How Do You Choose a Book for a Pre-arrival Shared Reading Scheme in a University?

A case study

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This paper continues the exploration of Kingston University's pre-arrival shared reading scheme, the Kingston University Big Read (KUBR), this time considering action research into how best to choose a common book. After a review of methods used to choose books both specifically in American universities and generally within large shared reading groups, the method used for the KUBR is described. A key objective of the KUBR is to promote inclusion, so the longlist of titles considered was produced by inviting the entire community to submit suggestions. Since the list was extensive, time to make a choice was short, and there was a strong desire for the methodology to be as objective as possible, it was decided to identify the key criteria relevant to choosing a suitable book and then use a simple algorithm—essentially a weighted scoring system—to score each book using readily available data in order to make a shortlist of six books. These were then read by a panel of students and administrative and academic staff. The book finally chosen was Matt Haig's *The Humans*. This paper details each step of the method and finishes with an appraisal and lessons learnt for next time.

Introduction

Kingston University established a pre-arrival shared reading scheme in 2015. Prior research into the leisure habits of first-year students, the part played by reading for pleasure, and their anticipated responses to receiving a book before arriving at university had indicated a likely positive response (Baverstock et al., 2016). Once the decision had been made to proceed, Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* was chosen by University Vice Chancellor Professor Julius Weinberg as the first title to be shared. This seemed a suitable choice, since it was considered a 'good read', was written by a Kingston alumnus (Hornby completed his Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at Kingston in 1981), featured city living, was not off-putting title in size, and 'growing up' was one of the book's central themes—which related well to students approaching the transition to university. Ten thousand copies of a bespoke edition were printed; one for each of the students about to start at Kingston University and enough for an estimated percentage of interested staff to join in too.

All UK students were sent a copy of the book at their home address. Responses on social media quickly referenced their satisfaction at receiving a 'present' or 'gift' and feeling 'welcomed', 'included', and 'comforted'. The special Kingston branding of the book received particularly positive comment, and many students concluded that Kingston had its own publishing house. The events attended by Hornby in connection with the scheme were packed; after the talk he gave during the first week of term he signed copies of his book for over an hour. The book was included in welcome activities, early weeks' teaching, and formative assessment. What was less expected, as it had not been researched, was the response of staff. Books were made available to them before the summer holiday. As well as copies being much more widely sought than anticipated (so much so that the book had to be twice reprinted), the book was used in a variety of different circumstances—as the basis for team-building by both university Finance and Estates Departments, by Human Resources in induction briefings for new staff, and as a promotional or introductory gift by the university's Development and Alumni Relations teams.

When students and staff were surveyed, after the events had finished, it emerged that the scheme had been much discussed among both groups, often with multiple categories of individual (e.g. friends, work colleagues, family, wider family, neighbours). The project consistently emerged as an ice-breaker for conversations and a community builder.

About a Boy had been chosen at short notice. A quick decision was needed if a book were to be turned into a bespoke edition in time for despatch to the students. When all the ways in which the scheme was monitored had been assessed, from its impact on student engagement to surveys of all involved, it was decided to run it again, bringing to the fore the challenge of how best to choose a shared book.

It's not easy to choose a book to be read by the entire community of domestic and international freshers, at both undergraduate and master's level, as well as by all staff who want to be part of the scheme. The main objectives of the scheme are to promote engagement and inclusion. As it was important that the Kingston University Big Read (KUBR) project should be owned across the institution, there was a strong desire to in-

volve the full community in selecting the book. It was felt that the book should be able to draw the community together and emphasize people's shared humanity, and that it shouldn't nestle close to any particular discipline. It was quickly concluded that, though it would be impossible to choose a title that would please everyone, the project should aim to find a book that could be read with interest by all and would provoke discussion.

Time, however, was pressing. If the scheme was to operate annually (as do all established university pre-arrival shared reading schemes) then the need to choose a book would also quickly roll around again. Although it was encouraging that the questionnaire sent to students and staff was yielding suggested titles, no one was able to put their life—or job—on hold to read and objectively appraise every suggestion made. This paper charts the process of trying to establish the best way of choosing a book, and how the eventual choice was made.

Literature review

Pre-arrival shared reading of a single book is not uncommon in US universities (Wright, 2006; Featherston, 2007), but associated analysis in the published literature is hard to find. It appears that most universities site such schemes within marketing and communications and thus outcomes are generally described rather than academically analysed. For our literature search we thus explored both the literature relating to US schemes, in both universities and civic programmes, and literature relating to book groups in general.

According to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a shared reading scheme aims to 'engage the campus community and beyond in an academically focused reading experience; generate vigorous discussions and exchanges of diverse ideas; promote connections among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the wider community; tap into and promote the intellectual resources of the campus; promote educational initiatives and learning outcomes; and bridge learning experiences inside and outside the classroom' (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). This relates to wider study of the optimum methods to engage and involve students (Baron and Corbin, 2012).

Similar objectives are noted by those establishing civic shared reading schemes. The first 'One City One Book' initiative took place in Seattle in 1998 and the coordinator, Nancy Pearl, commented that it was im-

portant to 'Keep in mind that this is a library program, it's not an exercise in civics, it's not intended to have literature cure the racial divide. This is about a work of literature' (Rogers, 2002, p. 16). Pearl did, however, subsequently refer to the role of such schemes in breaking down isolation: 'people can go for days at a time not talking to anyone outside their immediate family. There are precious few opportunities for people of different ethnic background, economic levels or ages to sit down together and discuss ideas that are important to them; this project provides that opportunity' (At Your Library, 2012). Another early initiative was the 1998 hosting by the Washington Centre for the Book of an event with author Russell Banks, prompting countrywide interest in reading: 'there are now state-wide, citywide, county-wide, and event country-wide reading programs all over the world' (American Library Association, 2003, p. 4).

