
Conference report

Information strategies for researchers: where are we making a difference?
SCONUL Working Group on Information Literacy / CONUL Advisory Group on Information Literacy event, 31 January 2008, Dublin City University

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A collaborative seminar organised by the SCONUL Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) and its Irish equivalent, the CONUL Advisory Group on Information Literacy, on 'Information strategies for researchers – where are we making a difference?' was held on 31 January 2008, at Dublin City University (DCU). Over 80 delegates from across the UK and Ireland gathered together to hear views from practising researchers and librarians working to manage and support the information literacy needs of researchers.

PRIORITIES FOR THE RESEARCHER

The morning session included papers from two established researchers who both drew attention to the researchers' goal of publication and dissemination. Professor Dermot Diamond, Director of the National Centre for Sensor Research at DCU, contextualised this with reference to the importance of the key performance indices (KPIs) of research income, publication and impact to the profile and career of an individual researcher. The decisions made at the beginning of a researcher's publishing history can be significant for his or her

future career – the need for consideration to be given to limiting any name changes; avoidance of multi-authored papers (given their relatively low citation value for individual contributors); and understanding that different disciplines will have different published outputs and accompanying value measures. But there is a general recognition that in statistical terms single-authored output, indexed in citation indexes such as the Web of Science, remains a recognised quality indicator for benchmarking.

This data also contributes to a researcher's overall profile, can provide evidence to attract funding and can be used as needed for career progression.

Professor Diamond identified the significant opportunity that exists for librarians to influence their colleagues and to work with both academic publishers and funding bodies to develop tools to enable the impact of research to be accurately assessed; this ties into the role bibliometrics will play in the next Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the weighting which will be placed on citation counts.

RESEARCHERS' PROFILES

Dr Andrew Booth, who has been an active researcher for over 25 years, prefaced his presentation with the observation that 'Researchers require tailored information, literacy training focussing on information management, not simply information retrieval.' This observation was further examined in the paper in the afternoon delivered by Moira Bent and Jo Webb, whose publication (along with Pat Gannon-Leary) 'Providing effective library services for researchers'¹ advances the proposal that researchers cannot be described as a homogeneous group: that the '7 ages of research' – from masters students through to experts – are accompanied by different needs and priorities which vary as individual research careers progress. This view was expanded on by Sheila Webber, who highlighted differences in information-seeking behaviour, in part linked to her personal experiences of being a research supervisor, research project leader and individual researcher.

Some of the differences identified were:

- personal conceptions of research, which for some might have a focus on outputs whereas for others the personal journey itself may constitute a significant element of the research process

- the different kinds of personal information-seeking behaviour that will be deployed at various stages in the research process: some, for example, involving browsing and others active searching
- the fact that different disciplines require different approaches to information-seeking: for example currency may be less important in English than in chemistry
- different research approaches (most obviously qualitative vs. quantitative).

Her presentation also identified the need for tailored and timely support which, on occasion, will not necessarily reflect the individual 'age' of a researcher. The complexity of a researcher's environment was further explored as part of Bent, Webb and Gannon-Leary's background research for their publication. This included gathering feedback from the research community on their definitions of research – such as 'investigation, interpretation, a holistic activity; theory-led, data-led, grounded in disciplines; multi/inter/trans disciplinary'. This diversity of interpretation, coupled with the wide variety of information needs, has led to the conclusion that a didactic approach to the delivery of information literacy to researchers will be ineffective – that the emphasis should be on developing the skills of early researchers so that they become capable of successful independent learning and self-directed decision-making.

Andrew Booth's presentation served to illustrate this profile in practice, and drew attention to the need for librarians to develop a clearer understanding of what researchers want. Recent research into information-seeking practices highlights dissatisfaction not with the resource-discovery stage of the process but at the final stage, 'the last mile' which delivers the document. Researchers working in this environment are generally comfortable with retrieving and managing a large volume of data and information but are often frustrated by the restrictions placed on access to the full-text of the document. The increase in the availability of pre-prints has led to researchers adapting their behaviour and 'in some disciplines, [search engines] are used as a way of bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as publishers and libraries'.²

THE LIBRARIAN'S ROLE

In response to this, and taking the opportunity to consider how librarians can assert their role as experts in information management, Andrew

Booth provided some observations and advice for the profession:

- 'Researchers do not follow the neat step-wise progression from a state of unknowing (information need) to one of "knowing" which underpins most information literacy instruction.' In recognising this non-linear approach Booth advocates intervention on a tailored, 'need to know' basis.
- 'Information management, rather than information retrieval, should be the focus of information literacy instruction for researchers.' The focus needs to adjust from the delivery of discrete activities to one which clearly addresses the whole – and often complex – processes of information management.
- 'Where information retrieval is covered it should focus on techniques such as "area scanning", footnote chasing and known author searching rather than keyword searching of abstracts and indexes.' This subtle shift of emphasis is clearly designed to better meet the specific needs of the researcher.
- 'Information literacy training should be "socialised" through formal collaboration with supervisors and integration with existing research programmes or groups.' The importance of context is well recognised as a key element in the successful delivery of information literacy and, for researchers, integrating those activities within their environments is important to both engagement and uptake.

STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

The final presenter of the morning, Angela Newton from the University of Leeds, provided a useful insight into the importance of cross-university collaboration to the delivery of a comprehensive information literacy programme for PhD research students. Funded as a result of the Roberts report 'SET for Success',³ the programme is delivered as a collaborative venture with participation from the University Library, faculty training co-ordinators and the university's staff development unit. As a case-study, it served to illustrate the importance of collaboration with key stakeholders. This further confirms Booth's observation that a key success factor rests in the level of integration information literacy achieves within existing infrastructures, both formal and informal.

Complementing this presentation, Marie Reddan, Librarian at the National University of Ireland,

Galway, provided an overview of how government funding is being used to support the development of a cross-university information literacy skills module for research students. The module is part of a six-module generic skills programme being developed for masters and PhD students at NUI Galway, Trinity College Dublin and University College Cork. The information literacy module is being designed to accommodate both face-to-face and online delivery and will include the following components: information literacy and your research; research resource discovery; evaluating results; managing your information; ethics in using information; and publishing and disseminating your research. Marie highlighted the importance of broad consultation and collaboration in the development of the information literacy module. Campus stakeholders consulted included research students; PhD supervisors; deans of graduate research; teaching and learning units; and the developers of the other modules on the generic programme. This case-study again served as an excellent example of information literacy integration within a campus-wide skills programme for research students.

SUMMARY

Evaluation from the day was extremely positive, with many delegates providing useful suggestions for follow-up activities that included further collaborative activities; practical workshops and opportunities for exchange of experiences; and presentations from a range of researchers across disciplines and at varying stages in their careers. In addition to these practical ideas, there was a recognition that opportunities exist for both groups to explore how best to progress this agenda at a strategic level, working alongside other national and international information literacy organisations and groups.

REFERENCES

- 1 Available from Facet Publishing at <http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/>
- 2 E. Fry, 'Researchers migrate to search engines', report in *Library and information update*, 5 (9), September 2006
- 3 See <http://www.ckiv.dk/papers/Newton%20Reaching%20out%20to%20research%20students.pdf>