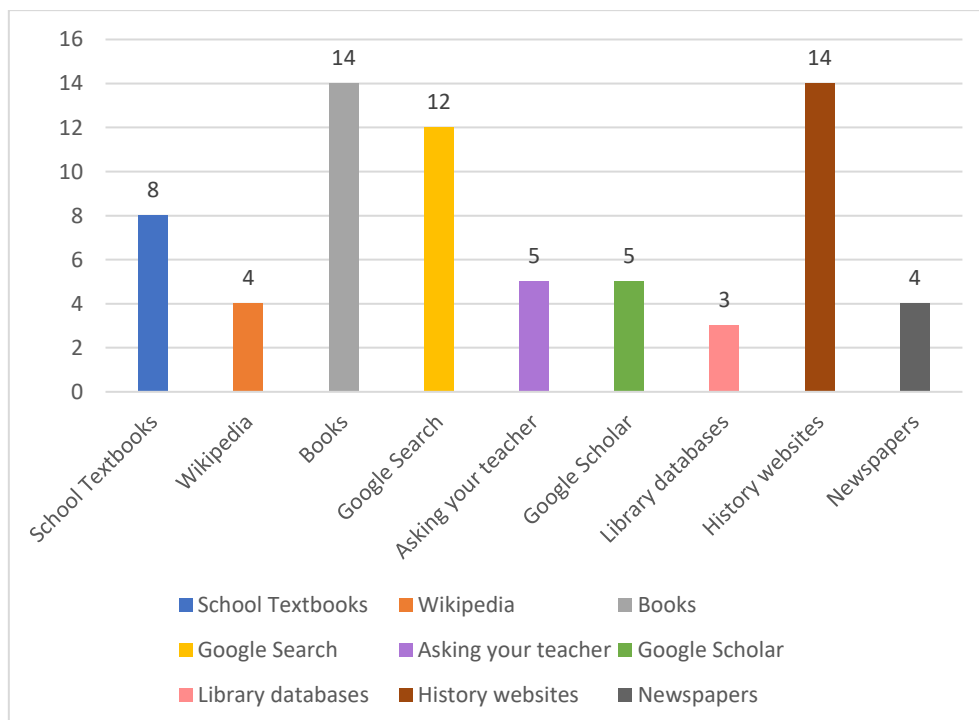

Figure 18. Preferred methods of finding information for RSR (Q1)

Question 11: **Have you used the library already for this or any other research? This could include looking up information on the computers, finding information from books, etc.**

The majority of respondents, 78.3%, had not yet used the library for research of any kind. 21.7% had used the library for this purpose.
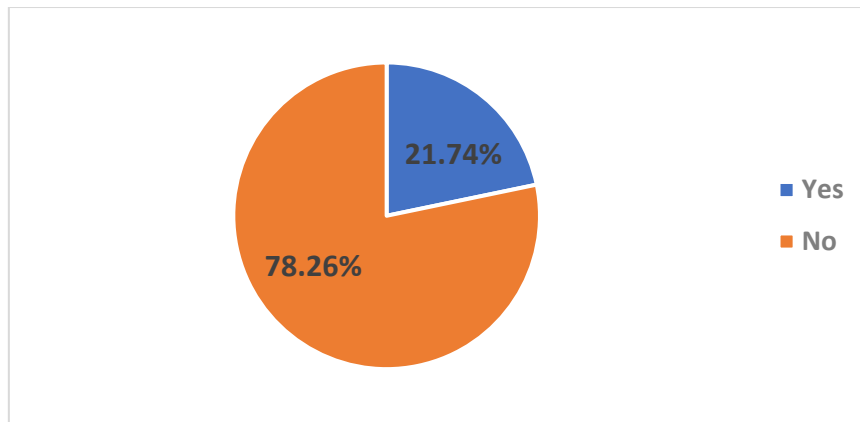

Figure 19. Have you used the library already for research?

Question 12: **Did you consider using the library when you first began your Leaving Certificate History Research study?**

60.9% of respondents had not considered using the library when beginning their work on the RSR. 39.1% had.
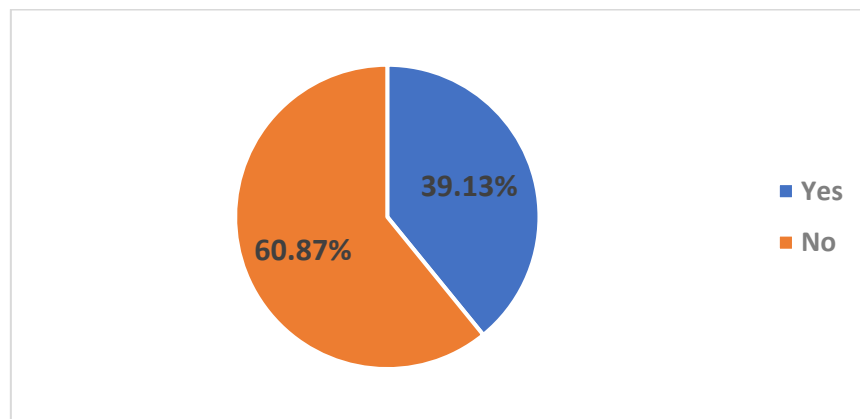

Figure 29. Did you consider using the library when you first began your RSR?

Question 13: **Do you consider the library a place to get expert help when carrying out research?**

30.4% of respondents consider the library a place to get expert research help. 56.5% were Not Sure, while 13.04% did not consider the library in this light.
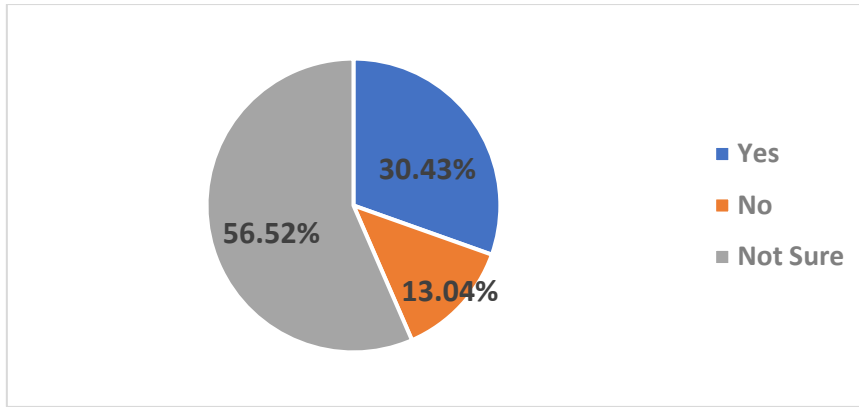
Figure 30. Do you consider the library a place to get expert help? (Q1)

Question 14: **Do you think library staff can help you with research and research skills?**

39.1% of respondents answered Yes to this question, while 56.5% were Not Sure and 4.4% (one respondent) did not think library staff could help with research and research skills.
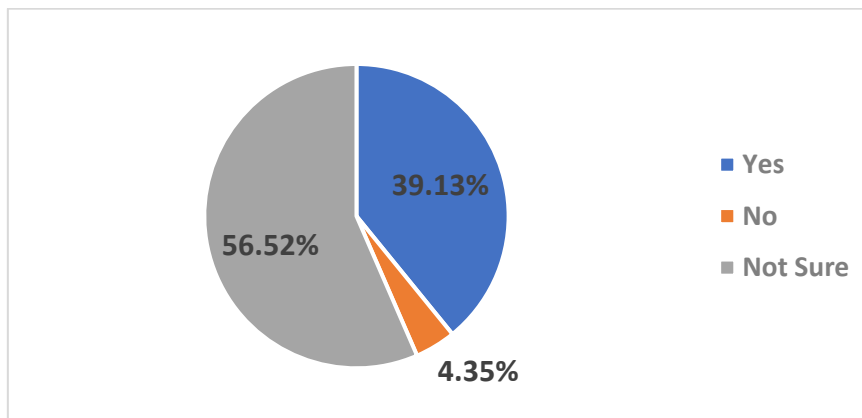

Figure 20. Do you think library staff can help you with research and research skills? (Q1)

Question 15: **How important do you believe the following research skills are to your project? Rank them from 1 (most important) to 8 (least important).**

Respondents were presented with eight skills and practices relating to research. *Using primary sources* was ranked first in importance by ten respondents, and *using high quality* sources had five such rankings. If ranks 1 and 2 are taken to be indicators of highly valued skills and practices, *using primary sources* was most valued, followed jointly by *using high-quality sources* and *using a range of sources*. *Creating effective searches* was ranked eighth by six respondents, and if ranks 7 and 8 are taken to be indicators of the least highly valued skills and practices, *creating effective searches* is the least valued, followed jointly by *reading plenty of secondary sources*, *citing sources properly*, and *assessing sources critically*.
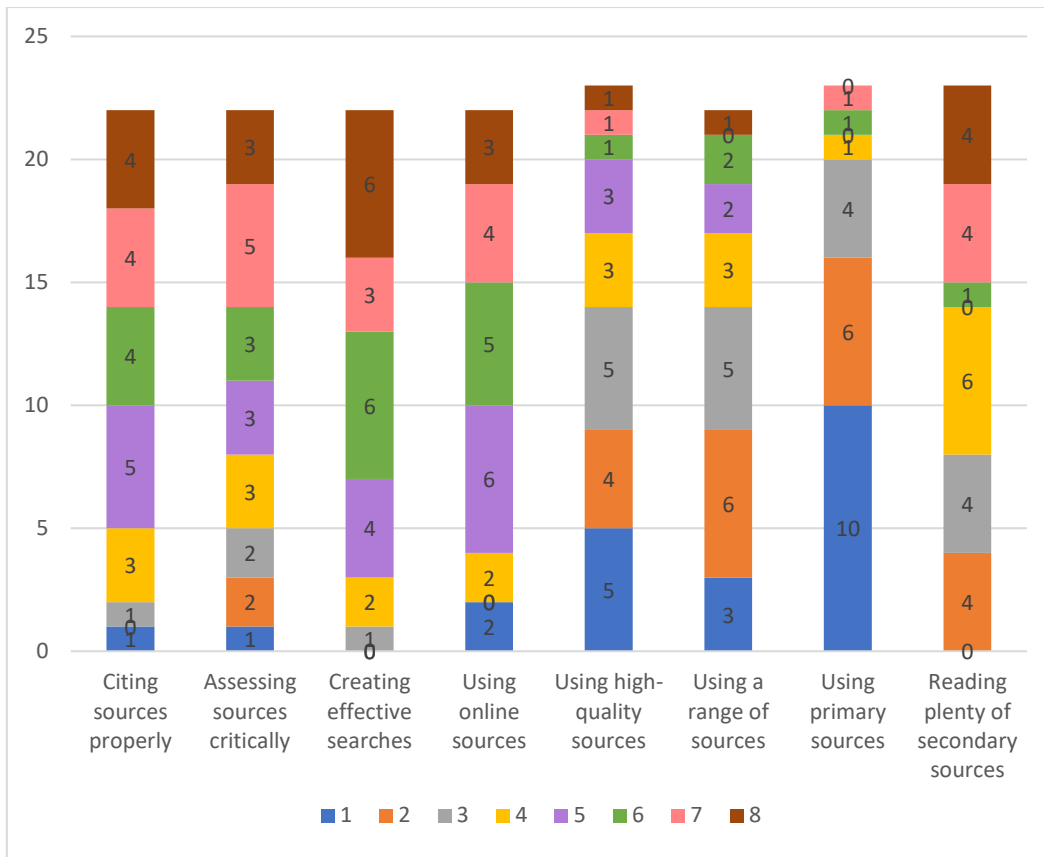
Figure 21. Rank these research skills in order of importance to your project

