

Who needs libraries, anyway?

Report of Event on 30th April



RIN-CURL Report on Researchers' use of academic libraries and their services

Introduction

Michael Jubb and Robin Green welcomed everyone to the event, giving an introduction to the report, and explaining the rationale behind the study.

Alma Swan – Director, Key Perspectives

Alma Swan and Sheridan Brown of Key Perspectives were the consultants to whom RIN/CURL commissioned the report. Alma explained that the study reflects the diversity of the research spectrum and research practices.

A SENSE OF PLACE

The library is no longer the same kind of place it was in the past, and this differs between disciplines. Those who go to libraries do so for a variety of reasons: to access print resources, inter-library loans (ILL), talking to subject librarians (who continue to be valued), or as a “laboratory,” since for some researchers their object of study is the physical material in the building.

Key issues related to library space include opening hours, the browsing of print collections, quiet study, and how the library has become largely an undergraduate space. Many researchers roam to other institutions, taking advantage of reading and (to a lesser extent) borrowing rights and SCOUNL Research Extra. The number working away from their home institutions is increasing.

DIGITAL CONTENT

Much content is still only available in print, but unsurprisingly e-journals and digital findings aids are used whenever available. Researchers are not always good at finding what they want, sticking to bad habits and a “good enough” tendency. Google is also very heavily used, which further suggests that many researchers are easily deterred if it represents too much effort. What does this imply for the quality of scholarship?

WAYS OF WORKING

Researchers seeking the full text of an article typically take the following steps a) looking for full-text version locally; b) using Google; c) emailing a colleague, or the author; d) using ILL, e) asking subject librarians. Physically moving away from their desk is the last option.

Inter-disciplinary work and big/e- science is increasing. Virtual Research Environments (VREs) are still in their infancy, but growing. This is leading to new patterns of demand and a huge growth of data as a research output. The implications of this are far-reaching, some of them for research libraries (e.g. in assisting researchers to manage their data).

Inter-library loan use is either static or declining, especially for journal articles. Increasingly it is associated with inter-disciplinary work. There is also a variety in views from librarians about their future roles, e.g. information literacy experts, researcher trainers, data managers/curators.

OPEN ACCESS

Researchers' awareness of open access remains low, in spite of extensive promotion by librarians... although researchers appear not to be aware of librarians' efforts in this area.

MEASURES AND BRANDING

New roles are critically important, and researchers are going to need librarians for advice. But what will be the outputs of librarians' work, and how will it be measured? How will competence and excellence be assessed? Communications will be crucial to this – there is a great need for deepening channels of communication between librarians and researchers, and between research managers/funders and senior institutional management. This underlines the importance of improving the poor status of library branding – researchers are often unaware of the services that libraries provide.

Sheila Cannell – Director of Library Services, University of Edinburgh

Sheila looked at “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of the report's findings.

THE GOOD

The report comes at an important time for librarians, because of the pace of change. There is much positive feedback from researchers about library services and their future, especially from the arts and humanities.

THE BAD (*potentially salvageable*)

This includes researchers' dissatisfaction with librarians' lack of focus on researcher (as opposed to teaching/learning, which is easier to manage and assess); the “good enough” approach (what does this mean for what libraries should be trying to provide?); the invisibility of what is not available digitally; and the decline in the use of the library as a place.

THE UGLY (*requiring a big effort*)

Researchers don't understand what is being done for them, behind-the-scenes work needs to become more visible. Researchers don't influence senior management on behalf of libraries in relation to funding, policy and strategy (despite informally telling librarians that they are valued). Divergence between researchers and librarians in value given to subject-based roles; and also on the future roles that librarians view as important (e.g. copyright).

THE KEY QUESTIONS

Can we believe what researchers say when they actually act differently? There is a difference between perception and actual behaviour, a divergence that may worsen in the coming years, particularly for humanities researchers who are increasingly treading down the path followed a few years ago by pure scientists. So how should researchers and librarians communicate to overcome this?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES FROM LIBRARIANS

Librarians and researchers need to be working in partnership to understand each other, but getting engagement is not easy. There is an importance in explaining not just core roles, but also explaining and advocating the newer roles. We need to think about exploiting the continuum between learning and research: students may become researchers... and researchers moving into new areas become learners.

The growth of the digital library should perhaps lead to an acceptance that library buildings are indeed essentially for undergraduates – but they can still provide an informal meeting/networking space for researchers. Reciprocal access schemes (especially for e-resources) should be pursued. Sheila controversially suggested that perhaps librarians should reconsider expert roles and information skills in this changing environment – perhaps moving away subject expertise?

So who needs libraries? Researchers certainly do, but not necessarily the library they are thinking about...

Mary Abbott – Associate Director of Student Affairs, Anglia Ruskin University (*view from the arts and humanities research community*)

In Mary's area, much emphasis is still placed on print resources. There is a reliance on very old resources – but not just library-based. Nonetheless, digital finding aids are the preferred option to identify printed/archival resources, with colleagues providing assistance.

Mary has good and fruitful contact with her subject librarians, but also with 'front-line' library staff. The libraries in Cambridge are, for her, very accessible, and offer a quiet working space (itself dependent on design, zoning and policing). Mary clearly has a level of tenacity in her research approach, but one wonders whether this is typical?

Finally, Mary posed the question of what happens to independent scholars – e.g. those retiring from full-time academic tenure. There is a problem around cutting off access to digital resources that are located behind a subscription wall.

Subrata Bose – Data Manager and Mathematical Modeller, MRC Clinical Sciences Service (*view from the science research community*)

Subrata explained that he worked in neuroinformatics, data mining, image reconstruction and kinetic modelling. Scientists read significantly more than 20 years ago. They tend to use journal articles as their main source of information, but there is also a reliance on social networking with colleagues. Partly because of multi-disciplinary approaches, scientists also read more than non-scientists.

The change in reading habits is due to the electronic revolution – remote access to electronic resources such as content and citation indexes is much preferred to print. The pattern of library usage has also changed – the process is now much interactive, iterative and continuous; less formally broken down into tasks.

Technology will continue to drive publishing patterns, such as open access - which is increasingly perceived as improving citation and impact factors. There is a need for new library information system models, designed with all stakeholders involved and including a simplification of the library and information environment.

Group Discussion

The starting point for the report was gathering evidence for the important task of developing policy and advice to libraries, host institutions, funders and other public policy makers. Some of the key points from the discussion follow:

- **Communications**
 - Difficulty in getting librarians' messages collectively across to the bulk of users, as distinct from at a 1-1 level
 - Many liaison librarians are successfully embedding themselves in university departments – perhaps this is a good model?
 - Need both a local and national approach to foster communications, perhaps some kind of national forum or expert seminar to take forward the findings of the report
 - A session with subject librarians might prove a useful element of induction for newly-appointed researchers, who might not approach such librarians of their own initiative
- **Role**
 - Data managers sometimes perform some of the roles that have been set out for librarians in repositories – so there are issues of turf, confidence, expectations etc

- Subject librarians may be perceived as being in silos - need to move away from this and represent a broader base, and a broader information management expertise
- Subject/liaison librarians are often very good at providing specific advice, but it would be unreasonable to expect them to have full all-round knowledge

■ Repositories

- Could act as the medium for allowing an interface between researchers and librarians, inasmuch as repositories could develop a central role in the research dialogue, where exchanges can take places prior to publication
- A library-provided service could indeed become the focal point for researcher dialogue, as a shared workplace. Librarians could develop many new partnerships with researchers here... but are libraries equipped for this role? Do librarians have the necessary skills?
- There are also practical problems about who inputs into repositories, user expectations, and metadata accuracy. Researchers are often to 'populate' repositories, but may need to be compelled to enter such information, for instance by pointing to links between repository content and research assessment. Embedded in researchers' professional lives, they should be a tool which libraries can help to support

■ Bigger Pictures

- Importance of demonstrating impact of libraries to institutional managers. Effective communications will help to get researchers advocating on the library's behalf.
- Access to resources is often a problem, particularly for research teams not embedded in universities (e.g. NHS); often conflicts over resources and difficulties about negotiating such access. This may point to lack of sustainability of current models of providing access to resources
- Investment in information resources is crucial for maintaining UK competitiveness in the international research environment
- Conversion or merging of library and information services (sometimes across institutions) poses its own problems, for instance with copyright. This underlines the importance of organising at a national level – e.g. pushing for a national electronic site licence, HEFCE shared resource initiative, UK National Research Reserve etc.
- RIN may well be well-placed to persuade both Research and Funding Councils of the importance of supporting information management at both local and national level, e.g. for effective training of researchers