

The use of the Royal Society Library by its Fellows

A case study



THE ROYAL SOCIETY

Introduction and background

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Introduction

The Royal Society

- Founded 28th November 1660, for 'the promotion of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning'
- Purpose of the Society was to discuss and conduct experiments in natural philosophy, and to collect evidence of the natural world
 - Fellows have been at the forefront of the development of science
- Today, the Fellowship comprises leading scientists from all its branches, from countries all over the world
- The Society's priorities today are to:
 - Invest in future scientific leaders and in innovation
 - Influence policy-making with the best scientific advice
 - Invigorate science and mathematics education
 - Increase access to the best science internationally
 - Inspire an interest in the joy, wonder and excitement of scientific discovery



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Background

The Royal Society Library - its early years

- Formally founded May 1661, as a resource for Fellows
- Grew rapidly, thanks to:
 - general gifts / donations from Fellows and 'strangers' anxious for election
 - bequests of private libraries – most notably the Norfolk Library in 1666/7
 - Council's decision that 'every member who hath published or shall publish any work, shall give the Society one copy' (28 May 1661)
- By 1678/9, Council had:
 - appointed the first Librarian
 - drawn up rules governing the use of the Library
 - established the first Library Committee



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Background

The Royal Society Library – its development

- Initially, held a fairly general Library collection –
many books on the arts, culture, language and religion sold or swapped to create a more scientific collection
- By the late C19th, science was developing rapidly, and the Library could not ‘keep up’ -
focus on collecting output of new scientific societies and academies
- In 1932, decision made to focus on the Library’s historical collections, rather than current science
- Emphasis placed on developing Library’s *history* of science collection in 1968 –
current collecting policy reflects this, although Fellows are still encouraged to donate published works



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Background

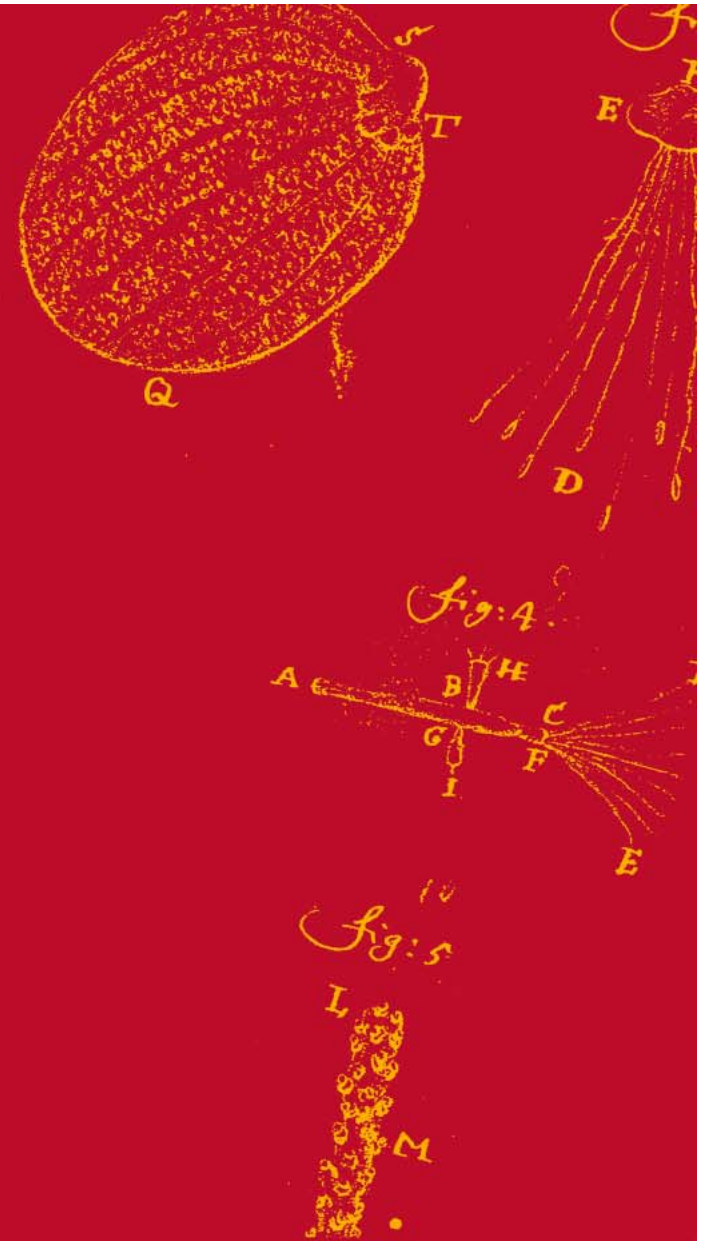
The Royal Society Library – its role and use today