Question 15(a): **Which of the research skills above (or any other) do you want to improve?**

20 respondents offered answers to this open question, and each named only one skill. 35% said *using primary sources*, 20% said *assessing sources critically*, 15% said *citing sources properly*, and 10% said each of *reading plenty of secondary sources*, *creating effective searches*, and *using high-quality sources*. None offered *using a range of sources* or *using online sources*.
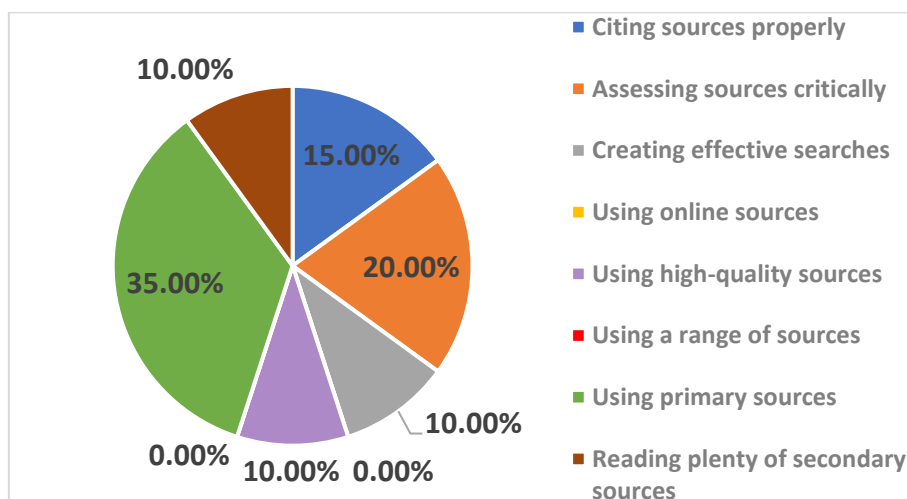

Figure 22. Which research skill do you want to improve?

Question 16: **Do you think you have adequate research skills to successfully complete your history Research Study?**

56.5% of respondents thought they had adequate research skills for the RSR. 39.1% were Not Sure and one respondent (4.4%) thought they did not have adequate research skills for the task.
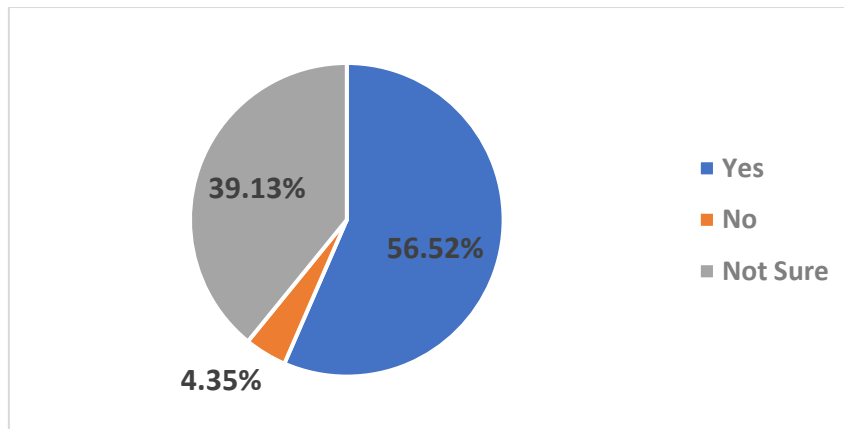

Figure 23. Do you think you have adequate research skills to successfully complete your RSR?

Question 17: **What change to library resources and services do you think would encourage you to use the library more/at all?**

13 respondents offered answers to this open question. The answers were grouped thematically, and more than half answered nothing/not sure. Other responses varied and included better promotion on the part of the library, more study space, longer opening hours, and more computers.
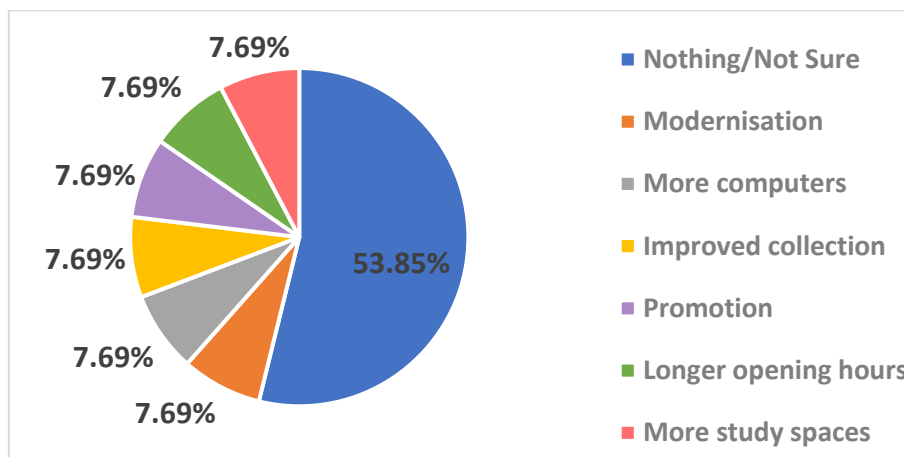

Figure 24. What changes would encourage you to use the library more/at all?

Question 18: **If you have any further comment or suggestion to offer regarding the Library Service and its services, please do so here:**

Two answers returned: "n/a"; "No other comment. Thanks." No useful answer returned.

4.1.3 Questionnaire 2 (Q2) completion rate

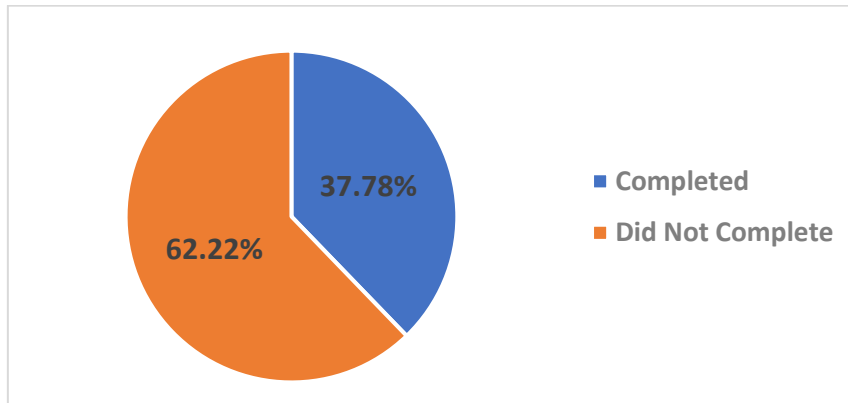17 (37.8%) of the potential 45 students who attended the presentation completed Questionnaire 2:

Figure 25. Completion rate (Q2)

4.1.4 Questionnaire 2 responses

Question 1: **Gender**

41.2% of respondents were female, 52.9% were male, and one respondent (5.9%) preferred not to say.
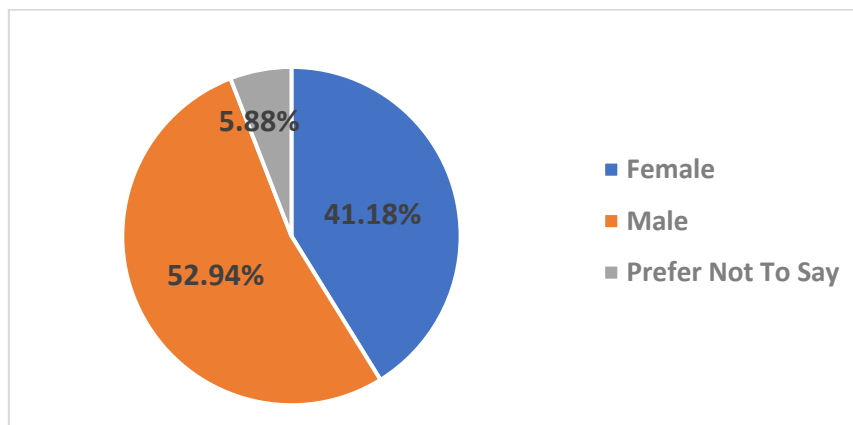

Figure 26. Gender breakdown (Q2)

Question 2: **Are you a member of the Library Service (or any other public library)?**

64.7% of respondents were members. 29.4% were not, and one respondent (5.9%) was Not Sure.
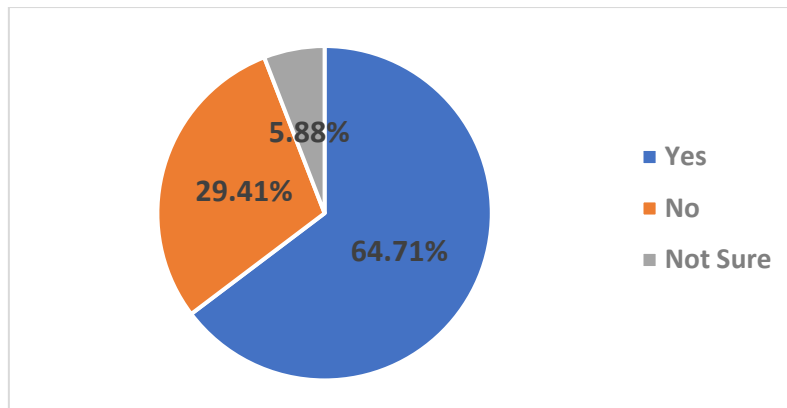
Figure 27. Are you a member of the library? (Q2)

Question 3: **Whether or not you are a Library Service member, have you visited one of the Library Service's branches in:** (the past 6 months, past year, prior to last year, or never)

11.8% of respondents had visited the library in the six months prior to the presentation. 23.5% had done so in the year prior, and 64.7% had done so before that. All had visited the library at some point.
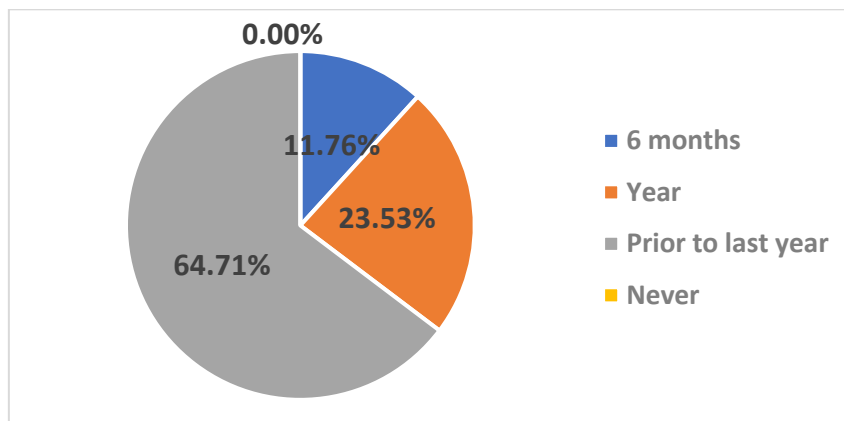

Figure 39. Last visit to the library (Q2)

Question 4: **Do you believe the library is for you?**

Only 16 respondents answered this question. 75% believed the library is for them, while 18.8% were Not Sure and one respondent (6.3%) answered No.
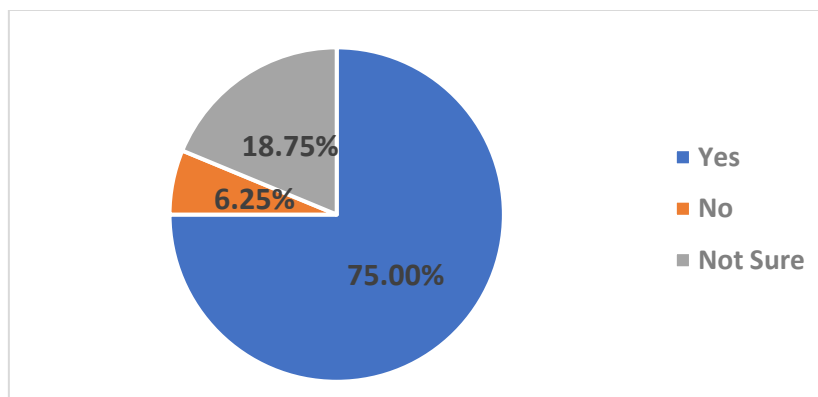

Figure 28. Do you believe the library is for you? (Q2)

Question 5: **Do you feel you are or would be welcome in the library?**

This question had 100% answer Yes.