Choosing a book for university shared reading

Michael Ferguson comments that 'common reading programs of all types are helping bridge divides on campus: between disciplines, between student life and academic affairs, between the orientation period and the first semester' (Ferguson, 2006, p. 10). How the book is chosen, however, may vary.

In his study of US colleges, Ferguson (2006, p. 8) suggested that 'many campuses pick books that enable discussion of US and global diversity'. As an example he cited Albion College using a novel in their Common Read to 'begin student understanding of differences' and 'provide an entry for students into the ideas of global citizenship'; this builds on Pearl's suggestion that shared reading can encourage common ground between people from diverse backgrounds. He quotes Levine Laufgraben of Temple University, and author of *Common Reading Programs: Going beyond the book*, who thinks that well-planned programmes of this kind signal both 'the importance of reading in college' and of 'discussion and respect for diverse viewpoints' (2006, p. 9).

With respect to the question of how to promote understanding of contemporary diversity, Stephen Moss (2000) cites Caryl Phillips, who argues that 'the "mongrel" nation that is Britain is still struggling to find a way to stare into the mirror and accept the ebb and flow of history that has produced this fortuitously diverse condition'; he believes that a novelist such as Zadie Smith,

who writes about the Jamaican diaspora and multiculturalism in the UK, can help understanding and promote greater societal unity. Perhaps the chosen book should be one that will promote collegiality through enabling discussion, offering a story that contains diversity, and yet embodies the culture of the country in which it is being read. Encouraging awareness of diversity was a particularly important factor for Kingston, the most diverse university in the UK, having a student population that includes over 150 different nationalities, and a long-term commitment to inclusion, adding social value, and transforming life chances. The work of Annie Hughes at Kingston (Hughes, 2015; Hughes and Garside, 2016) on promoting transition and addressing the needs of commuting students is particularly important in this context. The university was the 2017 winner of *The Guardian*'s University Award for Teaching Excellence, receiving specific praise for the inclusivity and accessibility of its courses.

Ferguson also suggests that the use of themes like 'fitting in' and 'rites of passage' can help students connect because they too are going through huge change in their lives, entering a different environment from high school which may also involve leaving home. For mature learners, going back into the classroom can be a particular challenge (Oxford Royale Academy [ORA] Prep, 2014). The experience of shared reading can help create a community the students feel part of, particularly if the book is one they can relate to.

Lehman (cited in Tienda, 2013, p. 468) suggests that, though a diverse student body provides the necessary conditions for leveraging associated educational benefits, 'diversity does not guarantee the socially legitimate goal of integration'. Haring-Smith's findings (cited in Tienda, 2013, p. 470) from researching an American university that had a high level of diversity in the student body suggested that the human tendency is to 'sort into islands of comfortable consensus' and concluded that 'integration must be deliberately cultivated through interactions that engage the diverse life experiences of students from different racial, geographic, religious, and political backgrounds' (ibid., p. 470).

Other methods of book selection emerge: some that involve students and others that are developed for them without their involvement. For example, at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota the book is 'selected

the year before by a panel made up of faculty, staff, and students' (Twiton, 2007). Washington State University (2015), however, wants to create 'a common academic ground', and the book is chosen by the university. They do not specify who is involved in the choosing, but there is no mention of a student contribution; 'students' professors, residence hall staff, librarians, and others lend ideas and actions to bring to life topics raised in the book' (Washington State University, 2015).

> **There is an issue, though, of whether paying students may compromise the integrity of their involvement. Perhaps more appropriate recompense might come in the form of book vouchers, to maintain the link to reading for pleasure.**

Many universities offer students paid work, for example in campus restaurants and shops, and this model could potentially be applied to their involvement in choosing a book for shared reading. There is an issue, though, of whether paying students may compromise the integrity of their involvement. Perhaps more appropriate recompense might come in the form of book vouchers, to maintain the link to reading for pleasure.

R. Mark Hall (2003, p. 659) concluded that universal reading schemes are not meant to be an 'academic task'; they're 'aimed instead at self-help and healing' and providing 'cultural uplift' (ibid., p. 655). Hall supports the idea of making such schemes more fun than academic: establishing a more welcoming environment and providing a sense of community. At Kingston, getting involved in the selection process was presented to students as both fun and useful CV material. A quantifiable involvement in the project was made eligible as a contribution to for students' Kingston Award, a scheme for recording and acknowledging individuals' contribution to the university beyond their academic studies.[1]

How the book is used

In the literature there was general agreement that related events should be used to garner student involvement in the programme, but how the book is used may link to the pathway by which it is chosen. Some universities use the book as part of an academic, year-long programme; others focus mainly on reading events during orientation and enrolment. A book chosen with the intent of improving academic performance may prompt wider engagement through formal delivery within existing academic structures, although it may find a better academic fit in some departments or faculties than others. Otterbein University (2015), for example, fully integrates the book into required first-year courses, relating the experience to their year-long reading scheme and requiring students to write an associated essay. Ball State University, meanwhile, uses more informal means such as online forums to promote student discussion (Ferguson, 2006, p. 9).

Gustavus Adolphus College gives the book out to be read during the summer and generally organizes associated events as part of orientation, focusing on the community/welcome aspect of the shared read, for example, by hosting a meeting with the author as part of finalizing the choice. Ferguson (2006, p. 10) explores the benefits of both routes and points out that 'programs that end when orientation ends risk leaving some students wondering why they were assigned the reading in the first place'. He also warns against 'tacking on' events to orientation and believes that the events that take place must feel properly integrated into other orientation activities. If the event seems 'incidental', he argues, then students will struggle to connect with it.

