

Mind the skills gap: Improving researchers' training and development



The Research Information Network's (RIN) report, *Mind the Skills Gap: Information-handling training for researchers* (July 2008) finds that training for researchers on information seeking and management is uncoordinated and generally not based on any systematic assessment of needs. The full report is available at www.rin.ac.uk/training-research-info

The report focuses on the nature, extent and organisation of the information-related training for researchers that is provided by universities and other higher education institutions. It looks at the roles that librarians and other information specialists play and how the training they provide fits with the wider provision of generic training for researchers.

Developing the personal, professional and career management skills of researchers is currently high on the agenda in the UK's higher education sector. Over the last few years, researchers have enthusiastically embraced new technologies and services that allow them to discover, locate, gain access to and create information resources on their desktops.

In embracing the new opportunities presented by online resources, many researchers have acquired a range of new skills. But librarians and information professionals say that many researchers display alarming deficits in their skills and in their understanding of the new online information environment.

This raises important questions about how researchers acquire the appropriate skills in discovering and handling research information resources and services, the training opportunities provided for them, and the take-up of those opportunities. The report's key recommendations are:

- better coordinated information-handling training and development for researchers is needed
- there needs to be clarification on what types of funding are eligible for information-related skills training
- libraries and central training units need to be well equipped to be able to train researchers in information handling, and
- higher education institutions need to have a strategic and integrated vision for training provision.

The report found that libraries are expanding training provision but that few get any of the RCUK administered 'Robert's money' which is aimed at ensuring researchers are given training to develop their career paths, including IT training, but not specifically focused on providing research

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Discovering physical objects: Researchers' needs

The RIN's latest report, *Discovering physical objects: Meeting researchers' needs* (October 2008) investigates the availability and use of finding aids and museum services from academic researchers' point of view.


The report highlights the importance of object-based research through a focus on four subject areas: archaeology, art history, earth sciences and social and

economic history. Museums have traditionally played an important role in the support of research and scholarship, but they now seek to appeal to a wider audience and their focus is on a broader and more popular role; there is a risk that their traditional commitment to research is being overlooked.

The development of online finding aids and discovery services provide

important primary routes for researchers to identify and locate objects and collections in UK museums and researchers now expect to find the information they need online and to be able to get it through a simple search procedure. However, they reported little awareness of the currently available finding aids for museums and generally held the view that those existing finding aids do not meet their needs.

Currently researchers also rely heavily on specialist curatorial staff to help them to locate and access the objects for their

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Hidden pressures: Peer review

Peer review is a cornerstone of the scholarly communications process. However, it has its critics and a number of reports examining the role and perceptions of the peer review process have been published over the past few years. Yet none seek to investigate the economic cost of peer review within the context of the scholarly communications process. The RIN's recent report *Activities, costs and funding flows in the scholarly communications system in the UK* (May 2008), examines the full process of the scholarly communications system and sets out the cost of global peer review, and the UK contribution, within this context. The full report is available at www.rin.ac.uk/costs-funding-flows

The report estimated that peer review is the main non-cash cost in the process of publishing and distribution, with 80% of peer review activity undertaken at academic or affiliated institutions. Within the context, peer review accounts for 30% (£1.9bn) of the £6.4bn spent globally on publishing and distributing research outputs. The report concluded that if cash payments had to be made to meet these costs, there would be a significant transfer of funds to the academic and the higher education sector globally and the cost for a major discipline

journal would increase by around 43% resulting a global increase in subscription charges of £1.4bn to £4.8bn. This would in turn have a significant impact on the subscription charges paid by UK academic institutes and libraries, as the UK is a net contributor to peer review (contributing 8.7% to the global peer review process), so UK academic subscriptions would increase from £117m to £164m.

The RIN is planning a free event to discuss the issues raised by this report on 11 December 2008 in London. If you are interested in finding out more and would like to register your interest, contact branwen.hide@rin.ac.uk



Open access and payment of publication fees

The Research Information Network and Universities UK have set up a working group to look at the arrangements for paying open access publication fees: that is, fees levied by some journals for the publication of scholarly articles so that they can be made available free of charge to readers, immediately upon publication. The group aims to produce guidance for universities and other research institutions, publishers, research funders, and authors. It will be looking at the issues to be addressed in establishing coordinated and strategic approaches to the payment of publication fees, and to provide practical guidance on the implementation of such an approach. The guidance will be published later this autumn. For more information, visit www.rin.ac.uk/openaccess-payment-fees

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information training. Therefore, funders need to provide clear guidance on the kinds of training that can be supported and especially what types of funding can be used to support the training in specific information skills and tools that libraries and other information specialists are in a unique position to provide.