Question 5(a): **Why?**

12 respondents answered this open question (one offered two reasons), and the responses were categorised thematically. Interest in books was the most cited reason (30.8%), and the library as an appealing space and as a place for learning were tied next (23%). Friendly and welcoming staff took up 16.7% of responses, and one respondent (8.3%) had no answer.
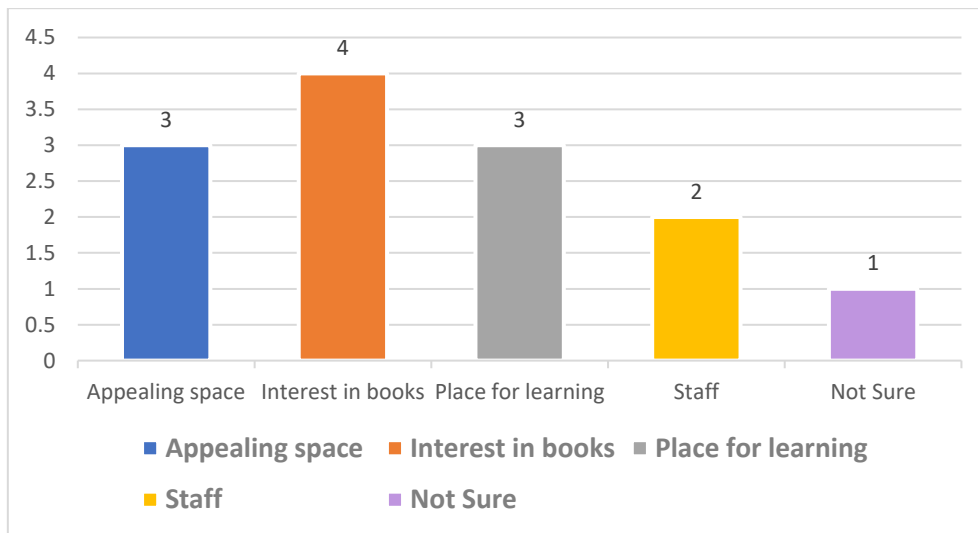
Figure 29. Why are you or would you be welcome in the library? (Q2)

Question 6: **Do you feel better equipped now to conduct your research than you did before the workshop?**

82.4% of respondents answered Yes to this question, and 17.6% answered Not Sure.
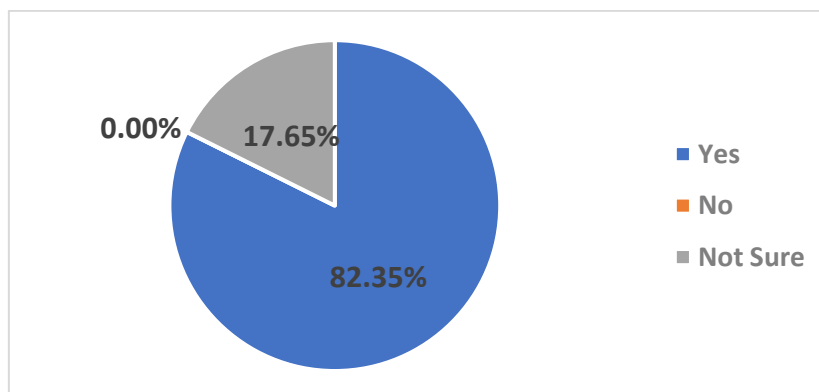
Figure 30. Do you feel better equipped to conduct your research after the workshop?

Question 7: **Do you think you will change the way you do your research following this workshop?**

70.6% answered Yes. 23.5% were Not Sure, and one respondent (5.9%) answered No.
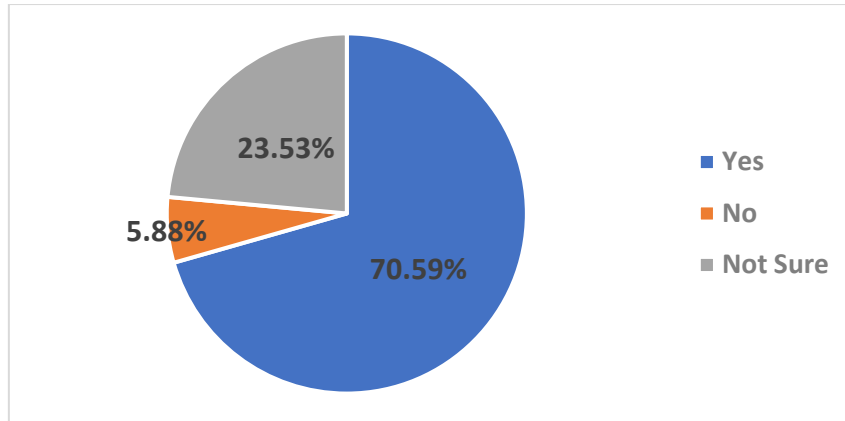
Figure 31. Will you change how you research?

Question 8: **Are you likely to approach staff for help in the future, either in person or over phone or email?**

70.6% of respondents answered Yes, while 29.4% answered No.
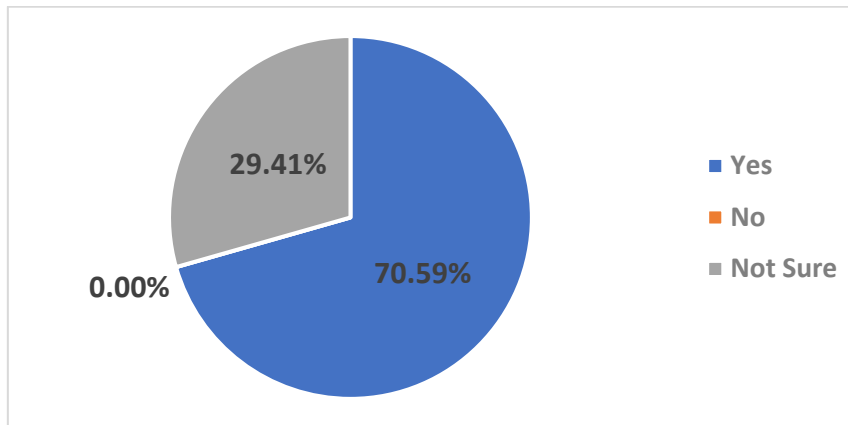
Figure 32. Are you likely to approach library staff?

Question 9: **On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is Not At All and 5 is Extremely, please indicate how much or how little you agree with the following statements. Please note some of these statements are negative and some are positive.**

Question 9(i): **The library is a welcoming place**

70.6% of respondents agreed Extremely, and 29.4% agreed Somewhat.
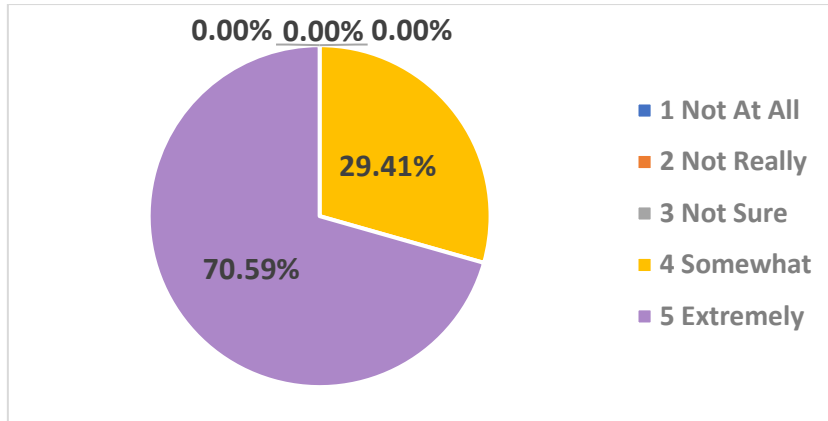
Figure 33. The library is a welcoming place (Q2)

Question 9(ii): **The library is a welcoming place for young adults**

70.6% of respondents agreed Extremely. 23.5% agreed Somewhat and one respondent (5.9%) was Not Sure.
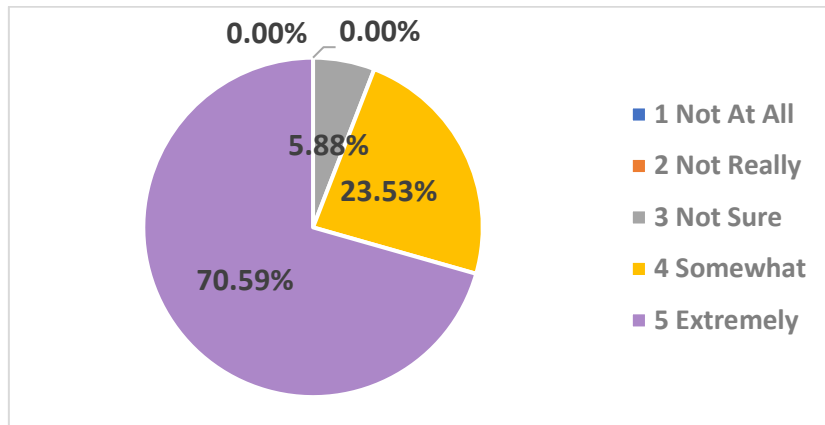
Figure 34. The library is a welcoming place for young adults (Q2)

Question 9(iii): **The library hasn't much I'm interested in**

70.6% of respondents selected Not At All or Not Really in answer to this statement. 5.9% (one respondent) were Not Sure and 11.8% selected each of Somewhat agree and agree Extremely.
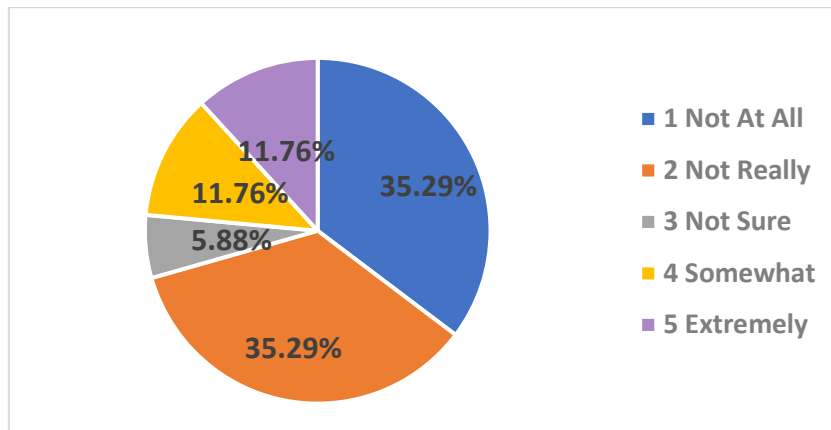
Figure 35. The library hasn't much I'm interested in (Q2)

