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Article Title: New ways of supporting researchers

Year of publication: 2012

Link to published article: [www.cilip.org.uk/update](http://www.cilip.org.uk/update)

Publisher statement: © CILIP Update. Brewerton, A. (2012). New ways of supporting researchers. CILIP Update, February issue, pp. 40-42.

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# New ways of supporting researchers



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How can subject librarians and other library staff best support researchers? **Antony Brewerton** reports on the outcomes of his work as Project Chair for an RLUK investigation.

RESEARCH Libraries UK (RLUK) has just issued *Re-skilling for research*, a report on its recent project investigating the 'subject librarian' skills sets required to support the information needs of researchers in the research environment.<sup>1</sup> The findings of this project – disseminated through a programme of workshops – have started to influence my own practice at the University of Warwick and the work of others across the profession.

## A collaborative, creative environment

As we all know, the world of teaching and learning is changing. When I studied for my first degree, the education I received was focused on instruction and content delivery, often in a lecture setting with one expert delivering curriculum-centric knowledge to a (largely passive) audience. Today, the learning environment is far more creative and agile. Students are active learners, group work and peer-to-peer support is commonplace, and students are generating their own content in the form of tutorial presentations, poster presentations and undergraduate journals. The student experience today is more learner-centric and far more engaging.

Likewise, the research environment, once characterised by the lone researcher working pretty much in isolation on a highly-focused topic is becoming more collaborative, with increased emphasis on multi and inter-disciplinary approaches, with networked technologies facilitating exchanges across a global community of scholars. Libraries have also responded to these changes. We have moved from a traditional model where we were guardians of physical stock, controlling uniform study spaces and providing expert knowledge from behind an enquiry desk to a more accessible, user-focused offering which capitalises on technological developments, delivering more information electronically and freeing up spaces to be developed in line with the needs of different segments of our user community.

But if libraries are typically made up of (as I like to think of it) the 3 Ss – stock, space and support<sup>2</sup> – they have generally focused on developing the first two – with huge investments in digital holdings and physical environments in recent years – but have made less progress (it seems) updating the third, especially when it comes to supporting researchers.

## Reviewing support

To investigate and help address issues surrounding support for our research communities, RLUK undertook a project 'to map the information needs of researchers onto tasks to be undertaken by subject librarian/information specialist/liaison staff ['subject librarians' in this article] and to develop the skills sets of existing staff to ensure they meet the needs of a constantly changing research environment'.

The areas of investigation (as outlined in the project's Invitation to Tender) would cover:

- **subject librarian roles** – by means of a comprehensive literature review and a review of current activities, job descriptions and organisational structures in the UK, North America and Australasia;
- **skills sets required to support researchers** – a review of the information needs of researchers, the skills required by subject librarians to support these and a gap analysis between the two to identify training needs;
- **training and development activities** – what is available for both new entrants into the profession and existing staff, and opportunities for future development;
- **alternative models of information support for researchers** – approaches that by-pass subject librarians... or the library completely.

I am pleased to say we were able to commission Mary Auckland to undertake this work on behalf of RLUK. From the outset, it became clear that this was a very 'timely' project, with colleagues willing to help us in our



research – but even more eager to hear our findings. Naturally, the beneficiaries of this project are the researchers who, we hope, will receive an improved offering from their library as a result. But other stakeholders should also benefit. Subject librarians can use the project report to identify the activities and skills required to move into new areas of support. Directors could use the findings to inform new role development and institution-wide training programmes. Library schools and professional bodies can use this to identify opportunities for developing training and support. The scoping of activities can also help research managers in Higher Education to see just what libraries can offer in terms of research support and help us to move away from traditional views of what ‘the library’ means.

### Supporting the researcher lifecycle

But central to all this is the researcher. Previous investigations<sup>3</sup> found that many library posts supporting researchers took the traditional subject librarian job description as a starting point, and just added a few references to ‘research’. This hasn’t always been as successful as one would have hoped. RLUK wanted to start out by articulating researcher information needs and then mapping subject librarian support activities (both traditional and novel) onto these needs.

The way we chose to do this was by employing a ‘research life cycle’ approach. From reviewing the literature, Mary established a 13-step model of researcher activities:

- 1 conceptualising new research, developing proposals, and identifying funding opportunities;
- 2 seeking new information;
- 3 information management;
- 4 data collection;

- 5 data discovery, management and curation;
- 6 sharing, discussion and online collaboration;
- 7 analysing and reflecting on information and data;
- 8 writing up and dissemination;
- 9 compliance, IP, copyright and other statutory requirements;
- 10 preservation;
- 11 quality assessment and measuring impact;
- 12 commercialisation;
- 13 emerging technology.

