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What researchers want: A personal case study

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Support for researchers

The increased emphasis placed upon research intensive universities to enhance the quality of their research outputs, their wider impact and the research environment, has not only affected research staff but has also prompted the departments supporting these research communities to respond by broadening their range of offerings. As a consequence, research support is now high on the agenda of many academic libraries and as such over the last year or so I have attended numerous conferences and seminars designed to inform library staff about researchers' attitudes to the library, their information skills and their needs.

As someone who is new to the library sector I have found these workshops and conferences really interesting although so far, nothing reported has really surprised me. This is because I used to be a part of the very research community library staff are discussing and find it fascinating to hear librarians talk about researchers as though they are a newly discovered species! From these conferences I also found that people really enjoyed hearing about my experiences of research, and were often shocked by my prior ignorance when it came to information skills and use of the library. It was for these reasons that I wanted to put my experiences down on paper, to share my insights and to highlight how I think the library could have helped me when I was studying for a PhD.

Who am I?

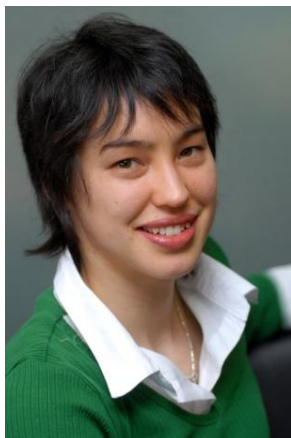


Figure 1: Donna Carroll

I am currently responsible for heading up the Academic Services Development Team, part of the Academic Services Division, at the University of Warwick Library but I started my career at the Library working in Research and Innovation; developing library-wide services and researching Web 2.0 technologies and their applications. During this time I also took on the responsibility for managing and developing the newly opened Wolfson Research Exchange, an innovative Library facility dedicated to the University's research community and aimed at encouraging cross-disciplinary scholarly collaboration. For this role my background in teaching and learning (I used to lecture maths at a college of further education) and my experiences during

my PhD (in experimental physics) were invaluable as they provided me with a good understanding of both the research and learning process.

I found my time in research difficult and I don't mean in terms of the academic challenges that arose, but rather with my struggle against the enormous sense of isolation it brought. I chose to complete my PhD at the same institution where I studied my first degree which should have provided a more gentle transition into research since I already knew the university environment, the area and even my supervisor. However, I found the transformation from being surrounded on a daily basis by a hundred or so cohorts on my degree course, to being alone in my office and my own laboratory incredibly isolating and a severe shock to the system. These feelings of discontentment encouraged me to work harder so that I could write up and submit my thesis as quickly as I could, to allow me to move onto something else. Despite this, I feel it's a great shame that at the time there were not the wealth of research student skills courses and other developmental opportunities for researchers as there are today, as these would have been an ideal way for me to break up the monotony of my work and meet others in similar situations to me.

I am pleased to say that the skills sessions for researchers which can now be found in abundance across a range of universities (run by libraries as well as graduate schools or dedicated postgraduate support services) have more than addressed this issue, but the way in which these sessions are advertised and marketed to your researchers needs to be carefully considered. To highlight this, let me begin with a story...

'What's a subject librarian?'

You might not believe this, but right up until I started working for our University Library, I had no idea what a subject librarian was. I'd like to emphasise that this should in no way reflect upon the efforts of the library where I studied as a student. When I think back into the mists of time I'm pretty certain I was introduced to my subject librarian, it's just that the word 'librarian' conjured up something different in my mind (and the minds of many others I'm sure) to that of somebody working within the library sector. I always assumed that librarians were the people who stamped and issued the books on the desks near the entrance to any library. It is these customer services staff who are the most visible within the library. Aren't librarians just people who work inside libraries? In addition to this display of ignorance, my worst moment came about when I was toured around the library where I now work during my job interview. I had a 'lion, the witch and the wardrobe'¹ moment as we walked down the aisle between the book stacks and right at the end, behind them all was a door through which there was a staff office. An office! In a library?! It may sound incredibly naive but before that day I'd never even thought about the large number of staff who work in a library, except those 'librarians' at the issues desk, the staff who reshelve the books and of course the people who rove the library and tell you to 'sshhh' – a definite case of out of sight and quite literally out of mind.

