
Support for research: support for learning



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‘How do our researchers obtain their research resources when we hardly ever see them in the library?’

This comment during a conversation between colleagues was to provide the trigger for a research project undertaken by librarians at Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) during 2004. APU library’s strength lies in our role as a ‘taught course’ support collection. The library has never been funded to be a research collection, but there is cutting-edge research going on in the university and as librarians we were intrigued to know what sort of relationship those researchers (most of whom were also teachers) had with us and what part our resources played in their research and in their teaching. These questions were framed against a background of institutional re-structuring and a drive to focus more academic staff time on research activities.

In order to encourage learning and teaching research within the university, APU has been awarding fellowships to staff for a number of years. Our project entitled ‘Support for research: support for learning’ was successful in its bid for a fellowship grant and set out to discover how the library could be more effective in its support for research-led teaching. Subsidiary questions were to gauge the extent to which learning and teaching resources overlap with research resources, to find out whether researcher/teachers encourage their students to use the same resources they themselves use for their research, and to assess how the move to electronic resources has affected the relationship between learning and research materials.

Our research was set against the background of the ongoing discussion within higher education in

the UK on the relationship between research and teaching. Both the Roberts Review of the RAE¹ (issued for consultation May 2003) and the Government's 2003 White Paper '*The future of higher education*'² have suggested that research funding should be concentrated in institutions with established research credentials. Within the learning and teaching community internationally there has been great interest in the research/teaching nexus. Alan Jenkins at Oxford Brookes University³ and Angela Brew at the University of Sydney⁴ have been particularly prominent in this discussion.

We wanted to know where our own academics stood in this debate and how we in the library could best support them. Our research method used semi-structured interviews with a sample of researcher/teachers. The team of academic liaison librarians, who work with the academic Schools to provide library support, went out with an agreed set of questions and recorded interviews with 20 academics in a range of subject disciplines. All the respondents were involved in research and all were teaching at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level. Seven of the 20 were engaged in PhD or professional doctorate supervision. The interviews were then transcribed, producing a wealth of data for analysis.

Our first questions were about values and beliefs and were intended to form the backdrop for our research. Initial analysis has highlighted the following issues:

- 100% of our respondents agreed that research is an integral and essential element of higher education and the life of a university
- research is essential for the maintenance of top level scholarship
- research is essential for informing and invigorating teaching
- lecturers should be experts at the forefront of their field.

We then asked questions about how our respondents related their teaching to their research.

Answers included the following:

- teaching provides a context for my research
- research keeps me up-to-date
- discussion with students can trigger new research ideas and identify theoretical problems
- research puts methodology into a material context instead of being an abstract thing.

Over all it appeared clear that our group of researcher/teachers were heavily in favour of research-led teaching. Interestingly, only 3 out of

the 20 mentioned the idea of differing levels of research i.e. pure research and scholarly activity. For most of them research appears to be a seamless, all-levels activity.

So how did our academics encourage students to engage with research generally and in particular with their own research? This seems to happen in several ways. General methods include:

- through the design of assignments or whole modules
- through designated learning outcomes
- through the process of learning research methods and critical evaluation
- through the recommendation of resources (in particular good quality journals and online databases)
- through the recommendation of library specialists for assistance
- through intelligent use of the internet.

Academics encourage student engagement with their own research interests through the following:

- using their own projects as a live study
- in discussion with students encouraging them to participate in knowledge creation
- delegating parts of the research to students
- giving assignment or tutorial questions based on own published work
- encouraging dissertation students to read own published work
- taking ideas discussed in seminars further when writing up research
- using own research to illustrate methodology.

Having established some background information we moved on to specific enquiries about use of resources and membership of research communities. It was encouraging to find that most of our respondents were using the APU library website and were aware of key databases and online journals in their discipline areas. There was heavy use of the Cambridge University Library by our Cambridge-based researchers, and the British Library in London by our Chelmsford colleagues. Our inter-library loan service was also being well-used and was highly valued.

Many of our academics belong to professional bodies and research communities through which they access specialist material via websites and discussion lists. E-mail contacts with academics at other universities (both in the UK and abroad) are also important. As may be expected, researchers know about developments in their own fields and watch particular journals to keep up with new

knowledge. They know when to expect articles on relevant subjects and have their own systems set up to receive these in many cases. Library support is additional to their own working framework of awareness and retrieval.

Our analysis so far shows that 18 out of our 20 respondents are sometimes recommending the resources they use in their own research to their students. This answers one of our key concerns about the links between learning resources and research resources. Electronic resources do seem to have had an impact here. It is the databases and online journals that are being used by researchers and being recommended to students. Proof, if it were needed, that online resources have added depth and breadth to our library collections.

One of our questions concerned the effect of the e-world on research and libraries. Responses can be split into positives and negatives. First the positives:

- the internet has had a profound effect on research: a revolution
- the e-environment offers convenience: access where and when you want it, access to library catalogues, exploratory research can be done from your desk, it makes me more self-sufficient, life's much easier now
- research is much quicker, especially access to full-text journal articles
- Google is a useful starting point
- the APU website is a virtual portal giving access to distributed, reliable resources
- government information is easily available
- the electronic library is essential for part-time and distance students
- the Internet offers a huge variety of sources
- email contact with people in the field all over the world
- easy to keep up-to-date
- makes library use more efficient
- increasing opportunity to publish in online journals.

The negatives are as follows:

- time is very precious and you can waste time and lose focus
- students do not expect to spend time researching – they want everything immediately
- students have problems identifying reliable sources
- academics need to come in to the library less and less
- there is a loss of relationship with librarians
- researchers can become isolated

- amount of information available can be overwhelming
- referencing e-resources is difficult.

We asked about the future value of physical libraries. Answers were encouraging: researchers still believe the library as a place is important. The value seems to centre round having a quiet place in which to think. 'If I want to think differently, coming into the library makes me do that' said one respondent. 'My natural inclination is to go to a library ... I still get a buzz from being in libraries' said another.

Our final questions were about how the library could better support student research skills and researchers' resource needs. Student induction and training, and raising awareness of available resources with academic staff, were seen as critical to research progress at all levels. Communication between the library and the university was seen as central to the successful use of resources. One respondent complained that librarians tend to speak in jargon. Another noted that the system of subject specialist librarians was not always helpful to researchers when their research crossed over subject boundaries. There was acknowledgement that financial constraints mean that specialised research materials are going to be limited but also that the library is doing a good job with what it has at the moment.

This article can only give a flavour of the data which we have collected. Our project has answered some questions and raised others. Feedback from our research will be added to the information from users which the library has gathered this year via a LibQual survey, focus groups and the university's student survey. It will particularly inform the library's e-resources strategy with its insights into the use of electronic databases and journals. There is plenty for us to follow up even though our analysis of the data is still at an early stage.

Research-led teaching is alive and well in our university and is a natural part of our sample of academics' practice. The library, and especially the electronic library, is providing these researchers with support both in their research work and in their teaching. Most of them are recommending the databases and journals that they use in their research on to their students. Our sample of respondents has found research practice deeply affected by the move to an internet dominated world. However, in spite of the vast array of alternative information sources available to them, they

still place high value on the role and place of the library. This typical response sums up their view:

'The library should not sit outside the academic community but should be central to it.'

REFERENCES

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