- Originally the Fellows' private resource – but accessible to approved members of the public for many years
- Provides a standard library and information service to Fellows, staff and the public – the public form our largest user group
- Library collections include: incunabula, rare books and journals (mostly science), histories of the Society and science, biographies of Fellows and scientific texts
- Archive collections include: the Society's own records (1660 onwards), manuscripts of key scientific papers, correspondence and papers of numerous notable Fellows
- Collections are used mainly by historians of science and biographers – other key user groups are social historians, writers and local historians



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The investigation

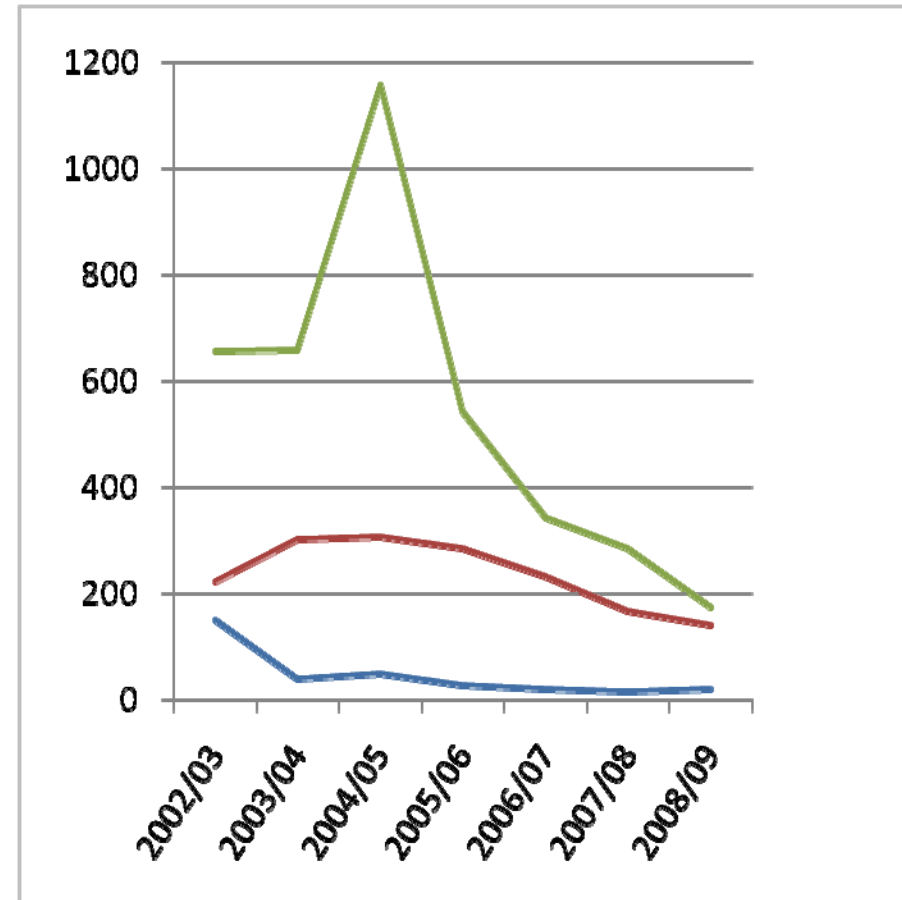


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Fellows' use of the Library

- Long-standing assumption (since early C20th) that Fellows do not use or need the Library:
 - can more easily access information via their own institutions
 - collections are not relevant
- User statistics maintained since 2001 indicate a general decline in Fellows' use of the Library
- BUT.....