The recommendations encourage libraries and central training units to engage with their Vitae regional hub (formerly UK Grad) and make use of the Vitae Database of Practice to share good practice examples, as well as an engaging with Vitae to explore innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the training they provide. Libraries should join in developing and delivering training programmes with the academic community, ensuring that they recognise the strengths of different training approaches.

Integrated approaches and strategies need to be developed and aligned with research strategies to avoid gaps and duplication. Communication between all those concerned in the planning, organisation and delivery of training needs to be improved, and libraries and central training units need to offer training for researchers that relates to information management, ensuring that training that takes account of researchers' different subject domains and experience, and that it is balanced with training offering generic skills where needed.

The report concludes that the delivery of coherent training

programmes that meet the real needs of researchers needs to be addressed and more innovative approaches to identifying and assessing the information-related training needs of researchers should be adopted and training programmes should be formulated in partnership with relevant members of academic staff, to take account of, and exploit, the experience and expertise already acquired by researchers and their disciplinary differences.

To facilitate the implementation of the recommendations, the RIN will work with the Research Councils UK (RCUK), Vitae, SCONUL, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and other relevant organisations to ensure appropriate and well coordinated information skills training and professional development programmes are provided for researchers.

The RIN held a workshop at Leeds University on 3 September 2008 to debate the findings of the report, which included presentations from Dr Ian Cameron, Head of the Research Careers and Diversity Unit at RCUK and Dr Janet Metcalfe, Director of Vitae. The presentations and information from the day is available on the RIN website (past events page). The RIN plans to hold a conference in London to bring together all the key stakeholders involved in the funding and provision of training for researchers and to draw up a framework to address the issues raised by the report. For more information about the report, to register your interest in the conference or to discuss any of the issues raised here, please contact sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk

Researchers' use of freedom of information: *a workshop*

The RIN held a workshop on 9 September in London to raise awareness of the relevance of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act to researchers and how the Act can be used to inform research work. Over 60 delegates attended, with presentations from Duncan Tanner, Director of the Welsh Institute for Social and Cultural Affairs, Bangor University, Steve Wood, Assistant Commissioner at the Information Commissioner's Office and Teresa Bastow, Head of FOI Centre at The National Archives, with the day chaired by Maurice Frankel, Director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

Duncan Tanner's presentation covered his experience of trying to obtain information from the Home Office about counter-terrorism policy in the late 1960s in Wales. He said that academics are not experts in the use of FOI and have traditionally not used it much for research purposes. He suggested that researchers need confidence (and perhaps even a bit of bravado!) to be able to challenge archivists and other information holders if information is being withheld.

Outlining the checklist of steps that are needed to ensure you receive information under the FOI Act, Steve Wood told delegates about the correct information they need to provide. He talked through the complaint procedure to address instances where information release has been refused and the process this has to go through.

Teresa Bastow covered what The National Archives (TNA) has to offer but pointed out that researchers wanting information from under the FOI act need to have realistic expectations, as files can be complex and contain a mixture of material, some of which may be covered by exemptions. She said that it is useful if requesters have a good idea of what information they are looking for and that they prioritise their requests, as resources are limited.

Three case studies then looked at the FOI in practice: Paul Francis, Group Political Editor at the Kent Messenger Group gave a lively talk on his experience of trying to get information from Kent County Council regarding a local story about turning fields into a motorway park. He contested some of the information being withheld by the Council because they felt it would cause public anxiety. From the perspective of a journalist, Paul suggested that disclosure of the correct information might actually lessen anxiety. Kathleen Sherit, a researcher, gave an example of her work researching historical documents and said that the success of her requests had depended on her providing clear and precise information about what she required. Denise Worsfold, Training Manager at the Food Research and Consultancy Unit, University of Wales Institute Cardiff looked at the issues of requests for information on food hygiene for the benefit of consumers. She said that information being provided was of a variable quality and not always complete.

In the afternoon session, Harriet Jones, a freelance historian looked at how FOI works in other countries and used the example of Sweden, which has had a long standing commitment to 'open information' regimes; however, as a consequence, there are few effective records management systems in place and a tendency to not record things or to take major decisions informally and verbally – for example, there are no minutes of Swedish government cabinet meetings. This situation illustrated the difficulty that historians may face in obtaining well-maintained information of long-term value.

The delegates then split into four workshops led by the speakers, on UK FOI legislation and the role of the Information Commissioner, The National Archives' experience of FOI and its user services, FOI in journalism and the Use of FOI in



contemporary British history to discuss each of these areas in more depth.