Question 9(iv): **I am interested in local history**

64.7% of respondents agreed Extremely or Somewhat with this statement. 11.8% were Not Sure and 23.5% answered Not Really.
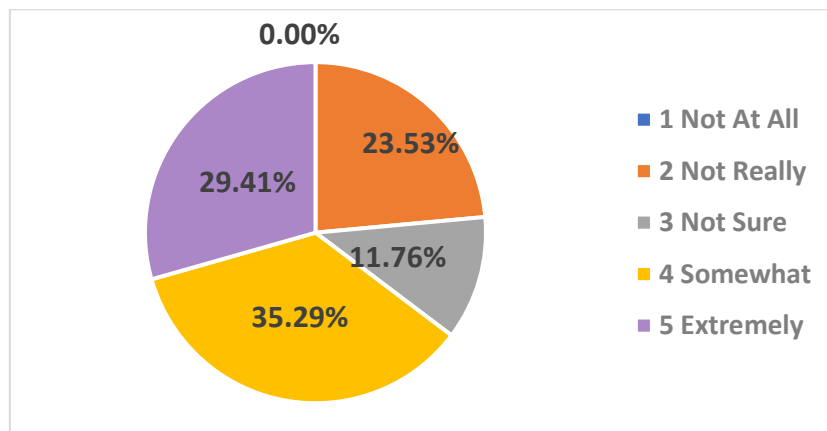
Figure 48. I am interested in local history (Q2)

Question 9(v): **I don't think the library can help me with research**

16 respondents answered this question. 43.8% answered Not At All to this statement, and 25% answered Not Really. 18.8% were Not Sure and 6.3% (one respondent) answered Somewhat and Extremely.
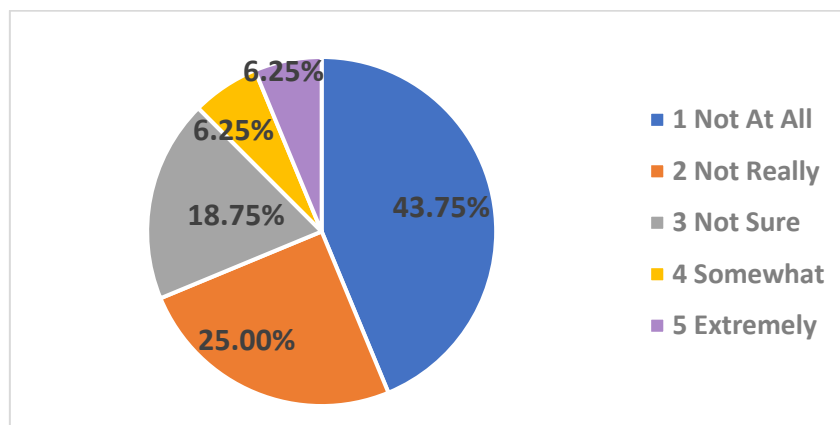
Figure 49. I don't think the library can help me with research (Q2)

Question 9(vi): **I have good research skills**

Only 5.9% (one respondent) answered Extremely agree to this statement, but 52.9% answered Somewhat. 29.4% were Not Sure and 11.8% answered Not Really.
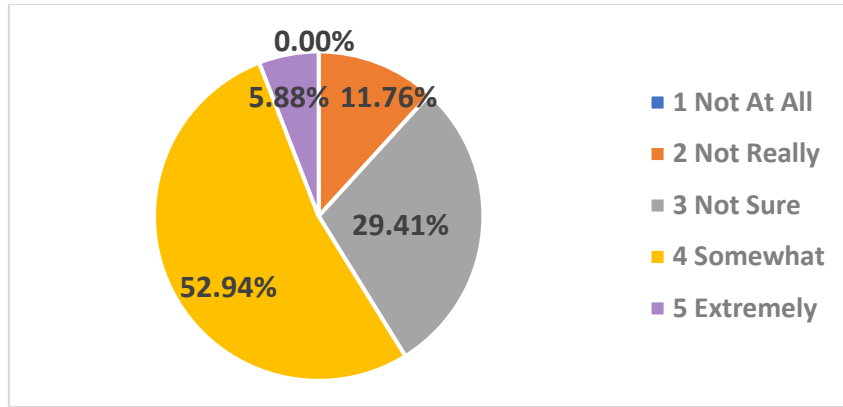
Figure 36. I have good research skills (Q2)

Question 9(vii): **I don't feel confident using library resources**

11.8% of respondents selected Not At All. A large proportion, 64.7%, answered Not Really. 17.6% were Not Sure and 5.9% (one respondent) answered Somewhat.
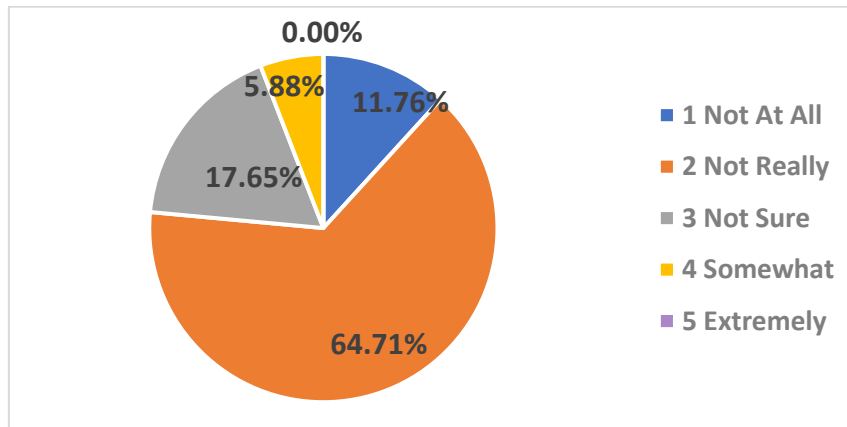
Figure 37. I don't think the library can help me with research (Q2)

Question 10: **Please rate the following existing library services as either important, unimportant, or neither important nor unimportant to you:**

Question 10(i): **Wi-Fi**

88.2% of respondents deemed Wi-Fi at the library important, while 11.8% deemed it neither important nor unimportant.
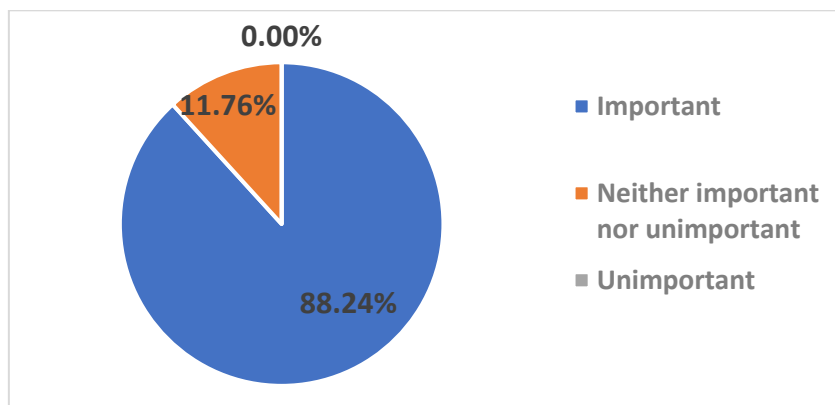
Figure 38. The importance of Wi-Fi (Q2)

Question 10(ii): **Study space**

100% of respondents deemed study space at the library important.
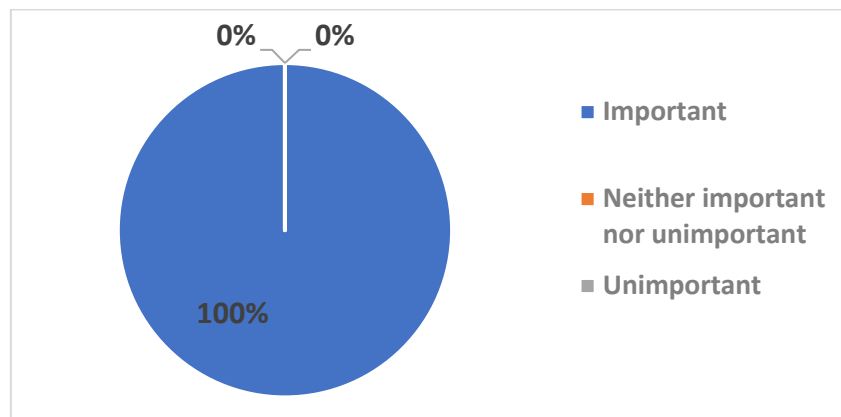
Figure 39. The importance of study space (Q2)

Question 10(iii): **Books**

82.4% of respondents deemed books important, with 17.6% deeming them neither important nor unimportant.
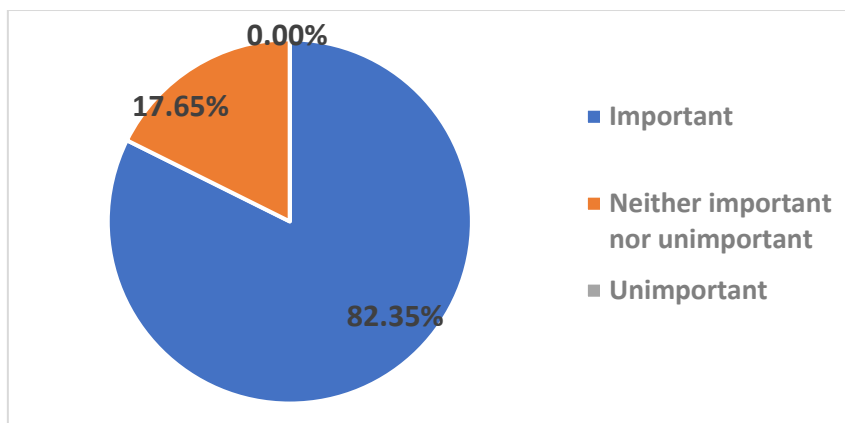
Figure 40. The importance of books (Q2)

Question 10(iv): **Online databases**

72.2% of respondents deemed online databases important. 22.2% deemed them neither important nor unimportant and 5.6% (one respondent) deemed them unimportant.
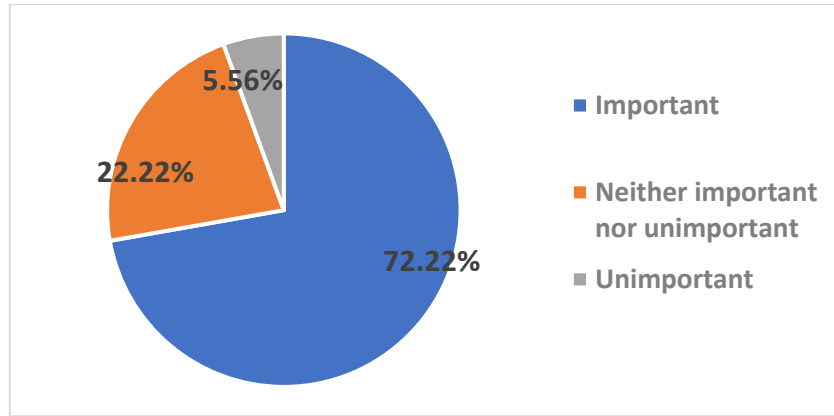
Figure 41. The importance of online databases (Q2)