Year-long associated programmes can, however, struggle to keep discussion flowing; the question then arises as to how to creatively to sustain the interest of the students, especially when they have other commitments like their graded work, sport, and part-time employment (increasingly common). Kate Porubcansky, Director of the Center for Student Involvement at Otterbein University (cited in Ferguson, 2006, p. 10), argues that, if a year-long route is chosen, then it must have a theme that can sustain year-long discussion; must not overwhelm, but must be a bit of a challenge for the participants; and must be usable in 'different disciplinary contexts'. She also believes the scheme cannot work without university, campus, and faculty support.

If a book is integrated as an academic element of the student programme, one may ask whether or not it should be compulsory. In this context a study by Rogers (2002) found that encouraging tutorial attendance at university did not improve performance at an Australian university. Although Rogers found a strong positive association between attendance and academic performance, whether or not a common reading scheme was in place, there was no evidence the incentive scheme caused student performance to improve. Although it can be argued that students who feel included and connected to the university may be more inclined to attend classes, which could lead to better marks, and that reading for pleasure may improve reading fluency and hence levels of communication, it is questionable how useful it would be to make a book that feels irrelevant to one's course a compulsory read.

Summarizing the various routes through which a book may be discussed, Levine Laufgraben (cited in Ferguson, 2006, p. 9) comments,

> activities like small-group discussion satisfy 'the desire to have an academic component to orientation,' which often otherwise focuses exclusively on student life. In this sense, common reading programs—even when they exist solely as part of orientation—can give students an early taste of academic life and set the tone for the first year of college.

> [Leaving] decisions about how a book will be used to individual faculty members has the advantage of being easy to implement. It is most likely to be effective when campuses offer discussion guides or workshops to help faculty integrate the common reading into their classes.

> The danger of relying upon individual classes to extend discussion of the common reading is that, from the student's perspective, such an approach may appear uncoordinated. Colleen Boff, the librarian for Bowling Green State University's First Year Experience, notes that this approach creates 'potential for redundancy' between classes; it also leaves open the possibility that some students will never encounter the reading again after orientation.

Making information available about a university shared read

One Book, One Community (2003) recommended that planning for a reading scheme should take at least six months, if not longer: 'many communities have begun the planning process over a year in advance of the campaign launch' (ibid., p. 8). Their guide offers a detailed section on timing and planning the run-up to the launch to ensure overall goals are met. It is suggested that a strong level of participation results from understanding both target audience and goals, and that 'general promotional materials such as flyers, press releases, and advertisements are great vehicles for reaching a general audience of mixed ages and backgrounds' (ibid., p. 25).

Successful reading schemes are often promoted using social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, blogging platforms, and well-developed websites with plenty of information and resources. The University of Wisconsin-Madison (2014) website features a 'Marketing Toolkit' to encourage people who are keen to be involved to print off posters and offers other marketing tools to encourage word-of-mouth and wider involvement among staff and students. Word-of-mouth (including social media) is a particularly effective form of marketing for such programmes because often one of the key institutional goals is to get discussions started. This relates to an early finding of the KUBR (Baverstock et al., 2016) that there was much discussion of the project, even among those who had not read the book.

Drawing on their civic involvement in shared reading, Peggy Barber and Linda Wallace consider that the kind of marketing needed is

- *about listening*—not just telling or selling. It is two-way communication.
- *about them*—not us. We build our collections and services based on what our community/school/university/business wants and needs.
- *about people*—not stuff. We can't just reel off a list of our impressive inventory and expect anyone to care. (Barber and Wallace, 2010, p. 1)

They found that 'Just a question [about a scheme or program] can create more interest in programs' (ibid., p. 39) and that the public learned about their library schemes through 'library staff or neighbours and friends,

[which] demonstrates the power of word-of-mouth marketing in the community' (ibid, p. 42).

Both One Book, One Community (OBOC) and Barber and Wallace discuss ways of drawing an audience in. The latter use case studies of various libraries involving 'e-newsletters' and 'clever name[s] and logo[s]' (Barber and Wallace, 2010, pp. 55, 49) to demonstrate the value of word-of-mouth campaigning. One Book, One Community (American Library Association, 2003) go into more detail on the practicalities, arguing that a successful campaign comes through effective planning and utilizing all possible resources. One of their suggestions is to capitalize on the fact many people will be interested in such a scheme and undoubtedly would love the chance to help out: 'these groups, and others, can also assist with promotion by passing information on to members of their organization through newsletters, meetings, emails, posting flyers, and more' (ibid., p. 25). They also list the key options and tips for marketing (ibid., pp. 26, 28).

In the UK, although anecdotal information was obtained about other universities that had run pre-arrival shared reading across selected departments, associated analysis was hard to find. Examples included the University of East Anglia offering final-year students the opportunity to choose a book for the pre-arrival reading of the next first-year cohort.[2] The University of Hertfordshire's (2015) Common Reading Experience is 'focused on first-year students', although they encourage existing students to get involved too. On their website, they use their partnership with the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to promote their reading scheme, a model that could be copied by other universities that have international exchange partners. There are also opportunities for UK universities to benefit from the activities of the Man Booker Foundation, whose university initiative

encourages first year students at universities across the UK to appreciate and engage with the very best contemporary literary fiction. Regardless of their chosen field of study, students are given a winning or shortlisted Man Booker Prize novel to read and discuss followed by a visit from the author who takes part in a combination of workshops, lectures and reading groups.