The event concluded that the FOI Act should not necessarily be the default approach to obtaining information, but it that it is more helpful to see it as a means of complementing information already obtained from elsewhere, to plug gaps on the basis of fairly focused enquiries. There is still apparently a degree of lethargy about researchers' approaches to FOI: clearly, many of them still do not see its relevance. Many are also put off by the length of time and bureaucracy involved, and the limited returns, but might this be because requests are not framed properly in the first instance? Researcher's could benefit from help and support from experts – could research institutions employ experts to provide advice?

A podcast of the event is available to listen to at www.rin.ac.uk/foi-workshop, along with the presentations and programme of the day.

UK Research Reserve: central access for journals

The Research Information Network will be providing the secretariat for the Advisory Board for the new UK Research Reserve (UKRR). This is a groundbreaking collaboration between higher education libraries and the British Library to secure the long term retention of and access to low-use printed research journals. The UKRR will also facilitate the efficient use of resources across the higher education sector, allowing universities to reduce the space needed for journal storage and adapt it for new purposes, including research and learning workspaces. The UKRR is currently developing a new website for the project. For more information visit www.rin.ac.uk/ukrr



■ Nearly £400 million investment for world leading research facilities

Almost £397 million is being made available through the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills' (DIUS) Large Facilities Capital Fund to provide support for the development of nine multidisciplinary research projects focusing on a variety of areas, including long-term studies of economic, health and social development.

<http://nds.coi.gov.uk/environment/fullDetail.asp?ReleaseID=373716&NewsAreaID=2&NavigatedFromDepartment=False>

■ UK universities aim to spearhead online education – globally

UK higher education is a world-class brand, encapsulating research and qualitative excellence. In his 11 September speech to the Universities UK annual conference, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, John Denham outlined ways in which it will need 'ambition and vision' in order to attain and maintain its global position. He also announced that he is asking JISC Chair Sir Ron Cooke for his advice on how the UK's global leadership in education and ICT can be exploited further. www.jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2008/09/uukconference.aspx

■ Consensus is difficult in open-access debate

How to provide access to peer-reviewed research articles is a topic currently under hot debate. It raises questions about who research is for, how the results should be disseminated and how the whole process should be funded. The magazine Research Information has had a panel of industry experts debate these issues and consider what the future holds for open access at www.researchinformation.info/rijunjulo6openaccess.html. The RIN published a report in May on the cost of the scholarly communications process (see page 2), including a scenario covering what would happen if publishing went solely online. www.rin.ac.uk/costs-funding-flows

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research. There are doubts that this support will be sustainable in the long term as curatorial staff are now under increasing pressure to meet the multiple demands modern museums place upon them and museums often lack specialist curatorial expertise in many areas.

The report identifies technological developments that have the potential to improve museums' services for research. But, in order to realise this potential, museums and related organisations must recognise the importance of the needs of researchers and make the development of online finding aids a priority. In addition, utilisation of Web 2.0 would allow greater collaboration with the research community and would enable museums to enhance the provision of information about the objects they hold. It is only through these changes then that the valuable resources held by our museums can be fully realised and exploited. To read the full report, visit www.rin.ac.uk/objects

RIN: in brief

■ Curing the bib data pickle

The RIN has commissioned a study to identify and map the current arrangements through which bibliographic records are created and to recommend how the current complexity could be reduced, and whether services could be improved through better coordination of this effort. If you are interested in finding out more or would like to contribute to the discussion, contact Ken Chad by email at ken@kenchadconsulting.com or telephone 07788 727845.

■ RIN welcomes new staff

The RIN has expanded and has recently welcomed four new members of staff to its team. The new staff are: Branwen Hide, Liaison and Partnerships Officer, Aaron Griffiths, Research Officer, Sarah Gentleman, Communications Officer and a new Administrator, Catherine Gray. To find out more about the new team, visit www.rin.ac.uk/?q=executive-team

■ RIN in the news: new website section

We now have a new web page covering mentions of the Research Information Network in the press and in journal articles. To see what's been said about us lately, have a look at www.rin.ac.uk/RIN-in-news

■ New RIN postcard and booklet

The RIN has produced some new material to help explain what we do and how we work, including a postcard and a booklet. If you'd like a copy (or copies to give to colleagues or hand out at meetings), email sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk



are you trying to get to grips with research information issues?

■ RIN events

Ensuring a bright future for research libraries report launch – 18 November 2008, 6.00-8.30pm, London
What does it cost and who pays? Scholarly communications globally and the UK contribution – 11 December 2008, 10.30am - 4.00pm, London

For more information visit www.rin.ac.uk/events-menu or email sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk