

# Mind the skills gap: Information-handling training for researchers (July 2008)



## Summary of case studies

**For the Research Information Network's [\*Mind the skills gap: Information-handling training for researchers\*](#) report, eight case studies were conducted in a range of universities in England and Scotland (Glasgow Caledonian, Hertfordshire, Imperial, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, Reading and Surrey) between October 2007 and January 2008.**

The case studies aimed to explore some of the complexities in managing and providing training and e-support and the overlap between library-based and other institutional training provision. These case studies entailed visits to the institutions, interviews with key respondents (usually including the head of research training or equivalent) and sometimes, observation of training sessions.

### 1. Strategic and managerial issues

How well was the role of university libraries in the training of postgraduate and postdoctoral staff coordinated and how well was this work integrated with any central training effort in the institution? The picture varied substantially amongst the case study universities:

- One university had considerable potential to develop research information training in a coordinated and integrated way because the Research Training and Development Coordinator for the University was recently positioned within the Library building and reported to the Director of Library and Learning Support Services.
- Two of the others had strategies for research training which placed the library services (including library-based training) centrally: one of these had a university-wide information skills strategy in place and was systematically extending its e-learning provision (originally developed for undergraduates) by adapting and adding to the materials for its researchers. A member of the Library staff had designated responsibility for supporting researchers across the university. The other institution was actively "making the research culture explicit" whilst acknowledging that "this is easier when we only have 450 research students."
- In two of the case studies, the library managers had adopted a strategic approach to engagement in researcher training but this was not yet fully integrated into an overall central university strategy. In one case the lack of a central strategy reflected the

decentralised nature of the institution: here a library manager was designated as a User Education Coordinator. She organised a substantial central programme of library-based training to complement generic academic provision organised by a research staff forum. However, they also had a range of training organised by a Subject Librarian, supported by Subject Consultants, including an 'information fair' for graduate researchers and a similar event for research supervisors and postdoctoral researchers, again complementing a departmental programme organised by the Director of Graduate Studies. This Department also actively promoted the central programme of training to its researchers.

- Another university library had received recognition for its work in the form of Roberts funding provided as a grant from the Staff Development Unit to develop a postdoctoral information literacy online tutorial (developed from their undergraduate on-line programme, but with a focus on individual learning rather than group learning and a shift of emphasis to research topics, as well as additional content.
- These library services are all making efforts to integrate their library-based offerings within the central research training programme.
- In the other two universities, one with large numbers of researchers, provision was uncoordinated and depended heavily on the quality of personal relationships between liaison librarians and key academic staff. Both services had recently undergone major reorganisation. In one case this included restructuring of Departments into Schools (a process which had not yet settled down) and the standing down of a number of previous committees, including the library committee. Not surprisingly, there was no overall strategy for information skills training and no recognition at the university level of how the Library could contribute to research and information skills training. Central training there was organised by a Graduate Education Team.
- The other institution gave the impression of lacking clear leadership in this area, exacerbated by the recent library service restructuring with cuts to the staff and repositioning within another service. Here, training continued to be offered by the Library through the Graduate Centre, Schools and directly to researchers, apparently at least in part as a counter to further perceived job threats.

## **2 Operational issues**

- Although the focus of the training provided in response to the Roberts Committee is on generic research skills, the role of university libraries in supporting researchers within their subject disciplines was also strongly demonstrated in all the case studies. Subject-based training and support was being offered to researchers within Departments or individually. Some library services went further in exploiting their unique resources as a research resource. One of the case study university libraries had major special collections which include archives and other materials highly relevant for research in the arts and

humanities. Unsurprisingly, in this institution archivists were closely associated with research training programmes and their subject knowledge was seen as significant in developing the programmes and in gaining the confidence of staff and researchers.

- The four library staff-led training sessions observed were relatively traditional in approach, with a tendency to assume that most participants required broadly the same types of introduction to e-resources. Some attempt was made to respond to specific questions and to vary training content accordingly. This approach was in marked contrast to that adopted in one of the case studies, where library staff had joined their academic staff colleagues in a 'training the trainers' event organised by UK Grad, in which constructivist approaches to training were emphasised. As a result, the library staff teamed up with an experienced researcher to offer witness sessions, based on an interview between a librarian and that researcher on how to do a literature review. This approach provided scope for the participants to empathise with the researcher and to ask her questions. The library team were also trying to adopt an experiential learning approach as part of the same approach, in which participants were encouraged to declare and use their research information expertise rather than assuming that they knew nothing about the training theme at the outset.

### **3 Development issues**

- The main development issue in relation to the training of researchers was about the quality of the training provided and the scope for doing more. One of case study library respondents reported that "Some of the Liaison Librarians would like to make more extensive use of the system to provide more intensive content but lack the training and confidence to do so." This issue was not confined to librarians: various training organisers commented on the variability of the training currently provided.
- Improving the training provided was not necessarily a matter of trainer competence, however, relatively low level practical operational issues of this kind may affect the ability of library staff to get involved and may limit how they are involved. In one university library the maximum training numbers and hence the type of interaction that resulted was defined by the size of room and number of IT terminals available.
- Three of the universities were at the forefront in developing e-learning support for researchers. One of these had developed a general introduction to the process of conducting PhD research; the other two had adapted existing undergraduate information literacy e-learning frameworks by writing researcher-specific materials.
- Various potential pitfalls in constructing e-learning programmes without sufficient engagement either with the potential users or with best practice in designing e-learning materials were explored in the case studies. These are adumbrated in the main report.

- In one university, an experimental 'audience participation' method of assessment, using the kind of audience voting technology used in some television programmes, had been used and found at least partially effective.
- More generally, one university was concerned about how to deliver training for 'creative practice' PhDs, for whom the creative process was the subject of the research. (In that university, it was hoped that the recent appointment of an archivist would be part of the answer, by providing systematic introductions to the available special collections.)

#### **4 Conclusions**

The conclusions drawn from the case studies have been amalgamated with the other forms of evidence used in this project and presented in the main report. It may however be of interest to note some of the particular issues that showed up strongly in the case studies.

From an institutional management perspective:

- Although all the case study universities were apparently committed to the support and training of researchers (including teaching staff in their research role) this did not always lead to coherent needs analysis, provision and impact evaluation of this work.
- There sometimes appeared to be a lack of commitment to real researcher support and professional development as exemplified by a reluctance to reorganise and reallocate resources to meet their expressed commitments.
- This gap between the rhetoric and reality could be seen in some of the case study universities by looking at the mismatch between what is being attempted and the resources made available by the university to achieve their goal. This gap was most marked in relation to library services (none of which had secured substantially increased budgets to support researchers although all of them were doing and planning to do more to help researchers than hitherto) but was also evident in other areas of researcher training.

From a library service management perspective:

- There was ample evidence of high energy provision of training by library staff and recognition of the appropriateness of their involvement in this type of training by the organisers of researcher training as well as by Faculty/Department staff (although there was some variation in views here).
- Providing training and other forms of support for researchers was seen as a key to future survival. It was rather provocatively suggested by one library service manager that whereas undergraduates can largely survive on internet access and whatever is provided by way of e-learning to supplement teaching (leaving a relatively limited role for the library) this is not true of postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers.

**You can download a copy of the main report for free at**  
[www.rin.ac.uk/training-research-info](http://www.rin.ac.uk/training-research-info)