The initiative was launched in 2009 and has expanded year on year. Participating universities have seen visits from: Julian Barnes; Sebastian Barry; Jim Crace; Karen Joy Fowler; Linda Grant; Kazuo Ishiguro; Lloyd Jones; Andrea Levy; Deborah Levy; Stephen Kelman; Hilary Mantel; Yann Martel; Hisham Matar; Simon Mawer; A. D. Miller; D. B. C. Pierre; Ali Smith and Sarah Waters. The scheme is jointly funded by the Booker Prize Foundation and the individual universities.[3]

Looking at the literature relating to reading groups in wider society, Barstow (2003, p. 1) considers how reading has come back into fashion, with the creation of many book groups and the associated revival of reading as a social activity, especially with the organization of communal reading schemes in cities. She suggests the revived popularity may relate to reading as a shared activity, drawing together people of diverse interests through a variety of group formats such as, for example, online, newspaper-sponsored, library-sponsored, neighbourhood, work-based, parent–child, and all male groups. She found that most adults' 'non-work related reading today is done in one of three places—on commuter trains and buses, in vacation settings, or at home'. In his history of reading, Alberto Manguel highlights the role of books in providing access to individuals with similar lives: 'readers, like imaginative archaeologists, burrow their way through the official literature in order to rescue from between the lines the presence of their fellow outcasts, to find mirrors for themselves in the stories' (Manguel, 1997, p. 233). Martha Nussbaum (cited in Barstow, 2003, p. 10) argues that we should value reading novels precisely because it often leads to emotional involvement in the lives of fictional characters and therefore promotes empathy and compassion. However, her selection of women from similar socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds as part of her focus group may mean that the shared interpretation of the text by these women reflects shared expectations that existed prior to the act of reading. D. Rehberg Sedo (2003) has explored gendered reading, citing genre literature as often attracting very clear divisions in terms of male and female reading preferences.

The Oprah Winfrey Book Club (1996 onwards) had attracted huge attention, and discussion of the book choices is similarly relevant to the choice of shared reading material. For example, Janice Radway comments,

> Oprah is obviously a serious reader, with particular goals and interests in mind. She's criticized by high-art critics or even cultural-studies scholars, because they say when she picks a book like *Beloved*, she's not looking at its aesthetic complexity—she's making it sentimental, confessional. That seems like a pointless criticism to me. When you write a book and put it out, that book can be read in many ways by many different people. People are always thumbing their noses at women's reading. It's a dismissal of women's engagement with literature, rather than recognizing that it's a particular and very vital way of making literature a part of daily life. (Cited in Rooney, 2005, p. 60)

Both the basis for book choice and their interpretation by media and viewers are examined in detail by Ted Striphas (2003).

In their detailed study of the operation of reading groups, based on contact with 350 UK book groups, Hartley and Turvey (2001) devote a chapter to how books are chosen. They highlight a variety of considerations, from the format in which work is available, to the particular age, experience, and preferences of group members, and including how best to achieve what Margaret Forster refers to in her foreword (ibid., p. ix) as 'stimulation by a spirited exchange of views'. One particular issue underpins the whole chapter: how to manage and reflect responsibility for book choice—whether it is the members' desire to assume personal responsibility (taking turns to select a title), or to share responsibility within the group (whether openly or anonymously), or to delegate it to an external entity such as media provision for such groups, in print and broadcast forms. The BBC launched their Big Read in 2003, asking members of the public to nominate their best-loved novel of all time, which led to lobbying and the casting of 750 000 votes by members of the public.

The *Richard and Judy* television programme launched a book club in 2004, making clear that the choices made were the result of wide reading by the team's production and presentation team and were not based on suggestions made by publishers or on bestseller lists. The resulting lists regularly featured surprising choices, which

once highlighted by the programme often went on to become bestsellers. The initiative brought new people into reading and expanded the horizons of those who were already active readers. Baverstock (2011, p. 37) commented,

> coverage of books on *Richard & Judy* won the 2006 HarperCollins Award for Expanding the Book Market (*Bookseller*, 2006) and an *Observer* poll voted Amanda Ross the most important figure in British publishing (McCrum, 2006). The trade press repeatedly reported the 'transforming' effect of their selections on subsequent sales (*Bookseller*, 2004). As Category Manager in charge of buying books for Tesco, David Cooke recognized the impact of *Richard & Judy*:

> 'They have brought different books to new people. Probably 50–60% of all the books they have chosen we wouldn't have listed otherwise. The typical Tesco book buyer only buys one or two books a year, driven by covers and what's very popular.' (Quoted in Rohrer, 2009)

The implication that reading enjoyment was owned by one department rather than widely shared was thought unlikely to enhance the project, and the offer was resisted.

Kingston also accessed informal feedback from universities that had organized shared reading, by interviewing participants and observers. Their experiences warned the Kingston team to avoid book choices that exposed self-interest (e.g., a memoir by a key figure within the hierarchy of a university running such a scheme had been badly received). They were similarly warned against books 'emerging' from unknown selection processes; it was stressed that transparency in the book-choosing process and evident potential for cross-organizational involvement would promote wider engagement. When it was later proposed that the choice of book should lie with the academic department most used to analysing literature; that they should make a

choice for the institution as a whole, discussion centred on whether routine analysis of literature made such a department super-qualified for the job of choosing on behalf of their colleagues—or whether their experience impair their ability to choose something that everyone would enjoy? The implication that reading enjoyment was owned by one department rather than widely shared was thought unlikely to enhance the project, and the offer was turned down, with thanks.

Another significant issue, given that the first shared title had been by a Kingston graduate, was whether the book choice should henceforth be Kingston linked. In addition to the esteemed work of colleagues at Kingston University (e.g., Adam Baron, Rachel Cusk, Hanif Kureshi), Kingston upon Thames is home to many writers (e.g., Chris Cleave, Mary Lawson, Jacqueline Wilson), some of whom also set their work in the borough. Although a link with Kingston might seem desirable, it was thought that in the long run the requirement of such a link might limit the choice too much. It was instead decided to draw upon a wide range of writers, and then seek to create strong links between the selected author and Kingston.

There were also the specific interests of the project's 2016 research partners at Edinburgh Napier to be considered. In order to be able to compare processes and outcomes, it was intended that the same book would be chosen for both locations, and so a range of authors and settings, including some in Scotland, would likely be appreciated.