Question 10 (v): **Local Studies collection**

47.1% deemed the Local Studies collection important. The same proportion, 47.1% deemed it neither important nor unimportant, while 5.9% (one respondent) deemed it unimportant.
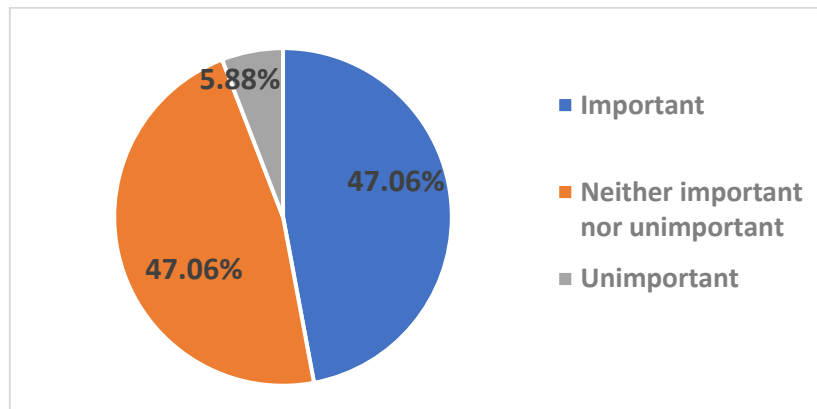
Figure 42. The importance of the Local Studies collection (Q2)

Question 10 (vi): **eBooks**

29.4% of respondents deemed eBooks important, while 41.2% deemed them neither important nor unimportant. 29.4% deemed them unimportant.
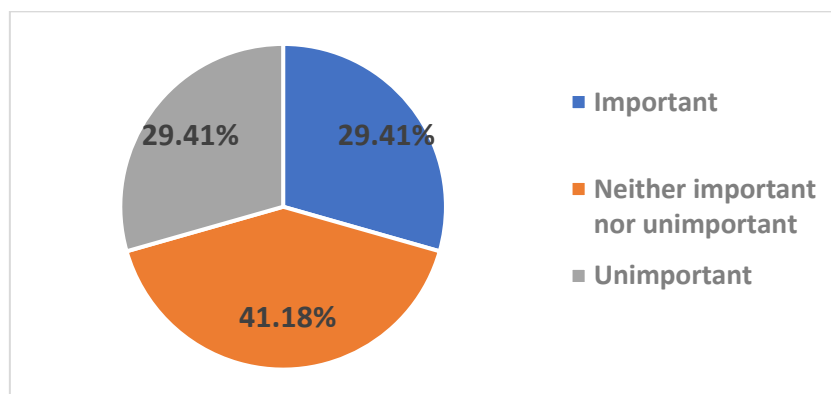
Figure 43. The importance of eBooks (Q2)

Question 10(vii): **eMagazines**

16 respondents answered this question. 18.8% deemed eMagazines important, 37.5% deemed them neither important nor unimportant, and 43.8% deemed them unimportant.
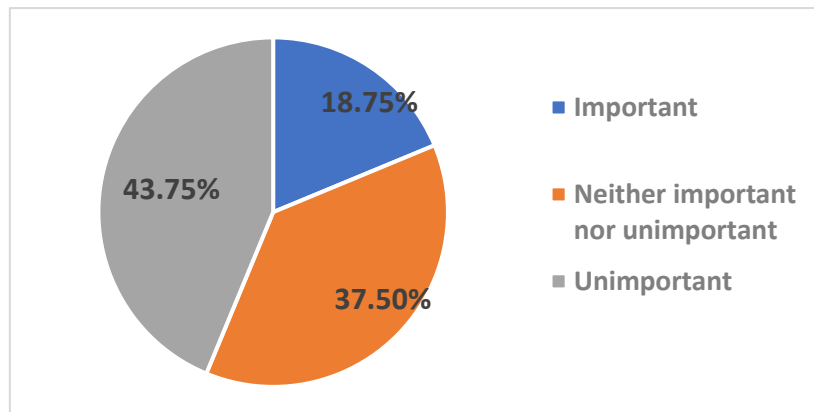
Figure 580. The importance of eMagazines (Q2)

Question 10(viii): **Online newspapers**

52.9% deemed online newspapers important. 17.7% deemed them neither important nor unimportant, and 29.4% deemed them unimportant.
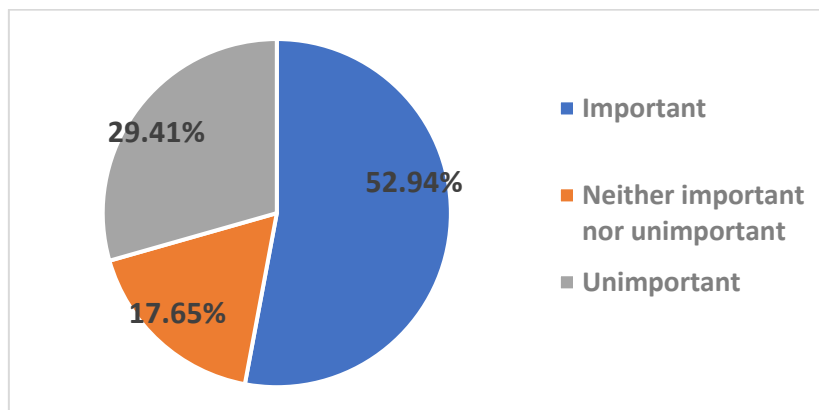
Figure 59. The importance of online newspapers (Q2)

Question 11: **Please select your three preferred methods of finding information for your Leaving Certificate Research Study:**

Respondents were asked to select up to three of their preferred methods. The most popular choices were Google search and history websites (each selected by 64.7% of respondents), Google Scholar (47.1%), and School textbooks (41.2%). Wikipedia and books were chosen by 23.5%, asking your teacher by 17.6%, and newspapers by 11.8%. Library databases were the least likely to be selected, with only 5.9% (one respondent) choosing that option.
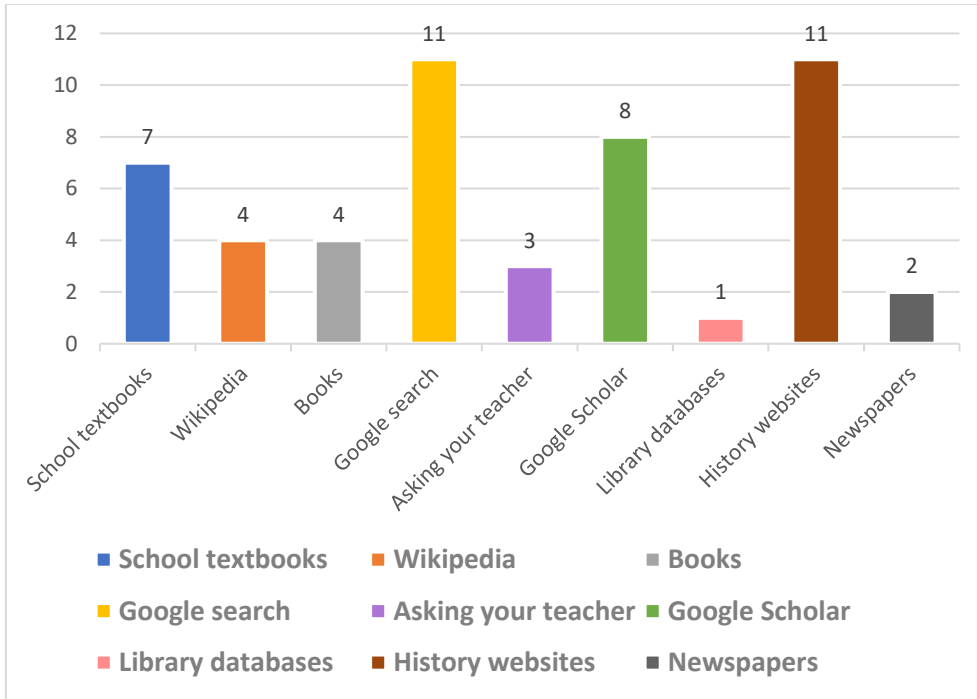
Figure 44. Preferred methods of finding information for RSR (Q2)

Question 12: **Do you intend to use the library for your history research project or any other research?**

35.3% selected Yes in answer to this question, while 58.8% were Not Sure. 5.9% (one respondent) selected No.
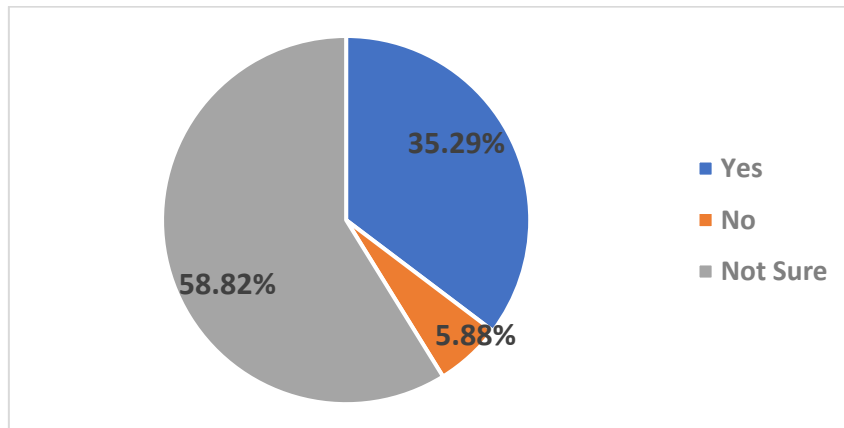
Figure 45. Do you intend to use the library for research?

Question 13: **Do you consider the library a place to get expert help when carrying out research?**

88.2% of respondents selected Yes in answer to this question, while 11.8% selected No.
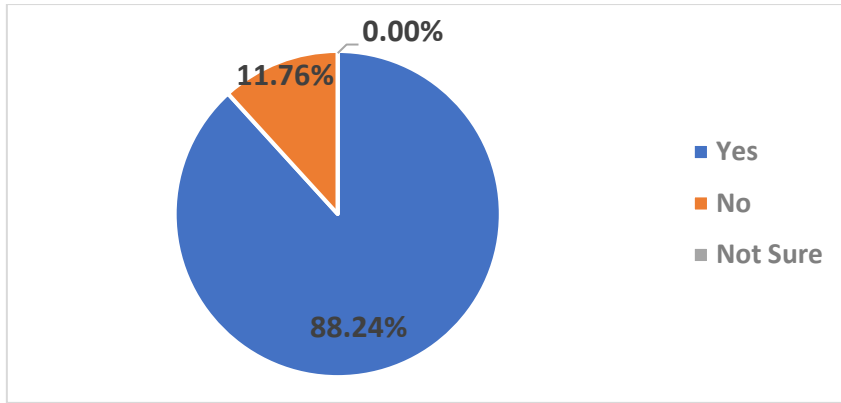
Figure 46. Do you consider the library a place to get expert help for research? (Q2)

Question 14: **Do you think library staff can help with research and research skills?**

94.1% of respondents answered Yes to this question, and 5.9% (one respondent) was Not Sure.
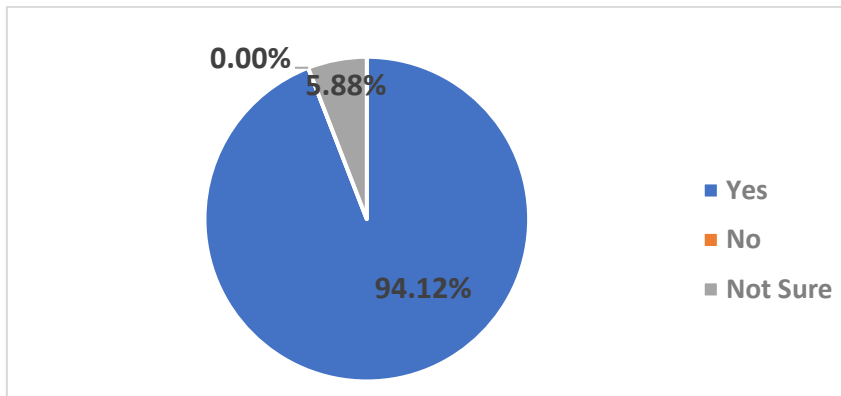
Figure 47. Do you think library staff can help with research and research skills? (Q2)

Question 15: **Do you think what you learned at this workshop will help you in your research?**

88.2% answered Yes to this question, while 11.8% of respondents were Not Sure.
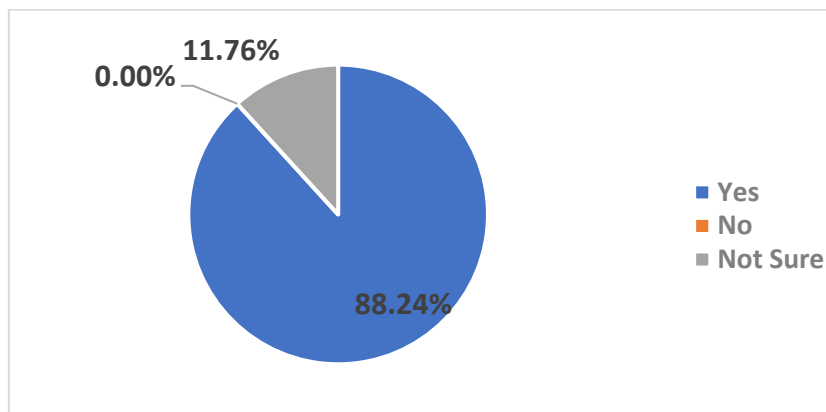
Figure 48. Was this workshop of help to you?