The Library is *still* the Fellows' resource – are these assumptions fair and correct?



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Fellows' use of the Library

Key themes in the investigation

- 4 key questions / themes which guided the investigation:
 - Is the Fellows' use of the Library really declining, and why?
 - Why and how do Fellows use the Library?
 - Do Fellows *need* the Library – especially given the swathes of information available digitally and online?
 - How can we encourage Fellows to use the Library – if we can? What do Fellows want from the Royal Society Library in the C21st?

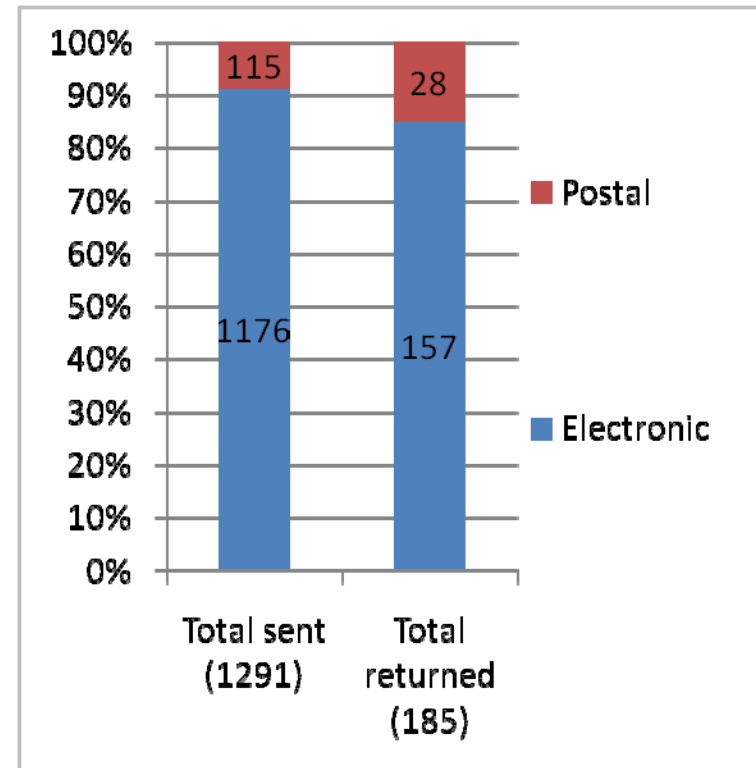


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The investigation

Methodology / response rates

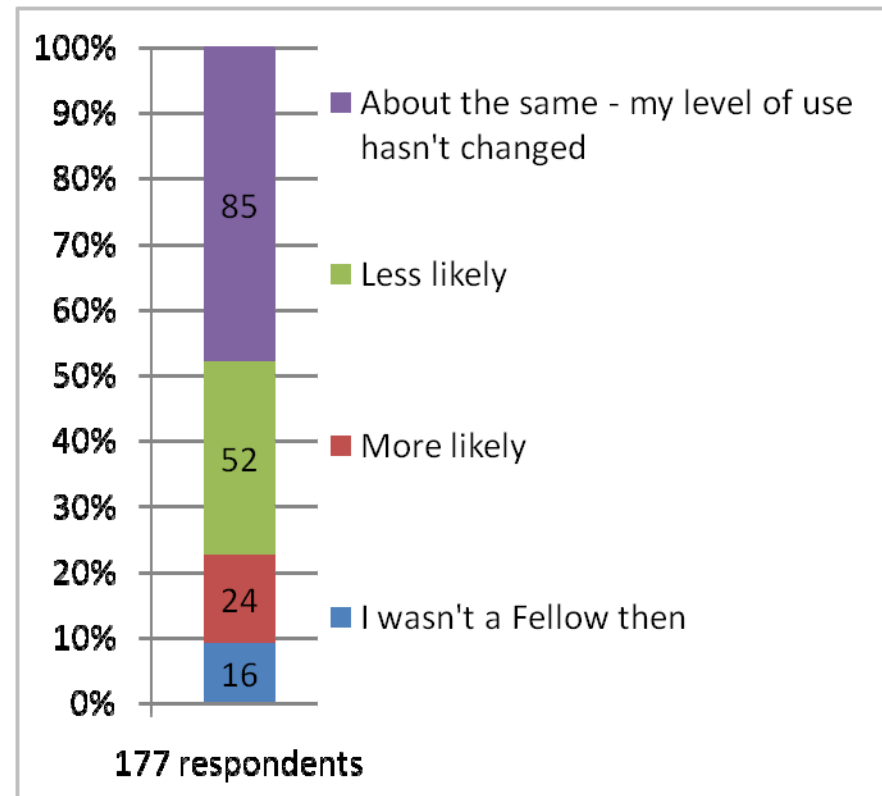
- Surveyed 1,291 Fellows in January 2009 by self-completion questionnaire:
 - 1,176 received electronic version (SurveyMonkey)
 - 115 received postal version
- Response rates:
 - 157 electronic questionnaires returned
 - 28 postal questionnaires returned
 - Total response rate of 14.3% (185 responses)



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Is the Fellows' use of the Library declining, and why?

- Responses largely validate user statistics
- Most Fellows (48%) say their level of use hasn't changed...
...but more Fellows consider their level of use to have declined (29%), rather than increased (14%)



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Reasons why the Fellows' use of the Library is declining

Lack of access

- Most Fellows (80%) visit the Society less than a few times a year
- Most Fellows visit the Society for business / work purposes, or to attend conferences – they don't have time to use the Library

Other institutions

- Most Fellows can locate / access all the information they need via their host / main institution
- Barely 30% of Fellows visit the Society with the intention of using the Library

Online access

- Fellows rely on the open internet to locate / access information as much as they rely on their host / main institution
- Fellows have almost universally embraced the digital era - 55% of those aged 81 or over use the internet to locate information

Lack of knowledge

- A handful of Fellows do not know if the Library has any resources which will help them with their work / research



- Where use has **increased**, this is usually because Fellows visit the Society more regularly, or because they need to access rare books or archives