Methodology
The team (comprising the Project Director, an analyst/economist, the Project Manager, and eight SADRAS [Student Academic Development Research Associates Scheme] students[4] plus some input from Kingston University's IT department) had to develop a method for choosing a book, incorporating the lessons learnt from the literature review. Other considerations to be taken into account when choosing the book were:

- the importance of involving the whole community in book selection, since one of the key objectives of the Big Read is to promote engagement and inclusion;
- the need for the book to provoke sufficient interest to be read and discussed by a very wide community

of domestic and international undergraduate and postgraduate freshers and staff at two universities; the need for the method chosen to be relatively quick, as time was short between receiving survey feedback after one Big Read and preparing the publication of a bespoke edition of the next book to be ready in time for despatch to staff and students; the need for the method to be as objective as possible, at least in making the shortlist of books, which would then be read by the representative panel of readers, likely consisting of 16–20 people.

The method developed therefore followed the five steps outlined below and described in more detail in the following sections.

1 Finalize a longlist of books comprising all the books suggested by staff and students.
2 Determine the key criteria for a suitable KUBR book against which each of the books should be assessed.
3 Determine a scoring system for each of the criteria and assign weightings to each criterion.
4 Score each book against each of the criteria to produce a weighted total score for the book. Produce a ranked list of all the books based on this scoring. Test the sensitivity of the ranking to various weighting systems.
5 Pick the shortlist—the top six books on the list—to be read by the panel. Approach the publishers and, provided the publishers' responses are encouraging, ask the panel members to read each of the books on the shortlist. Hold panel meetings to select the final book.

Step 1. Finalize the longlist

One of the questions asked in the student and staff surveys conducted after the first KUBR included an option to suggest a book or type of book for next time. In total, 95 books were suggested—and this became the core of the longlist. Interestingly, students were more likely to suggest classics whereas staff were more likely to suggest modern books. The books were wide-ranging, very few were suggested by more than one person, and just one book (Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*) was suggested by both a student and a member of staff.

Step 2. Determine the key criteria against which each book should be assessed

Bearing in mind the lessons learnt from the literature and the considerations listed above, the team agreed that the following points were important in the selection of a book for shared reading:

An author able to attend. There was a strong desire for the author of the chosen title to come and speak in person about their book. It was expected that an author visit would give students additional impetus to read the title and engage early on with their university, and that this would promote both enrolment and engagement. As one member of the research team commented:

> I personally was more engaged with *About a Boy* as I knew about Nick Hornby visiting the university. I wanted to find more out about the famous author and hear his thoughts first-hand and to make sure I would fully benefit from the visit, I read the book.

Author diversity. Kingston University is one of the most diverse in the world. As this research project is a continuation of Kingston's SADRAS initiative, a diverse range of authors and reading material was considered important. SADRAS seeks to promote engagement, inclusion, and a sense of community right across the institution, particularly in segments of the student community which have often not found transition to higher education easy, for example BME (black and minority ethnic) and mature students, commuters, and those from a care background or with care responsibilities.

A well-known author. It was thought that a well-known author would help enhance project credibility and community engagement, particularly when appealing across the institution to all disciplines and roles, including people who do not read or books on a regular basis. It was thought that selecting a book by a well-known author, who was either already familiar to potential participants or could be shown to be well established in their writing career, would also enhance the external profile of the project, drawing attention to the university and potentially supporting application and retention rates.

Author bibliography: an author with several titles available. The choice of an established author would also increase the likelihood of their having several titles available besides the one selected. This was considered important for two reasons. Firstly, an author with a backlist enlarges the opportunity for participants to extend their reading journey and try other titles by the same author. Secondly, wider title availability will boost the motivation of the participating publisher to offer a good unit price on the chosen title, on the basis that a 'halo effect' will benefit other work (although this presupposes that the author's backlist is all published by the same house, which is not always the case). In 2015, feedback from both student and staff surveys confirmed that participants had gone on to read other titles by the featured author; Penguin reported increased sales of Hornby's other titles after the selection of *About a Boy* as our KUBR; and at the author's first Kingston event a book stall run by a local retailer did good business.

> **The physical size of the book was considered critically important; there should be no initial reaction from those receiving the book that it was either too long or difficult to read, and in particular that it would be not easy to hold and carry around.**

Date published. Date of publication was considered important to choosing a book that first-time students would find appealing. Some aspects of *About a Boy*, published in 1998, were considered rather outdated (e.g. policies around the well-being of children have changed; there were no references to mobile phones). It was thought that some students might not become immersed in a text if they could not relate to the main character or events.

Currency of title (*the time in which the story is set*). Similarly, and based on prior research among the stu-

dent cohort of 2014 and further discussion in the research group, it was felt that a modern setting would resonate more with incoming students. As a group member explained: 'a historical novel runs the risk of appealing only to those that are interested in history/the relevant period of history; a book set in more modern times may have a broader appeal'. Along similar lines, a memoir that included references to music and events the students would not recognize might perhaps be less appealing than books depicting the years from 2000 onwards, since these were within the living memory of the students involved.

Page count. The physical size of the book was considered critically important; there should be no initial reaction from those receiving the book that it was either too long or difficult to read, and in particular that it would not be easy to hold and carry around. Students coming to university for the first time would want a book that was easy (and not too heavy) to take with them, and one that does not look like a chore to read during their holidays. It was decided that the optimum extent would be 250–350 pages but a shorter book would be preferable to a longer one. When it came to the dimensions of the page, allowances were made for variation between publishers, though ensuring that each book felt comfortable to hold.

Gender-neutral cover. A gender-neutral cover was thought desirable, one that would be 'suitable for, or applicable to, or common to both male and female genders'[5] in the hope that, on first impression, both men and women would feel equally drawn to read the book, whether they were seeing it through the polylope mailing package or picking it up in person at the university.