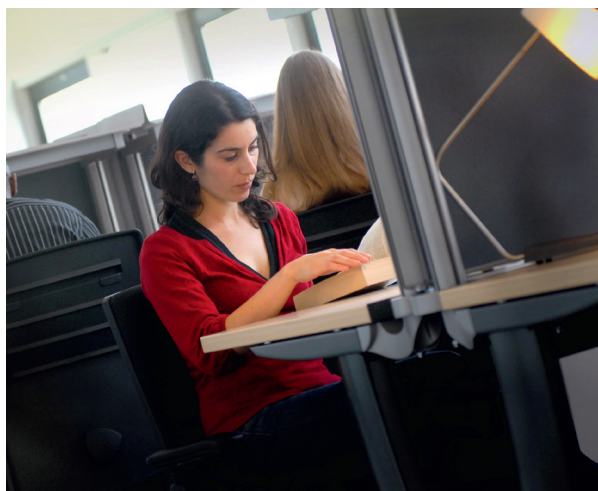
Of course, this is not linear, not even cyclical and not always in this order – emerging Web 2.0 technologies, for example, enable us to extend the conversation about research via blogs and wikis but they can be used to enhance many of the other points that precede it on the list. But this approach gives a structure to what can feel like quite a chaotic process.

So what are we doing as a profession to support these 13 steps? From reviewing the literature and surveying colleagues we found:

- areas of extensive activity and support – notably supporting researchers with information seeking and managing information retrieved: the traditional subject librarian activities;
- elements with which we have not engaged as a profession – there was little mention of steps 1, 4, 7 and 12 in our research;
- areas where we are beginning to get involved – subject librarians and other colleagues are finding opportunities around data management, facilitating collaboration (a key theme for us at Warwick), providing advice on publishing and raising impact, support with copyright and other compliance issues, preservation of research out-







puts, and the promotion of relevant new technologies. This latter group includes many potential 'next step' activities. For colleagues looking to extend support to their research communities, this might sensibly be the best place to start. The report includes many examples of good practice which could prove useful in this regard.

### Developing our skills sets

But do we have the skills sets to take up these opportunities? Another aspect of the study was to audit the skills needed by subject librarians now and in the future, and to assess areas where we as a profession need to develop skills sets.

A questionnaire outlining potentially relevant skills was sent out to RLUK member libraries. Mary and I were concerned that the original list of attributes was over long, but at the same time, we didn't want to lose the richness we were hoping to receive in our feedback.

In the end, we came up with 32 skills and knowledge areas, some of which were generic, but the bulk of which were focused specifically on researcher support. The 32 areas covered:

- information literacy;
- information management;
- subject/discipline understanding and knowledge of tools/sources;
- partnership building;
- the research process – both generic and local knowledge;
- research data management;
- metadata and research data;
- issues around scholarly communications;
- funder mandates, assessment and other 'legal'



## Factfile

*Re-skilling for research: an investigation into the role and skills of subject and liaison librarians required to effectively support the evolving information needs of researchers, conducted for RLUK by Mary Auckland, is available at [www.rluk.ac.uk/](http://www.rluk.ac.uk/)*

**Research Libraries UK (RLUK)'s vision is that the UK should have the best research library support in the world and it works with members and partners, nationally and internationally, to shape and to realise the vision of the modern research library.**

requirements;

- Web 2.0 and other emerging technologies relating to researchers.

So were colleagues put off? I am pleased to say we received 169 respondents from 22 institutions. Sixty-one per cent were from subject librarians and the rest from managers or allied staff (for example, institutional repository staff).

Responses mirrored the findings related to the researcher lifecycle. The areas where subject librarians feel most comfortable relate to seeking information and managing information. As a profession, we feel we do not need to develop the skill sets to support the areas we currently avoid. (In my opinion, as a profession, we need to think again about some of this.)

But in many ways the most interesting finding relates to some of the areas which look most attractive for developing our service portfolios. Although we recognise the potential, we often feel we are not equipped to grasp the opportunities being offered. Training and development will be essential. The report's analysis of training being provided gives a reassuring picture of the skills being developed by new entrants into the profession, but established professionals similarly require support with up-skilling and developing new roles.

### Extending good practice

To inform staff development programmes, the questionnaires used in the survey can be used for internal training audits. To help managers with role development, Appendix D of the report includes sample elements to help colleagues assemble job descriptions and person specifications for new specialist research support posts.

But possibly most useful of all is the review of what the RLUK strategy refers to as 'new ways of working and emerging roles'.<sup>4</sup> Examples of good practice from across the globe are illustrated in the text and referenced in an extensive bibliography. By providing details of developments in Sydney and Purdue, and closer to home from universities such as LSE, Leeds, Cardiff, Liverpool and my own colleagues at Warwick, we hope these can provide inspiration and practical pointers for service development.

I have spoken to many colleagues across the sector about the project who are both excited by the opportunities for developing support for researchers as well as daunted by some of the operational issues. We hope this report will highlight potential areas of service development, but also offer some practical solutions to help the profession to take this forward. [1]

### References

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- 4 **The power of knowledge – Phase 2: RLUK strategic plan 2011-2014, p. 8** ([www.rluk.ac.uk/content/rluk-strategic-plan-power-knowledge-phase-two-2011-2014](http://www.rluk.ac.uk/content/rluk-strategic-plan-power-knowledge-phase-two-2011-2014))  
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