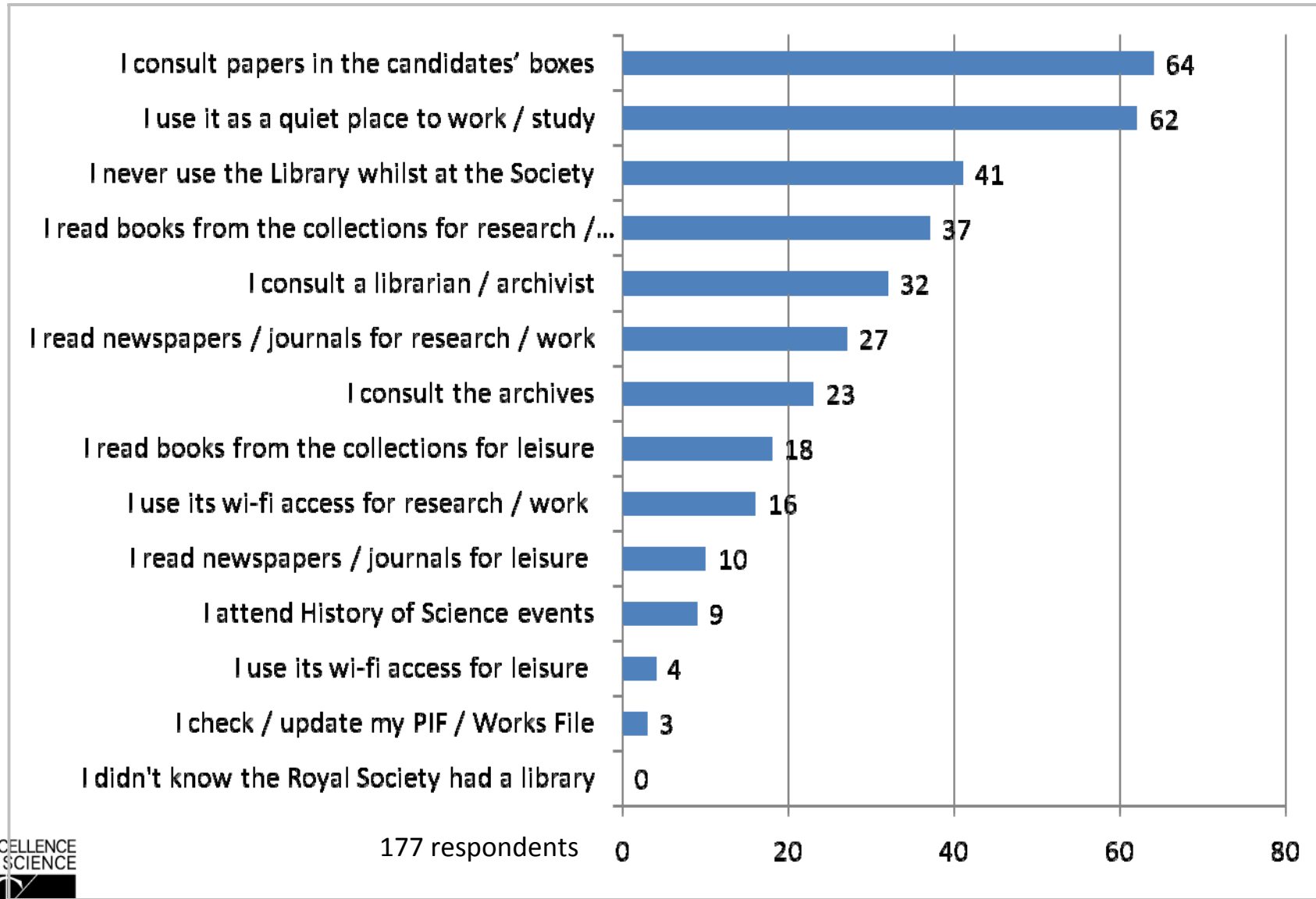
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How and why do Fellows use the Library?

- Mostly, their use reflects Fellows' reasons for visiting the Society – they use the Library for work / business purposes
- Most popular 'use' of the Library is to consult Candidates' boxes
- Also use it as a quiet place to work or study
- However, few cite using its resources – suggests Library is not viewed as a primary research resource, unless Fellows need to access rare books or archives (unique resources)
- Most popular Library resource is books – followed by staff!



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Do Fellows *need* the Library?

Survey results suggest

NO!

At least, not to facilitate their research

- 75% of Fellows work for academic institutions and have access to top-rate academic libraries / library services
- 96% of Fellows have access to an institutional library

- Few Fellows visit the Society with the intention of using the Library (barely 30%)
- If they do use it, it's mainly to consult Candidates' boxes, or for quiet study

- Impact of the digital revolution:
the Library does not offer any remote services to Fellows, or publicise those it has, but this is now the accepted / preferred way of working

- Little demand for more current science material:
would expect this to be higher if Fellows relied on the Library as a primary research resource



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How can we encourage Fellows to use the Library?

What do Fellows want from the Library in the C21st?

- 33% of Fellows stated that they are happy with current Library services / facilities – however, there is clearly room for ‘improvement’
- Extend Library opening hours
 - to reflect the Fellows’ ‘use’ of the Society
- Provide online access to journals
 - to reflect modern ways of working
- Better publicise our services and facilities
 - to encourage use of the Library, and to encourage Fellows to donate published works and their own archives / papers etc
- Set aside a private working area
 - so Fellows do not have to work alongside staff and the public
 - so Fellows feel more like the Library is ‘their’ resource



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Wider implications

Does the survey have wider impact / influence?

