Research: why bother

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There are several reasons why librarians should engage in research-led practice. Of these, the most important are: (1) to exploit the existing knowledge base for services improvement so that future decisions are made on the basis of real evidence; and (2) to enhance the value of prior research work by capitalising on the investment made in earlier research studies.   Equally, it is evident that there is value in encouraging librarians, especially those working in public libraries, to undertake practitioner-led research. Of particular significance here is the pressing need for library practitioners to contribute to efforts to enlarge the evidence base that demonstrates the value and impact of library and information services delivery. This is crucial to convince politically important stakeholders of the need for further investment in services provision. Such work needs to extend beyond advocacy (the indisputable "libraries are a good thing" mantra) and the simple measurement of tangibles (for example, transactional data such as issue numbers). What is needed here are demonstrations of actual benefit, for example, how the service has contributed to the reduction of anti-social behaviour or the improvement of literacy amongst the community.

The drive towards research-led practice, and associated ambitions to enlarge the body of research-active librarians, faces a number of challenges. Whilst librarians recognise that *in theory* it is worthwhile to consult the output of earlier research studies as part of decision-making processes, for example in the development of a new service, few would do so as a matter of course. Rather than conduct a formal literature search to access a set of relevant research papers, it is more likely that they would rely on first-hand experience and professional judgement in an action-orientated approach to their work. Here is interesting to note the irony that specialists in accessing published evidence to help other professionals plan a systematic approach to professional practice fail to do this themselves.

Lack of time is often cited to justify an approach that ignores earlier studies. This is with good reason. The multidisciplinary nature of librarianship research means that relevant papers are scattered across various domains. In addition, often the most significant source material comprises grey literature, such as unpublished internal studies and summaries of discussions on listservs. This is near impossible to locate, let alone access. In some cases, the most valuable research has not been published at all.

The dearth of accessible published research studies emphasises why practising librarians themselves need to acknowledge their role in contributing to research efforts in librarianship as part of the larger research community that also includes academics, students and other researchers. Currently many librarians simply do not consider research as part of their professional role. This holds true even in cases where they play a lead in the design and implementation of projects which – to an outsider – represent research activity. Much valuable knowledge is lost when such projects end, and their outcomes are

disseminated only as far as a local audience, often when they would be of interest to professional colleagues beyond the home authority. The Library and Information Science Research Coalition is therefore working to encourage librarians to reflect on how they may actively contribute to research efforts across the profession, as well as exploit the existing evidence base in their regular work, as outlined above.

The efforts of the Library and Information Science Research Coalition acknowledge that the circumstances in which librarians work, particularly in the public sector, are often not ideal for the budding practitioner researcher. Time constraints of the practitioner role, low internal support of research activity and poor access to external research support , for example in the form of funding or research mentors, are all relevant external factors here. Individuals may also lack confidence in their own research competence due to limited knowledge of research approaches, coupled with a general failure to recognise their current research activity and skills as such. To address these concerns the Library and Information Science Research Coalition has made publicly accessible a set of resources to save researchers' time (see http://lisresearch.org and the Twitter feed from @LISResearch), is involved in advocacy to persuade services managers of the need to support research initiatives, points to resources as well as supports events to extend the repertoire of research approaches in library and information science, and leads efforts to improve recognition of research knowledge within the profession. In short, the Library and Information Science Research Coalition is a focus for external research support in librarianship and information science.

It has been argued above that research has a significant role to play in supporting the delivery of library services to end users: to inform practice, drive future services development and demonstrate impact and value. It should also be acknowledged that individuals' engagement in research also meets the personal priorities of staff as professionals. Intellectual stimulation, enjoyment of learning and pride in observing how the integration of research findings into work practice enhance services delivery all contribute to job satisfaction (and, from a manager's point of view, the retention of talented individuals). Associated with this are career benefits. For example, profiles and reputations may grow on the basis of submissions to the journal and conference literature, and the skills of individuals increase through both formal and informal professional development activity undertaken in practitioner researcher roles. At the same time actual research output supports claims of the value of library and information services to individuals (for example, their social mobility, their educational opportunities), to citizens and society (for example, contributions to the enhancement of local communities, culture and heritage) and specialist user groups (for example, information provision to business to support economic development). A further role of research in this domain is to raise the profile of librarianship as a profession that is evidence-based across all sectors, the public library service included. For all these reasons the Library and Information Science Research Coalition facilitates a coordinated and strategic approach to Library and Information Science Research in the UK.

About the Library and Information Science Research Coalition

The Library and Information Science Research Coalition was founded in March 2009 by the British Library, CILIP, JISC, MLA and the Research Information Network (RIN). In 2010 the Strategic Health Authority Library Leads group (SHALL) and Committee on Library Cooperation in Ireland (COLICO) joined as associate members. The implementation is led by Dr Hazel Hall, Director of the Centre for Social Informatics, Edinburgh Napier University (hazel.hall@lisresearch.org).

Full details of the Library and Information Science Research Coalition can be accessed from http://lisresearch.org. The web site includes details of news and events related to library and information science research, a full archive of the Library and Information Science Research Coalition conference held in June 2010, links to a range of resources to support practitioner researchers, details of the member organisations of the Library and Information Science Research Coalition, and its history.

The Library and Information Science Research Coalition Twitter feed at @LISResearch provides a valuable current awareness service to over 1000 followers. It covers a full range of news related to library and information science research, for example of: research funding opportunities, studentships, invitations to join consultations, publication of research reports, on-going research, training events, calls for papers for journals and conferences, conference registrations, prizes, invitations to contribute to the research of others, research-related vacancies, conference reports etc.