I've learnt a lot in the short time that I've been working here but I strongly believe there's something we can all learn from this story:

Awareness

The way that your library is marketed to researchers (or any potential library patron) is the key to a successful uptake of your service. Whether you're promoting your staff, services or space, you need to ensure that these are put into context for your clientele. You need to tell them what they'll gain from the courses, not just in terms of what they'll learn but how the information will actually benefit them. Often people talk about how a course will help someone in the 'long-run', but researchers are always quick to tell us how busy they are, so it's difficult to get them to invest time into something that will help them later on – it needs to be relevant **now**. This clearly isn't always possible, for example teaching reference management techniques. This is a topic that researchers should be introduced to right from the beginning of their careers as it is harder to migrate to a reference management program once you've already started collating references in your own way. However, researchers will not usually see the benefit of using something like EndNote² or RefWorks³ until they are writing up their theses, dissertations or journal papers, by which time it is too much effort to change their practice. I'd never heard of reference management software until working for the library and I was so disappointed that I'd spent all of those hours typing my references in manually before submitting my thesis. Luckily for my friends who were still writing up their theses when I started working for the library, I was able to impart my newly found knowledge about reference management along with many other topics including the staff and services available to support them while they were writing up. For me it was too late but for others, this type of information and support can be invaluable so it is essential to get this message across. There are many people with a story like mine, who can say first hand they wished they'd known about the courses and support available. Therefore I would encourage you to invite these people to talk about their experiences in your information skills sessions, to get the point across to researchers in a language that they understand. What you need to do is build up advocates of your services.

The use of 'champions' or ambassadors of your services can be helpful in other ways too. Another problem with raising researchers' awareness of services and support is that researchers respect, listen and learn from the people around them. A PhD is rather like an apprenticeship into a career of research and as such, PhD students learn from their supervisors and their peers (including more experienced PhD students or post-doctoral staff), rather than looking elsewhere for help and support. As library professionals, we can't get the same message across to researchers as other researchers can, so use your contacts and the early adopters of your support to spread the message to their colleagues and friends. Invite them along to your outreach sessions to provide first hand testimonials and use their experiences to build case studies to support your points when promoting your services.

The modern library

Part of the problem with promoting the range of services that university libraries now have to offer, is how far libraries have developed in more recent years. Libraries are no longer confined to offering traditional, silent reading spaces with stocks of books and journals; they've evolved beyond this to offer a wealth of other services. Many libraries now offer a broader range of work spaces to encourage autonomy amongst their learners, through group study rooms, PC areas, coffee bars and flexible social

learning spaces where food and drink can be consumed as well as allowing mobile phones to be used. But as well as different spaces, libraries offer a range of varied services which sometimes include subject specific advice from librarians on where and how to search for relevant literature, advanced web-search training, reference management workshops, advice on publishing, and repositories for promoting research outputs. As a researcher I had no idea that these were available from a library, and this shouldn't be surprising. The fact that the library is labelled as a 'library' promotes certain expectations, just look at its dictionary definition⁴:

Library: a place set apart to contain books, periodicals, and other material for reading, viewing, listening, study, or reference, as a room, set of rooms, or building where books may be read or borrowed.

It is this very definition that has become ingrained in our understanding and nowhere does it mention any support available, so challenging these views is not easy. In fact, it may even be easier to rename your library, not to a 'learning resource centre' or similar, but how about 'support hub' or 'resource and support service', so that the name of the building does not predetermine people's attitudes before they've had the chance to explore the space and services for themselves. It is therefore all about making people think differently about what you have to offer. Why not rebrand your subject librarians as 'Library tutors'? This may not be appropriate in an official capacity and in no way takes into account the full and varied range of responsibility of their role within the department, but the title of 'tutor' makes more sense to students when you're promoting the help you have to offer.

Getting the message across

Apart from this very drastic approach to marketing, what else could libraries be doing? The support available to academic researchers is so often dispersed across a university campus that it's difficult for researchers to know where to turn first and it's not always clear that it should be the library. This is why it is so important to push information out to your users rather than waiting for them to come to you. Whereas some keen students may take time to find out all that is available and to broaden their skills beyond those offered by their own department, the vast majority will not, thus it is important to reach out and provide opportunities for all. At the University of Warwick we've been experimenting with emailing lists, electronic newsletters, Twitter, Facebook, discussion forums, wikis and blogs to get information out to our researchers. It is not about finding the single 'right' method for our users because we now live and work in a complex, multi-faceted environment where there is a strong demand for a more flexible approach to the way we work and learn and so there is no one preferred method for our researchers to receive information. By providing a range of options and making use of different media to cater for the varied preferences of your customer, you can hope to reach a larger segment of your intended audience and increase the accessibility of your services.