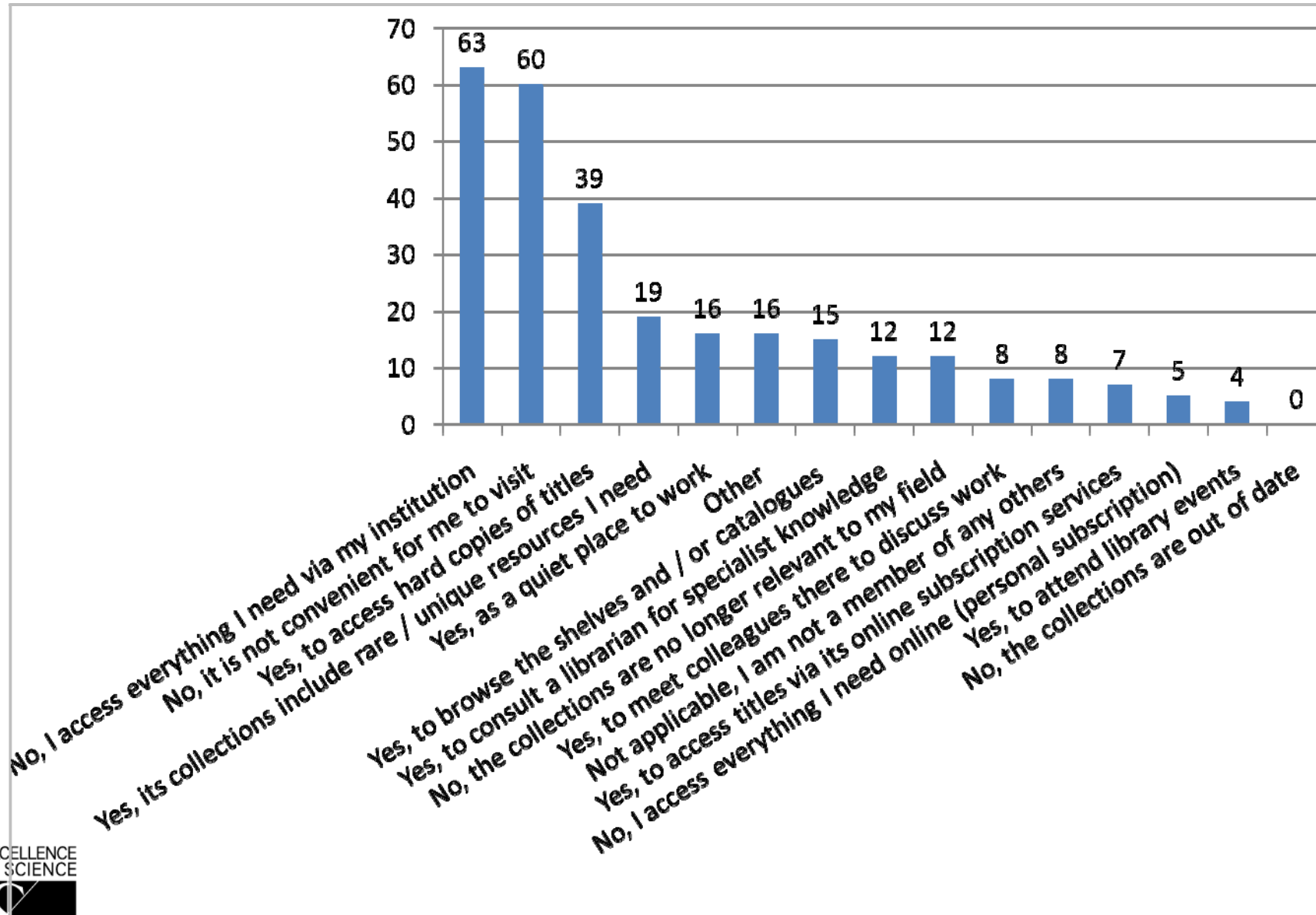
- Very little collective information available about the use of learned society libraries - significant gap in literature / research
- Asked Fellows whether or not they use other learned society libraries
- Results seem generally to reflect Fellows' use of the Royal Society Library -
 - 54% don't use other learned society libraries because:
 - they access everything they need via their institution (24%)
 - they can't conveniently visit other learned societies (23%)
 - 5% said collections were no longer relevant – but none thought they were out of date