Consideration of what is gender neutral is necessarily subjective, depending on an individual's conception of gender neutrality and influenced by both conscious and unconscious bias. There are simplistic mechanisms that can be applied, for example avoiding too much pink or stereotypically masculine imagery unless specifically relevant to the plot. It was also considered that gender neutrality should be evident in the words used on the cover as well as in any images, so the font, gender of endorsers, and language of the book blurb all needed to be considered. It was, however, important to retain balance. Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*, whose cover featured

a picture of a small girl—which was apposite to the story—was included on the shortlist, since various aspects of the design made clear that this was not a specifically female read but a memoir that could be enjoyed regardless of gender.

A possible way around these difficulties was to revert to publishers' earlier packaging of books; often the hardback had a more gender-neutral cover than the paperback. It was eventually decided, however, that consistency was important and therefore it was best to review the current paperback edition of each title. Another solution was to create a cover specifically for Kingston, perhaps involving students from Kingston University's Art School to design one. This was decided against for two reasons: firstly because it would slow the process down and secondly because it was thought important that students see that a *real* book had been purchased for them that was also available in shops, which would enhance their perception of an item they were being given for nothing.

Genre. The appeal of genre titles was also considered, having featured in the pre-project research of 2014, when findings had shown that the specific appeal of fantasy and science fiction as well as romance and thrillers (collectively often known as 'genre titles') had all drawn less support than a more mainstream title, that might have broader appeal across the community. Although it was acknowledged that it was probably impossible to find a book that everyone would like, consideration of genre might reduce the risk of students being discouraged from reading the book because of preconceived notions about whether or not they liked such material.[6] The research group concluded that a genre title might be an alienating choice for a shared reading project aimed at a large group of people with different backgrounds, tastes, and levels of reading for leisure.

Location of story. There was discussion of whether a KUBR title should be set in the UK, or more specifically London, in order to instil a sense of geographical familiarity, whether the new arrivals were home students (EU or UK) or international.

Reading a book set in a location that will shortly become home has the potential to create a sense of connection with between the place and the reader. An international member of the SADRAS team commented that the 2015 choice had done just that; she had 'found it both beneficial and exciting to be reading a story set in my new home. The book acted as a surrogate friend, welcoming me to my new city, the characters and their experiences helping my transition to life in London.'

Reviews. It was generally agreed that the chosen title should above all be a good read. But again this is a subjective criterion. Does it mean the book should be critically acclaimed or, rather, widely enjoyed? Amazon reviews were selected as the basis for evaluating this criterion. Reviews are not entirely reliable—there is a risk they may be written by friends and relations of the author—but it was felt this was still the most feasible method of gauging the general likeability of a book without requiring every title to be read by a member of the research team. The large number of people reviewing on Amazon meant the sample size was large, and it was decided to focus on the 'average customer review' star rating on Amazon. Although a high review on Amazon is not a guarantee of a good book, poor reviews might perhaps be an indicator of an unsuitable book.

School curriculum. There was a desire *not* to choose a book that had featured on the UK school curriculum, as it would likely be familiar to a significant proportion of the potential readers, who, even if they had not read it, might feel a resistance to an 'approved title'. This draws on research by Penguin into their brand identity as 'books I was forced to read at school'.[7] As one member of the research team commented: 'We did not want awaiting students to feel like this was part of their course and a recommended reading task. By excluding any titles that have been, or will be, studied, it gives the scheme more of an appeal and seems less of a chore.'

A 'general comments' section. It was felt that some issues relating to book selection were too indistinct to be predicted or itemized, but nevertheless important to note. A 'general comments' section was therefore included in the selection criteria, allowing opportunity to note further issues that the listed criteria did not cover—for example, areas of difficulty that we felt were inappropriate for 18-year-olds' first move away from home or the specific characteristics of our student demographic. A

book was sought that could be the basis of an ice-breaking conversation; deep enough to motivate conversation but without becoming too controversial, sad, dark, or depressive.

Step 3. Determine a scoring system for each of the criteria, and then a weighting system

Once the most important criteria had been agreed, the next step was to assign a scoring system for each of them. The scores needed to be normalized so that the maximum possible score for each criterion was the same; we decided on a maximum of 5. We then assigned rules for each criterion. For example, for page count the scoring system was five points for a book of optimum length (250–350 pages), four points for a slightly shorter book (150–249 pages), three points for 351–400 pages, two points for under 150 pages, and one point for more than 400 pages (which was considered dauntingly long for the purpose). Similarly, the reviews criterion was scored using the Amazon star rating rounded to the nearest point (rounding up for values of .5).

The next challenge was to derive a weighting system for the criteria. Following group discussions about which were criteria were the most important, each of the 11 team members drew up their own weighting system in such a way that the weightings for each of the 13 criteria totalled 100 per cent. These were then averaged and the average weights used for the final ranking. Partly out of team interest and partly to test sensitivity, we also looked at which books would have been chosen under each individual's weighting system to see how much they varied.

The most important criteria according to the average weighting were whether the author could attend, the page count, the gender-neutral cover, the genre, and author diversity. The least important was the author's bibliography.

Step 4. Score each book against each of the criteria and calculate a weighted score. Rank the books and then test the sensitivity

The Project Manager undertook extensive desk research to look up the required data (page length, Amazon reviews, publication date, author information, location, etc.) for each book so that it could be scored against each of the criteria. The weighting scheme was then applied to each of the individual scores so that
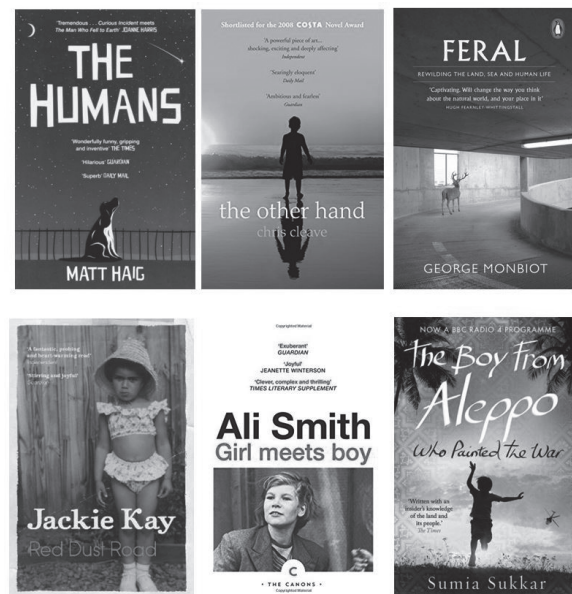

Figure 1. The shortlist for the KUBR 2016.

a weighted score could be calculated for each book.