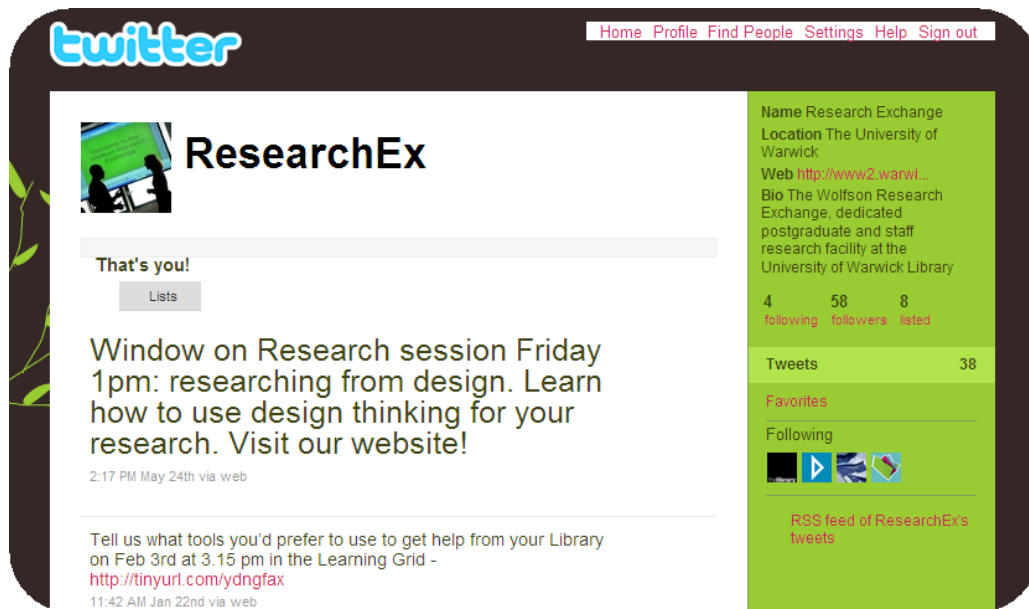


Figure 2: The Research Exchange Twitter feed⁵.

Community space

In addition to branding and promotion it is also important to consider the physical space allocated to your research community. As a 'lonely' researcher, a dedicated space for researchers may have alleviated a number of challenges for me. It would have provided me with an arena to work amongst peers in a less isolated environment, with the opportunity to network with or learn from others. Moreover, this shared place may have increased my awareness of events, training and other issues relevant to my needs. In 2008 the University of Warwick opened its Wolfson Research Exchange, a dedicated library facility for researchers that aims to provide just this. The space is not only an environment for researchers to work away from the undergraduate-dominated areas in the library, it also offers a flexible and informal atmosphere for researchers to meet, discuss and share their research ideas and experiences. It has a mixture of work areas including seminar room facilities where skills sessions and conferences are run, not only by the library but by other university departments supporting research. These spaces also contain a wealth of multimedia technologies and we have a team of advisers in place to offer support. The advisers are also expected to have an awareness of the academic research process so that they can not only support the events taking place and maintain the facility, but can offer peer guidance to users and act as a referral point for their queries should they not be able to assist first hand.



Figure 3: A groupwork activity in the Research Exchange



Figure 4: Academic coaching from our Research Student Skills team taking place within the Research Exchange.

This type of environment based within a central location on a university campus provides great opportunities for researchers to interact with peers and learn from those more experienced than them. Furthermore, it can reduce the solitude often felt by researchers, while having a focal point for the community allows the space to be used to advertise and promote events and topics relevant to the users.

If you don't have a dedicated space within your own library (and many don't have this luxury), work with other departments who also support researchers. Collaborate and promote each others' services. Try running joint sessions drawing on your different perspectives and knowledge, there are many examples where this can work well. Skills tutors may run academic writing workshops where the tutors may discuss writing styles and techniques but a librarian could advise on the journal publication process, copyright or open access publishing, for example. Researchers don't mind which department is delivering the services or courses so long as the material is appropriate for them and providing a more joined up and coordinated service can makes it clearer for the user.

Summing up

I hope that some of my insights have been helpful. I might not know all the answers but having experienced both sides of the fence I can certainly identify some of the problems and I know that I am not alone in my feelings towards the research process.

To all librarians who are so willing to help and yet so often forgotten by the research community, my apologies, I was once one of the ignorant masses but I am no longer. Even in the short time since graduating from my PhD I have noticed great change in library services for researchers and I assure you there is hope! We need to remember that there are many researches out there that will benefit significantly from the library research services available if we can capture their attention. It is imperative we strive to promote our skills and services and train our staff accordingly so that we

continue to deliver world class facilities and support for budding researchers. Their futures are to some extent in our hands.

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, London : Collins, 1998.
- 2 EndNote, [Online] Available at: <http://www.endnoteweb.com/>, Accessed on 12 July 2010.
- 3 RefWorks, [Online] Available at: <http://www.refworks.com/>, Accessed on 12 July 2010.
- 4 Library. *Dictionary.com* [Online] Available at: <http://www.dictionary.reference.com/>, Accessed on 12 July 2010.
- 5 Twitter, [Online] Available at: <http://www.twitter.com/>, Accessed on 2 September 2010.