Fellows mostly use other learned society libraries in order to:

- access hard copies of titles (15%)
- access rare / unique resources (7%)



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Summary

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Fellows and the Royal Society Library

- Fellows' use of the Library is in decline:
 - they don't need to use it
 - they don't view it as a primary research resource
- However:
 - the Library does still provide a service to Fellows
 - it can continue to provide a service to Fellows
- Fellows are supportive of the Library, and its work, resources and services
- However:
 - there is a demand and need to improve its resources and services
- Fellows are not our biggest user group, but the Library remains their resource – we have a responsibility to ensure that it remains useful to them

Fellows' support is vital if the Library is to survive, and to augment its collections for current and future users – whether they be Fellows, staff or the public



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Questions / comments?

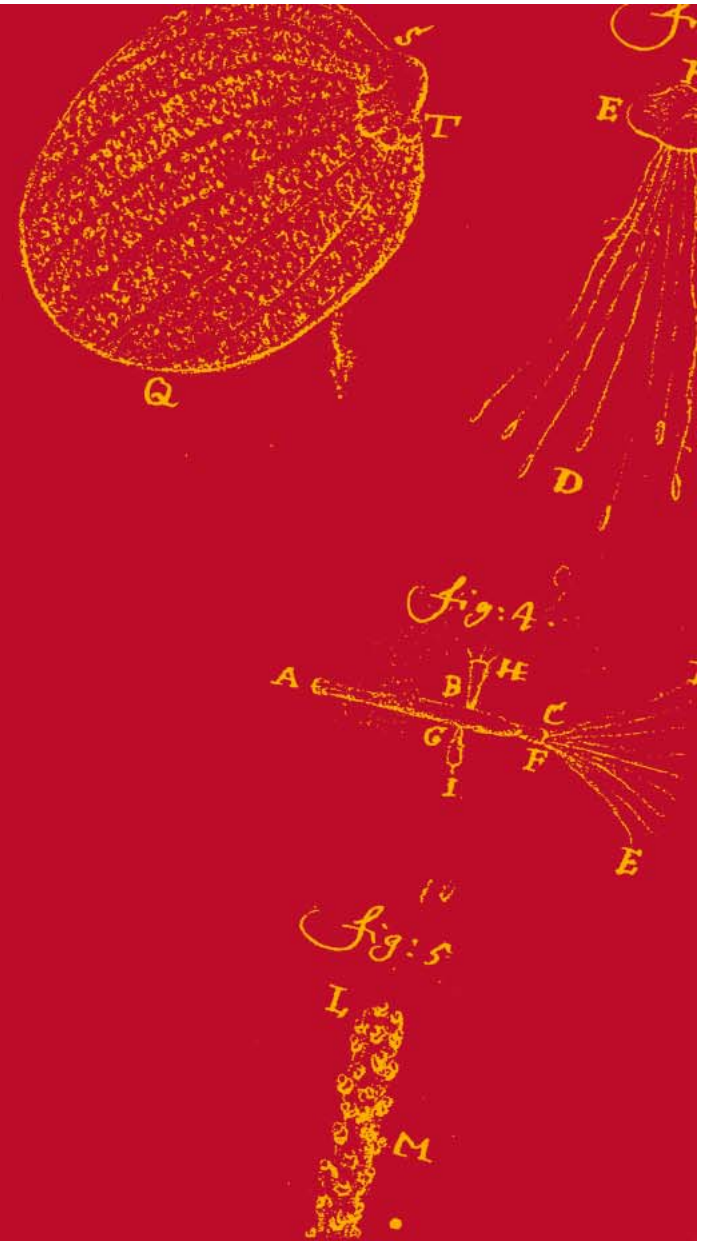
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