Question 16: **Do you think the library has resources useful to your research?**

82.4% of respondents answered Yes to this question, and 17.7% were Not Sure.
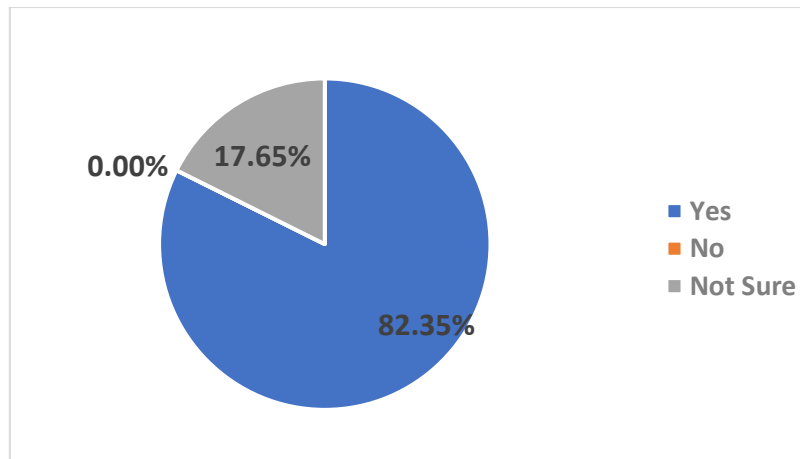
Figure 49. Do you think the library has resources useful to your research?

Question 16(a): **If yes, can you name a few?**

The 10 answers to this open question were categorised thematically, and some contained more than one resource or service. Computer/internet was offered the most, mentioned by 40% of the respondents, followed by books by 30% and newspapers by 20%. Study space, databases, the Local Studies collection and general information were all identified by 10% of respondents each.
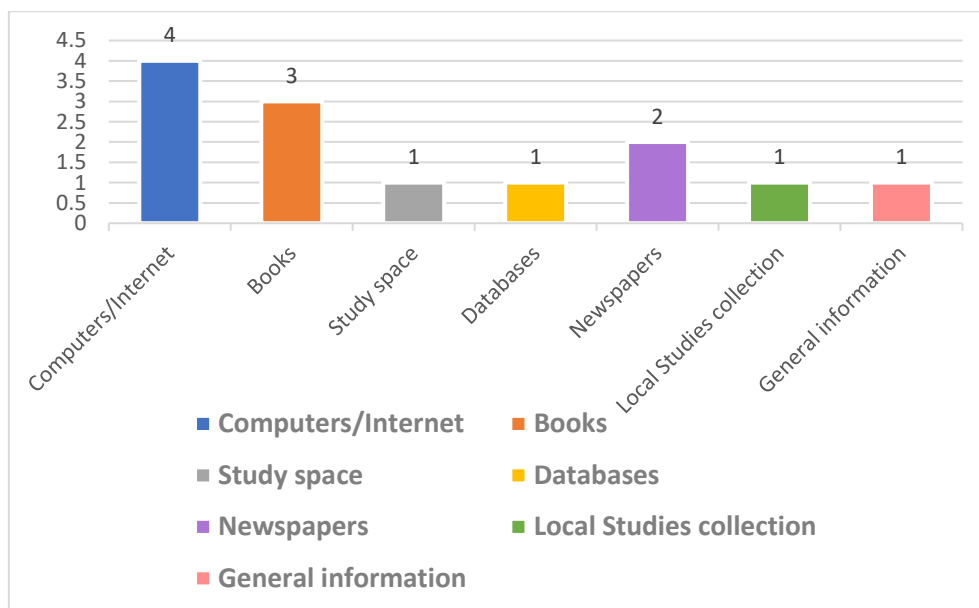
Figure 50. Name some useful library resources

Question 17: **If you have any further comments or suggestions regarding the Library Service, please share them here:**

Two answers returned: "none"; "N/a". No useful answers returned.

4.2 Presentation engagement

Every student, at all three presentations, kept their cameras off, preventing any visual feedback or body-language cues. Questions were encouraged but were minimal, with a total of two questions asked by students and one by a teacher. The students asked how to replace a lost library card and

whether the library still had game consoles, and the teacher asked for advice for students on choosing a topic. Answers were offered by the presenter in each case.

4.3 Teacher interview results

Semi-structured interviews with the three teachers took place between a week and a month after the presentations, depending on the teachers' availability. Interviews took between ten and twenty-five minutes and were conducted over the telephone. Social cues that might have necessitated in-person interviews were not considered essential (Opdenakker 2006). The teachers were guided through a series of questions in a conversational manner. Some information was offered by the interviewer as appropriate, such as details concerning membership. The list of questions used are in Appendix 4 and transcriptions of the interviews are in Appendix 5.

Their answers were examined at under specific headings: Attitude; Use; Knowledge; and Potential. Other themes that emerged during content analysis were also noted and explored.

4.3.1 Attitude

All three teachers had a positive attitude toward the library and the presentation. Teacher 1 described their school's "big connection" to the library. Teacher 3 was satisfied with the level at which the presentation was pitched: "quite user friendly and pitched at their level", and had five separate positive comments regarding the presentation. The presentation was variously described by the three interviewees as "very useful", "of huge benefit", and that the students considered it "very good" and "really did enjoy it".

Teacher 1 described previous visits to the library as "an amazing experience" for students, and specified an aspect of the Local Studies collection. The Local Studies collection was praised by Teacher 3, who also stated that they would have mentioned the library to their students regardless of the presentation, as did Teacher 2. Teacher 3 was also very positive regarding accessing eBooks via BorrowBox.

4.3.2 Use

All three teachers were library members. Two had used BorrowBox personally. All three teachers had visited the library in a professional capacity in the past with history, English and Irish students. All three had brought classes to the Local Studies collection. Teacher 1 stated that they had brought students to the library to borrow Irish-language books and to attend talks. One teacher referred to using the local newspaper collection themselves, and another to using history resources personally. Teacher 1 stated that their students were currently utilising resources suggested during the presentation.

4.3.3 Knowledge

Only one was aware of the option of having a teacher account. Two teachers were aware of BorrowBox, and two were slightly aware that eMagazines were available. One was aware of PressReader. All three were aware of the Local Studies book collection and the local newspapers.

4.3.4 Potential

All three teachers expressed interest in future professional engagement with the library. Teacher 3 was particularly interested in arranging further presentations for Transition Years, both specifically on history and on more general library services, with eight separate comments regarding future engagement. All three expressed interest in library staff visiting their schools when possible, although Teacher 3 was more interested in bringing students to the library. There was interest also in further online engagement, and in accessing online content and resources. Teacher 3 mentioned encouraging

students to contact the library themselves and to make use of the Local Studies collection. Teacher 1 referred to the skillset learned through the presentation being important at third-level for students, and later to the school's "connection going forward in the future" with the library.

4.3.5 Other themes

Enrolling students as members was raised as a potential issue. Teacher 2 expressed concern that young adults find joining the library difficult, referring to it as a "barrier". Teacher 3, when discussing students accessing digital resources, remarked that "they need their library account" to do that, indicating that they believed not all would have access for this reason.

Two of the teachers discussed specific relationships with the library. Teacher 2 referred to their role as literacy coordinator for their school, and wondered how the library might support that. Teacher 3 offered themselves as a school contact to the library for future interactions, particularly in their role as Transition Year coordinator. Teacher 3 explicitly stated that making a personal connection with staff at the library, as occurred through this presentation and interview process, made the library more accessible:

> …you pick up the phone and ask for the library and you'll get talking to somebody, there's no problem, but I think it is good…having a contact person and having the name of somebody you can contact actually is a pull-factor.

All three teachers teach subjects other than history. While some have used the library in the past for another subject, such as Irish, others had not considered the library's supports for their other subjects.

Library expertise in certain areas was raised. Teacher 1 highlighted library expertise: "You guys have the expertise in this area, we don't", referring to information-seeking skills. Teacher 3 stated that information on recreational digital resources would be "better coming from someone in the library than from me".

4.4 Consent forms

Consent forms from students, parents/guardians and teachers were received online.

5. Discussion

5.1 Participation and completion rates

Three schools participated in this study. Each school has one fifth-year history class, and between these three schools there are 62 fifth-year students enrolled in history. Of these, 45 (72.5%) attended the online presentation. Of these 45 students, 23 (51.1%) completed the pre-presentation questionnaire, Questionnaire 1, ahead of time, via the online link shared by their class teacher. 17 students (38%) completed the post-presentation questionnaire, Questionnaire 2, after attending the presentation.

The small numbers involved and the lower completion rate on Questionnaire 2 in particular can affect the accuracy of the study (Cook, Dickinson and Eccles 2009). This is especially true when particular factors influence who does or does not complete the questionnaire; as will be seen, library members appear to have been most motivated to do so, meaning that the results cannot be fully representative of the age demographic. The small numbers involved in this study mean that slight changes must be considered critically.

As links to the surveys and consent forms were sent via the teachers, the study was reliant on said teachers to encourage the students to complete the surveys. At the beginning and end of the presentation, the researcher encouraged students to complete the surveys and consent forms, and two-three reminders were sent to the teachers afterwards to ensure they reminded students of these. No direct reminders could be sent to the students.

5.2 Gender breakdown

Of the participating schools, one was an all-girls school, one was an all-boys school, and one was a mixed school. While the 13 attendees from the all-girls school and the 20 attendees from the all-boys school are easily categorised, the gender of the thirteen attendees from the mixed school were not recorded, and so a breakdown of attendee gender is not possible. Of those who filled out Questionnaire 1, 52.2% were female and 47.8% were male, and 41.2% of those who filled out Questionnaire 2 were female, while 52.9% were male and 4.3% (one respondent) preferred not to say. Assuming the mixed school has a broadly half and half male to female ratio and considering the larger number of attendees from the all-boys school, it appears girls were more likely to complete the questionnaires than their male counterparts.

5.3 Membership of the library

This very high level of membership of either the Library Service or another public library (82.6% in Questionnaire 1 and 64.7% in Questionnaire 2) is not representative of young adults more broadly in the county. 2019's statistics are preferable for comparison than 2020's, due to COVID-19's impact on the latter, and they show that 1111 individuals aged 12-17 were library members, which is 15% of that demographic in the county (numbers taken from 2016 Census and adjusted for 2019). The difference between Questionnaires 1 and 2 indicates that the respondents who completed each questionnaire are not identical, as was already clear from the difference in numbers who completed each.