The books were then ranked in order of their weighted scores so that the top six could be identified. Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* was included in the coding process (though it wouldn't be considered for reuse this year) to see where it would come in the ranking. Pleasingly, it came fifth and so would have been in the shortlist.

For interest and in order to test the sensitivity of the weighting system, we also looked at the top six books that would have been selected using each team member's individual weightings. For the most part the same five books surfaced to the top (though the order varied). The sixth book, however, was not on everyone's list. As it happens, the book that was eventually chosen scored either first or second on 10 out of the 11 individual weighting systems.

Step 5. Approach the publishers of the top six books. Ask all panel members to read the books

The emerging shortlist (Figure 1) for the second iteration of the KUBR was balanced in author gender (three men, three women), included fiction and non-fiction, had a diverse range of titles and author backgrounds, and came from a range of different publishers (two large, two middle-sized, and two very small). Two of the books

Figure 2. A spinner showing the stock bought by the library to support wider reading of the shortlist within the community. Left to right: Project Director Alison Baverstock, Kingston librarians Wendy Woodley and Wendy Morris, Project Administrator Laura Bryars.[Q37]

Figure 3. The selection panel for the KUBR 2016.

were published by the Edinburgh firm Canongate (those by Ali Smith and Matt Haig), and two of the authors were Scottish (Ali Smith and Jackie Kay).

Involving the relevant publishers

The six publishing houses of the shortlist titles were informed of the project, how the shortlist of books had been arrived at, and that one of them was from their list. They were asked to give speedy consideration to three issues:

1   Was their author willing and able to come and talk at both Kingston and Edinburgh?
2   Were they willing to collaborate on the creation of a special edition of the book and make it available to the university at a competitive rate? No figures were mentioned and it was specifically indicated that, though a competitive rate was hoped for, the full author royalty due should be paid.
3   If the answer to those two questions was yes, could they provide 20 free copies of the book to distribute to the judges? (In the case of the smallest two publishers, Kingston offered to pay for this stock.)

The six publishers responded variously: one very enthusiastically by return of email; one soon afterwards in similar vein, including a quoted enthusiastic response from the author, one over two weeks later after having

been chased many times and contact had been made with the author to try to prompt action. The latter publisher had to be repeatedly chased for the 20 copies for the selection panel, which eventually arrived on the morning of the photoshoot.

The shortlist was announced on 1 February 2016 via the Vice Chancellor's monthly letter to staff. Having been secretly bought and catalogued, copies of the shortlisted titles were made available the same day for loan to staff and current students through prominently placed spinners in libraries across the university (Figure 2); the titles also featured in the student press and local and social media. There was strong interest in the displays, particularly after they appeared on digital screens across the institution. A third of library staff (34) read the entire shortlist and there was widespread discussion of the titles:

You have really created a buzz. I feel I must read the shortlist. (Shereen Nabhani-Gebara, Senior Lecturer, Pharmacy)

Selection panel

The six books on the shortlist were then read by a panel composed of people already recruited from throughout the university (Figure 3), including four students (a mixture of undergraduate and master's), the Vice Chancellor, a research coordinator, a receptionist, an

academic, a technical demonstrator, and a librarian. Particular care was taken to obtain a cross-institutional group that included a range of roles, ethnicities, ages, and professional seniorities. Presentations were made in a variety of forums, student and staff, to secure broad involvement. In the case of faculties or roles not represented after the initial trawl, a targeted approach was made via university hierarchies to invite representation. Overall, enthusiasm to take part was high and a list of those wanting to participate in future years was begun.

All panel members were given their books in February and had two months in which to read them before meeting to talk about the final choice. Staff from Edinburgh Napier were represented on the panel and took a full part in representing their recommendations and voting.

Progress of selection meetings

Two meetings were held to discuss the shortlist of six titles, both from 5 to 7 p.m. An open discussion was encouraged in which everyone was invited to participate. It was particularly important to ensure the student voice was heard, given that the majority of the group were staff—albeit from a wide range of roles. Refreshments were provided to foster an informal atmosphere. The first panel meeting was chaired by the Vice Chancellor. Before the second, there were discussions about how to get everyone, particularly the students, to contribute more.

Features of the discussion

In a paper featuring the work of six esteemed writers, it would not be politic to detail the discussion of individual titles. But for the sake of understanding the processes, and what was learned, the following may be helpful.

1   Before the first meeting, six individuals were asked to speak briefly about one of the books on the shortlist, highlighting positive and negative points. They were deliberately not allocated a book they had nominated themselves.

2   The chair began by reminding all present that the task in hand was to choose what would make the best KUBR; a title that could, hopefully, be read with interest and enjoyment across the institution and form the basis of discussion. The panel was asked to note that this was not an exercise in literary criticism, to find

the 'best' book, but rather one to find the title likely to offer the best basis for shared reading and discussion.