The county town being located in the middle of the county, members of other county public libraries are likely to be a tiny minority here, if they exist at all. That there were respondents who were unsure if they were members (8.7% in Questionnaire 1, 5.9% in Questionnaire 2) is not surprising, as respondents may have attended the library as children with their parents, without knowing their membership status.

This high membership rate may be affected by social desirability bias, as respondents may have felt that they *should* be members (Brace 2008). The Central Library is also the largest branch in the county, with the longest opening hours, the most events, and the MOL service, which may appeal more to young adults than other branches in more rural areas. The most likely reason, however, is that library members were more motivated to complete the questionnaires.

Questionnaire 1 asked when respondents who had answered Yes to being a library member had joined. Of these, 80% joined as children (up to the age of 11) and the remaining 20% joined as young adults, which demonstrates the importance of enrolling children and their parents. Only one respondent (5.3%) indicated that they were a MOL member, while 52.6% were Not Sure. As the MOL service has not been in operation since March 2020 and only those aged 16+ are eligible for MOL membership, these students were mostly too young to have availed of the service. The uncertainty of so many respondents is cause for some concern. In 2019, 20% of young adult members in the Central Library were MOL members. The duration of the suspension of the service has had a large impact on awareness of it; what was once a very popular service among young adults aged 16-17 is already unfamiliar to more than half the respondents to this question and there is need for clear and focused promotion of the service on its resumption.

5.4 Using the library

All respondents to both questionnaires had visited the library at some point in the last, even the few who were not library members. The numbers who had visited the library in the previous six months were, predictably considering the restrictions in place, small, but the numbers who claimed to have visited in the previous year were much higher (43.5%) in Questionnaire 1 than in Questionnaire 2 (23.4%).

Questionnaire 1 asked respondents what resources and services they used at the library, either online or on-site. The vast majority, 82.6%, had borrowed books, reflecting the traditional role of the library. 52.2% had used study space at the library, indicating that this is a valued function. 43.5% had used the printing/photocopying service, 39.1% had used a computer and 34.8% had used the Wi-Fi. Only one respondent (4.3%) had used either online databases or, incredibly, online resources. It is clear that promotion and education around online services is sorely lacking in this group. While the emphasis on print books and physical space in the library tie in with the traditional functions of the library, these are activities that have been severely affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

5.5 Welcome at the library

Respondents to Questionnaire 1 were then asked if people their age believe the library is for them. This phrasing attempted to avoid the social desirability bias that might encourage respondents to answer yes out of a sense of obligation or social pressure. By answering for others like them, a more truthful response may be elicited (Brace 2008). Just over half (52.2%) answered Yes, 21.7% said No and 26% replied Not Sure. These are not encouraging numbers, considering how high the level of library membership is in this group. When asked about their own feelings toward the library with the next question, 'Do you believe the library is for you?', far more answered positively (69.6%). This higher level of positivity may also be due to social bias, or these respondents' high levels of membership and therefore familiarity with the library. In either case, the level of negative responses highlights the need to engage with young adults and ensure they feel welcomed and accommodated. A higher proportion (75%) answered positively to the latter question in Questionnaire 2; the presentation may have encouraged the feeling of welcome at the library. Any outreach may have done so, by indicating interest on the part of the library.

The next question in both questionnaires asked if respondents feel (or would feel) welcome in the library, and the response in each case was entirely positive. The follow-up question in Questionnaires 1 and 2 asked why and offered an open answer box. Interest in books, reading and learning appeared among these answers, as did the library being an appealing space, open to all. Friendly staff were also cited as part of the library's welcoming impression. No negative answers were offered. Although the answers given in each questionnaire are not identical, very similar themes emerged and the only obvious difference, given the small numbers involved, is the absence of reference to the library as an open, public space in Questionnaire 2.

Both questionnaires asked respondents to indicate how much or how little they agreed with a series of statements about the library, on a scale of 1(Not At All) to 5 (Extremely). Over half of respondents (56.5%) to Questionnaire 1 agreed Extremely that 'The library is a welcoming place', a proportion that increased to 70.6% in Questionnaire 2. A similar change between the two questionnaires is seen with the statement, 'The library is a welcoming place for young adults'. It is interesting to see in both questionnaires a very slight difference between the responses to these two statements, indicating that respondents overall see the library as less welcoming, even marginally, to young adults than generally.

5.6 Library services and resources

'The library hasn't much I'm interested in' saw a most respondents agreeing with the statement in Questionnaire 1, while the reverse occurred in Questionnaire 2, with 70.6% answering Not At All or Not Really. This demonstrates that with information and education, young adults can appreciate that the library can and does cater for them. Despite the negative response in Questionnaire 1, the change after the presentation shows the difference outreach can make.

'I'm interested in local history' had a largely positive response in Questionnaire 1, with 69.6% stating that they agreed Extremely or Somewhat. Slightly fewer (64.7%) responded similarly in Questionnaire 2, although more selected Extremely. The presentation demonstrated searches on local newspapers, but the opportunity to engage one-on-one with these resources might prove more appealing to participants. Slightly more respondents to Questionnaire 2 felt confident using library resources than respondents to Questionnaire 1 (76.5% rather than 60.9%), suggesting that seeing such resources demonstrated during the presentation was helpful. A marginally smaller proportion in the second questionnaire answered Not At All to the statement 'I don't feel confident using library resources', possibly indicating that the presentation may have led some attendees to slightly reconsider their facility with the available resources.

Respondents were asked to rate a series of eight library services and resources as either important, neither important nor unimportant, or unimportant. Of these, study space, books and Wi-Fi were considered important by the highest number of respondents in both questionnaires, and eBooks and eMagazines were rated lowest in importance. Slightly more respondents considered online databases and online newspapers important in Questionnaire 2, indicating that their demonstration during the presentation may have increased their value in their eyes. 47.8% of respondents to Questionnaire 1 rated online newspapers as important, a figure that increased slightly in Questionnaire 2 to 52.9%. This admittedly small change may be due to demonstrations of searching international and local newspapers during the presentation, but that only approximately half of respondents consider online newspapers important is noteworthy. Various studies suggest that young people generally get their current affairs information from non-traditional media (Edgerly 2017), and consider newspapers inconvenient and irrelevant (Zerba 2011). This offers an opportunity for public libraries to educate their young patrons on their news sources and information literacy.

The proportion of Questionnaire 1 respondents who considered the Local Studies collection important (69.6%) was identical to the number who claimed interest in local history in a previous question, while this changed in Questionnaire 2. There, 64.7% claimed interest in local history and only 47% deemed the Local Studies collection important (though the same number again were neutral). It may be that their exposure to aspects of the collection during the presentation discouraged their interest, and certainly the opportunity to engage properly with the collection on-site would be vastly superior to seeing books over a screen.

It is interesting that neither eBooks nor eMagazines were deemed important by even half the respondents in Questionnaire 1, and by even fewer in Questionnaire 2. Despite young adults' reputation for technological savvy, they rated books as far more important than eBooks in each questionnaire. This may tie in with what these students see as a main function of the library, providing physical books, or it may reflect their own limited experience of eBooks A US study found that young adults prefer physical books to eBooks (Gray and Howard, 2017), although it was based mostly on library staff perceptions.

5.7 The library and research

The statement 'I don't think the library can help me with research' saw 26.1% answer Not At All and 39.1% answer Not Really in Questionnaire 1, a positive indication of the library's reputation regarding

research. This was improved upon in Questionnaire 2 with 43.7% answering Not At All and 25% Not Really, indicating that the presentation strengthened this opinion among respondents.

60.9% of these students were confident enough to agree Somewhat with 'I have good research skills' in Questionnaire 1, with one student (4.4%) agreeing Extremely and 34.8% Not Sure. This confidence dropped in Questionnaire 2, as some (11.8%) selected Not Really. The presentation may have shone light on some gaps in respondents' information-seeking abilities. It is to be hoped that they see that the library can assist them with this issue.

Respondents were asked to select up to three of their preferred sources and methods of finding information from a list. In Questionnaire 1, the results in order of popularity were: books and history websites, Google, school textbooks, asking teachers and Google Scholar, newspapers and Wikipedia, and, lastly, library databases. This question would have been better phrased with an option for students to add another source if they wished but, even so, the results are interesting. Respondents' disdain for Wikipedia is likely to results from efforts by teachers (and others) to dissuade them from using this crowd-sourced encyclopaedia, along with perhaps their own understanding of its limits. Google Scholar was similarly rejected, most likely due to unfamiliarity with it, as it has excellent potential as an information source. Books, a traditional source of information, were valued while school textbooks were valued far less – an accurate, if blunt, reflection of the latter's utility in a research assignment. The very poor rating of library databases was unsurprising, as usage statistics do not show JSTOR (the main database offered by Irish public libraries) to be very heavily used at the Library Service. In 2019, there were 987 searches conducted and 1052 items accessed while, in 2020, a year in which public PCs at the library were available for less than six months, there were 611 searches and 566 items accessed. The lack of interest in newspapers reflects the disinterest shown by the 47.8% who deemed online newspapers unimportant. In Questionnaire 2, Google and history websites were the most popular selections, followed by Google Scholar, school textbooks, Wikipedia and books, asking teachers, newspapers and, finally, library databases. While the increase in interest in Google Scholar is likely due to its demonstration during the presentation, the decrease in interest in newspapers or library databases is a poor reflection on the impact of the presentation. Whether the demonstration implied a level of difficulty or irrelevance that discouraged participants, this change must be considered when offering such outreach again.

When asked if they had previously used the library for research, 78.3% of respondents to Questionnaire 1 answered in the negative. This attitude is continued by the response to the question in Questionnaire 1 of whether respondents had considered using the library when they first began thinking about their RSR, with 60.9% answering No. In Questionnaire 2, they were asked if they intend to use the library for research and 35.3% answered Yes, with 58.8% Not Sure. The large proportion indicating uncertainty in this is both an opportunity for and a critique of the library. Despite the presentation, more than half of respondents do not confidently expect to make use of the library for research purposes. The current inaccessibility of the library building and many of the library resources is likely to contribute toward this opinion, but it certainly implies that the respondents are somewhat unconvinced by the relevance of the library to their RSR and beyond.

The question of whether respondents considered the library a place to get expert help with research was met with a great deal of uncertainty, as 56.5% were Not Sure, although 30.4% answered Yes. When asked whether they thought library staff could assist with research, again 56.5% were unsure, although 39.1% answered Yes. After the presentation, the same questions in Questionnaire 2 are overwhelmingly positive, with 88.2% considering the library a place for expert help with research and 94.1% thinking library staff can help with research. The uncertainty conveyed in Questionnaire 1 was persuaded by the presentation, it seems, demonstrating that such uncertainty can be an opportunity for the library.

Asked to rank a number of information-seeking behaviours in order of importance to their research project in Questionnaire 1, *Using primary sources* was ranked first by ten students, the most popular choice. *Creating effective searches* was ranked last by six respondents, making it the least popular. This is a concerning proportion, indicating that the respondents do not see the importance of being able to translate their information need into terms and combinations that a search engine can use effectively (Hearst 2009). *Using high-quality sources* was highly regarded, but *assessing sources critically* was far less so, despite the fact that "evaluation of evidence" is explicitly included in the Leaving Certificate History curriculum (NCCA 2003 p. 4). Effective searches and evaluating sources are among the core concepts in Kuhlthau's Guided Inquiry programme (Kuhlthau 2015), but these respondents do not appear to value these skills. When asked about improving their skills, *using primary sources* was again the most desired. This presents the library with the opportunity to highlight its Local Studies collection, drawing on the respondents' interest in primary sources. C*reating effective searches* and *assessing sources critically* were selected as areas for improvement by some respondents (10% and 20% respectively), indicating some awareness of gaps in their knowledge, but these students appear to have relatively simplistic understanding of information-seeking behaviours. Nor is this awareness carried through in the next question as, when asked if they think they have adequate research skills for their RSRs, more than half of respondents to Questionnaire 1 were confident that they did. The potential for public libraries to work with schools in the area of information-seeking skills and information literacy is exciting. As recognised by an interviewee (Teacher 1), this is an area in which schools do not possess expertise, and libraries can use it as unique selling point for education, collaboration and engagement.

In Questionnaire 2, respondents were asked if they felt better-equipped to do their research after the presentation: 82.3% answered Yes, and 17.7% answered Not Sure. They were then asked if they would change how they do their research after the presentation, and 70.6% answered Yes, while one respondent (5.9%) answered No and 23.5% selected Not Sure. These two questions are the most explicit in asking students if they believed the presentation had affected their information-seeking behaviour, and the result was largely positive. Of course, it is difficult to estimate the truth of this. 70.6% also answered Yes to the next question, asking if respondents are likely to approach staff for help, while 29.4% were unsure. 88.2% answered Yes to whether they thought what they learned would help in their research in Questionnaire 2, with 11.8% unsure, and 82.3% of respondents answered Yes to the question of whether the library had useful resources for their research. Considering at least one attending class had not yet chosen their topics at the time of the presentation, this is a positive result. The follow-up question to this asked if respondents can name some of these useful resources in an open question, and answers were mainly concerned with computers and the internet alongside books. Despite the interest shown elsewhere in primary sources, the Local Studies collection was only cited by one respondent here.

There is clearly a section of this sample who do not expect to engage with the library when undertaking their RSR, and this seems to be a difficult gap to bridge. It might be hoped that in-person education and exposure to collections and resources might assist in convincing these students that the library is a useful and hospitable resource.

5.8 Suggestions for the library

Respondents to Questionnaire 1 were asked what changes to library resources and services would encourage them to use the library, to which more than half answered either nothing or not sure. This should not be taken to mean that they do not see room for improvement at the library. Rather, it can be difficult and demanding to come up with a suggestion or know fully what they think and then articulate it on the spot (Brace 2008). Suggestions offered included more study space, longer opening hours, more computers and general modernisation. It might be argued that some of these suggestions betray unfamiliarity with the Central Library in its current form (COVID-19 restrictions

notwithstanding), as there are 67 study spaces and ample public PCs available to the public. The same dearth of suggestions appears in Questionnaire 1's final question, asking for further comment or suggestion, to which no meaningful answers were given. Similarly, Questionnaire 2's final question seeking comment or suggestions was unfruitful. Again, the lack of criticism should not be taken as a positive, as it takes effort for respondents to think of and then write something concrete. As they approach the end of the questionnaire, they are also eager to finish, meaning that only the most motivated of respondents are likely to enter meaningful comments or suggestions. This area in particular is where focus groups would be beneficial, allowing participants the chance to discuss and develop suggestions.

5.9 Teacher interviews

It became clear that the teachers, despite each having brought classes to the library in previous years and all being members of the library, lacked knowledge on many of the services available to them and their students, including the digital services and teacher accounts. It is up to the library to appropriately target teachers and improve this through education and promotion, and thereby potentially access school classes and students more readily.

All teachers had brought classes to the library previously, and were interested in doing so again, and all three preferred in-person workshops over online session. It is essential that libraries take the lead in re-establishing these habits and relationships once restrictions allow. Despite this preference, all interviewees expressed satisfaction at the opportunity to expose their students to the library and its services online, and one interviewee emphasised the relief of the variety it offered to them and their students. While this is particularly pronounced when remote teaching is in place, this is part of what library outreach can offer – a variety of experience for teachers and students. When asked, each teacher expressed interest in library staff visiting the school, whether in person when possible or online, but they recognised the value in visiting the library. Arising from the presentation, one teacher specifically requested an outreach event for their Transition Year students (which took place in April 2021). Transition Year students are an excellent cohort to engage with from the library's perspective. Aged 15-16, they have greater flexibility in school and fewer school-related demands on their time than fifth- and sixth-year students, and may be more open to leisure-related services at the library. However, arranging this second outreach involved persistent follow-up with the school; teachers will seldom ask for engagement, it must be pursued by the library.

One teacher shared that the process of joining the library is a barrier for their students; they are unfamiliar with the process and put off by the effort. This is a very pertinent point, strengthened by the fact that in normal circumstances, all minors must join alongside a parent or guardian. One advantage of the current circumstances is that anyone may now join online, including young adults, and the autonomy this offers may attract new young adult members. The policy on young adult enrolment in the library must be revisited at a national level. If there is true desire to increase membership and engagement with young adults, barriers should not be unnecessarily placed in their way.

Two teachers mentioned their respective roles as literacy coordinator and Transition Year coordinator for their schools, roles that have the potential to be specific contacts for the library. Current outreach to secondary schools often involves emails to generic email addresses, which may be read by principals, secretaries, or no one. Identifying specific contact persons in schools makes it more likely that libraries can better target relevant teachers and students for events and services.

The importance of outreach shone through in these interviews. Educating teachers on the facilities available to them, whether that be teacher membership or online books, should be prioritised, not just contact with their students. The stress one interviewee placed upon having a personal contact

with the library was notable, suggesting that such personal relationships can have the most impact. In a county of this size, where such relationships are possible even in the largest library branch, it benefits the library to develop them.

5.10 Successes and challenges

The greatest challenge facing this study is the small numbers involved which inevitably limit its generalisation. In the case of the second questionnaire, even one reply constituted over 4% of the response, meaning that one cannot extrapolate to the larger young adult population without a great deal of caution. The non-identical groups of respondents to the two questionnaires are also problematic, making it far more difficult to compare like with like and see what effects the presentation had. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to treat the two groups of respondents as comparable. At the very least, they were all fifth-year history students who attended the presentation and were motivated enough to answer questions about the library.

The relationships built with individual teachers are a tangible benefit of this process. It has already borne fruit as the teachers involved have proven enthusiastic in engaging with the library in subsequent ventures, including supporting the Library Service School Survey, conducted as part of the Library Development Plan-writing process, and in Transition Year outreach. This study and the preparation for it will feed into the Library Service's outreach policies and procedures, and these will be laid down formally in the Library Development Plan, currently in process.

Lack of awareness of services emerged as a central issue, both for students and teachers. It is up to the library to better promote the services it has available and ensure that they reach as wide an audience as possible. The uncertainty expressed regarding whether the library is a place of research expertise should be seen as an opportunity to persuade these young adults. All contacts must be taken as such an opportunity. In ranking research skills, the respondents appear to discount the importance of essential information-seeking behaviours, effective searches and critical assessment of sources. However, the respondents are at the beginning of their research projects, and may develop these skills over time. It is the library's opportunity to be part of this process.

5.11 Recommendations

Based on the results of the questionnaires and interviews, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Improve the targeting of communication relating to services and events with secondary schools
2. Persevere in offering outreach to secondary schools, including online to ensure accessibility
3. Develop relationships with teachers in branch libraries
4. Offer training and demonstration of Local Studies collection on-site
5. Identify educational areas that the library is best positioned to offer, such as information-seeking skills and digital literacy, and develop staff skillsets to do so
6. Promote library services, and MOL in particular, to young adults on resumption of normal service
7. Remove guardian-related restrictions on membership for those aged 16+

6. Conclusion

This study set out to discover if providing an outreach event on research skills to secondary-school students could positively impact on young adults' attitudes toward and perceptions of the public library, in light of issues in attracting and retaining young adult members. Overall, it was found that yes, an outreach event such as this had a positive effect on young adult attitudes toward and perceptions of the public library. The findings of this study will feed into the Library Service's interim Development Plan 2021-23, currently in production.

6.1 General findings

Based on the questionnaires, respondents had good knowledge of specific services at the library: borrowing books, using study space, and availing of printing, photocopying and computers. Their knowledge of the online services available, including eBooks, eMagazines, and online newspapers was particularly lacking, as was their understanding of the MOL service. The interest in study space was evident in the responses, and this desire for spaces for young adults to be must be recognised in future imaginings and developments of the library service. Future education of young adult members and potential members must include promotion of the MOL service and a drive on online services that can be easily accessed on handheld devices.

The positive response from participating teachers to the presentations can be utilised by the library to continue direct engagement with students in schools and as a means of promotion. Teachers who are fully aware of the services available are in an excellent position to share this information with their students in a way that relates to student needs, whether that be researching history or accessing language supports. Class visits to the library are very beneficial to public libraries, both to boost visitor numbers and to encourage engagement.

Respondents did see the value of the library in supporting them in their research, even before the presentation but, with few having yet used the library for this purpose, it is up to the library to convince young adults to come and use the services available to them. Even after the presentation, over half of respondents were unsure if they would use the library for research and, while it might be hoped that on-site workshops could improve this response, there is work to be done in this area. Certainly, the responses indicated that attending the presentation made the students feel better equipped to conduct their research. The fact that the proportion who saw the library and its staff as 'experts' in research was less than half points to the need for libraries to decide if they wish to assert themselves in this role. Irish public libraries are increasingly being positioned as community spaces, but this should not come at the cost of their staff's role as information professionals and specialists. If the library wants to be known for research expertise, in local studies or elsewhere, it needs to develop that function.

Attending the presentation improved the expectation of welcome at the library, and drew attention to unfamiliar resources. Attitudes to the library generally were positive rather than negative and often, at worst, indifferent. This indifference is the enemy of engagement, however, and work is necessary to address this, as discussed in the recommendations made in the previous chapter. Vital to any efforts to increase young adult membership of the public library is a change to the current policy requiring all members under 18 to join alongside a parent or guardian. This failure to acknowledge the independence and autonomy of older teenagers, particularly those ages 16 and 17, is a genuine barrier to young adult membership.

6.2 Study limitations

The small numbers involved in this study limit the statistical significance of its findings, but it is hoped that the findings are useful in informing public library outreach practices nonetheless. The large proportion of library members who completed the questionnaires also affects the results, as members are expected to have more knowledge of and more positive attitudes toward the library than non-members. The latter is a group of whom the library wishes to know more, presenting a potential audience for membership and library resources use.

6.3 Looking to the future

This study and its outreach events were an excellent basis for future outreach to secondary schools in the county town area and, indeed, the wider county. At the time of writing, another online presentation and Q&A session has been held with Transition Year students in one of the participating schools, focusing this time on joining the library and the online recreational and education resources available, and similar online sessions are in the planning stages for other schools in the area. It is intended that the presentation offered as part of this study be used to create an annual presentation and workshop for fifth-year history students, building on the relationships created during this process.

This presentation is not limited to the county town area, and can be offered on-site (restrictions allowing) and online to schools around the county, developing relationships with teachers and schools and fostering library staff outreach skills and knowledge of the library's resources. It is hoped that these relationships and skills can assist and support library staff in reaching out to young adults and schools, encourage engagement with the library's services, and increase young adult membership.

It is critical that young adults are consulted on what they want from their public library, and this study was a first step in this direction. Young adults are an important part of public library membership and community, and must be encouraged, accommodated and nurtured by the library system, by library services, and by library staff. As the adults of the future, they will be part of the largest cohort of members of the library in the future, and that long-term view of their engagement with the library must be maintained.

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