3   Before the meeting started, the chair asked each panel member to note down their preferred order of titles. This was put to one side. They were then asked to revisit their choices at the end of the first meeting, and scores were tallied by the group secretary. During the second meeting, the secretary shared the voting average without any public noting of associated names. There was discussion of whether a book that scored highly but was no one's first choice would be as good a catalyst of discussion as one that had a mixture of scores, some very positive, others less so. A note was taken of the order in which individual members of the group had read the titles. It was found that people had thought about the order in which to read their allocated books, although different methodologies had been used. Some group members had begun with those which attracted them most (for various reasons); others had been aware of their preferences but used deferred gratification as their means of deciding which title to read first, saving the one they most fancied until last.

4   The appearance of the cover impacted on reading intentions. One title was several times mentioned as being approached with caution, but then really enjoyed.

5   Regular votes were taken, and at the end of the first meeting two titles were dropped from the shortlist so that four would be presented at the second meeting. Four people (not those who had presented on them previously) were asked to offer short summaries of these titles to the second meeting.

6   There was a lengthy discussion of whether the demographic of the author of last year's book (white male) should influence the 2016 choice. The project was initially envisaged as support for student engagement and retention, but had proven very popular with staff; whereas student recipients would be unaware of the previous choice, staff would.

7   Two books had specific connections to Kingston and their relevance was discussed at some length. Choosing one of them might establish a precedent that in the longer term only a Kingston-connected author could be chosen.

8   The period in which the book was set was explored in

some detail. Although the currency of the plot might not date, perhaps music and television references might not be caught by students. On the other hand, given the current taste of younger generations for things retro—e.g. vintage clothes and vinyl records—this might be viewed as an unnecessary sensitivity.

9   The author's likely proficiency as a speaker was considered. We wanted an author who was eager to be involved and could relate to the students and inspire them.

Conclusion and learnings for next time

It was a close-run thing, but in the end Matt Haig's *The Humans* was the unanimous choice of the second meeting. The title was announced in mid-April 2016 and institutional response to the announcement was very positive. Events connected with the book were held in September/October and feedback on the book was mostly very favourable. The shortlist had offered a diverse range of potential authors, and types of publishing house, but the emergence of a second white male as victor did draw comment and led to consideration that weighting of the criterion for 'author diversity' in the algorithm might need to be reconsidered when choosing a book for 2017.

> A wonderful author who engaged readily both online and when visiting KU. The book itself was funny and sweet and just a little bit dark. A great all-encompassing choice for such a broad range of readers. Truly accessible. (Comment from staff survey)

Reflecting on the book choice process, we thought that:

-   There are ongoing challenges endemic to the process of choosing a book for a whole institution to read. Kingston's approach was to consistently keep two key principles in mind. Firstly, that the main market was the forthcoming Kingston University students, and so the needs and interests of an 18-year-old about to arrive in higher education for the first time should be of primary concern to those making the choice. Secondly, that the process aimed to find not the 'best' book (whatever 'best' means) but rather one that could be read with interest by all.
-   Neither the method for deriving the shortlist nor that for selecting the final book could ever be completely objective; judgement is involved in selecting the im-

portant criteria, in setting up the scoring and weighting systems, and in the final reading of the shortlist. None the less, the method used was a useful basis for selecting the best book for sharing within the particular but very diverse body of KUBR readers—undergraduate and postgraduate freshers, administrative and academic staff, and the wider participating community—in as objective and transparent a way as possible. The algorithm allowed everyone to be involved in recommendations for the longlist and allowed this list to be narrowed down to a shortlist in a manageable amount of time using readily available data on each book and without the need for large numbers of additional readers.

-   The algorithm can be used each year and quickly implemented. It can be tweaked each time to incorporate learning from the experience of previous years and from the feedback surveys afterwards. For the book choice for the KUBR 2017, based on feedback from 2016, a new criterion has been included about the importance of the first few pages of the books under consideration, and the weightings have been tweaked to reflect comments about author diversity, given Kingston's highly diverse student population.
-   How many panel meetings are needed? Given that the book that emerged as the community choice had been identified as the likely frontrunner from the beginning of the first meeting onwards, there was post-panel discussion about whether panel processes had in fact been more complicated than necessary—certainly the original idea of three meetings was probably too much. Although the rankings of the books by panel members changed relatively little between meetings, and perhaps the matter could have been completed within a single meeting, it was felt appropriate to continue to have two panel meetings. This would give panel members the opportunity to change their mind and to reflect on the opinions of others expressed during the earlier meeting.
-   Asking panel members to consider the order in which they read the books, and their rationale for doing so, led to some interesting conversations. It's a good way to gauge people's attitudes to the physical qualities of the book as they would be experienced by the intended recipient. Is the cover gender neutral? Is the book too big or too heavy? This did, however, need to be

discussed in the context of the reader's general tendencies, e.g. were they inclined to read their favourites first or to base their reading order on the prospect of deferred gratification?

- There was discussion about how to enable the student voice to come through, in both title suggestion and panel meetings, particularly given that the group contained a wide range of staff from across the institution.
- Although the eventual decision was not to select

a title on the basis of the author's connection to Kingston, it is possible to create a strong link between chosen author and institution.

The KUBR is now established as part of the institution at Kingston. The associated research programme has yielded rich data for further analysis and it is intended that future papers will examine other aspects of the scheme, from its impact in certain demographics to the creation of value around an item given away without charge. ∎

Notes

1 https://www.facebook.com/pg/TheKingstonAward/about/?ref=page_internal
2 Jon Cook, University of East Anglia, personal communication, November 2016
3 http://themanbookerprize.com/foundation
4 Previous papers (Baverstock et al., 2016; 2017) have outlined the process through which the KUBR was developed, working with students on a SADRAS action research project.

5 www.Oxforddictionaries.com
6 Philip Pullman has commented that his *His Dark Materials* trilogy is for 'fantasy people who don't like fantasy' (Beckett, 2009, p.138).
7 Andrew Welham, Marketing Director and Deputy Managing Director, Penguin Books, personal communication.

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