Involving university library staff in ongoing research

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Abstract

To embed university library practitioners in research, this paper proposes a strategy of maximum immersion. The strategy involves the inclusion of as many employees from as many sections or departments in the library as is practically feasible in research projects of an ongoing or repetitive nature. The paper argues that this strategy will overcome most of the obstacles that normally hinder research by library practitioners, including a lack of research experience and a lack of time. To succeed, the strategy should comply with a number of conditions, such as that the research has to be relevant and beneficial to the university, library and research participants, the research process should develop research experience and build capacity, the research technique should be relatively easy to apply, involvement in the research activity should create lasting enthusiasm, and the process should be dynamic.

In the second part of the paper the author uses the example of citation counting of theses and dissertations as a research application that fits the conditions outlined in the first part. The paper concludes with the opinion that, although sufficient thought and planning should go into selecting a research application for ongoing research, it is no more than a means to an end. The ultimate purpose is to get libraries embedded in research – not for the sake of research, but for the sake of its benefits.

Keywords: Practitioner research, university libraries

1 Introduction

A random investigation into the research involvement of university libraries in English-speaking countries shows that the majority of them acknowledge and accept a support role with regard to research done by their institutions. Most of the time that support role is incorporated in their mission statements. However, there is very little evidence that university libraries formally acknowledge, by way of their mission statements, that their research roles go beyond research support. The reality is that many university libraries are indeed conducting research, even though it is often only one-off (cross-sectional) research, focusing on solving internal problems without publicising the results. But there are exceptions. The papers that are presented at IATUL conferences are examples of worthy research carried out by library practitioners in university libraries across the world.

It is not clear why university libraries that do research – even if it is only on a limited scale – do not come into the open more and include their research role in their mission statements. It could be because research at universities is seen as the responsibility of faculty or research units and, therefore, there is no pressure on libraries to be accountable for research or a lack thereof. Perhaps university libraries do not regard their research as worthy enough, or perhaps they believe that if they start to preach what they practise, they will come under the scrutiny of their institutions or peers in the LIS profession. The modesty of university libraries in terms of the research they conduct is even more surprising if one considers the benefits of and reasons for practitioner research. Those benefits and reasons are well documented in the library literature, i.e. by Busha and Harter [1], Powell, Baker and& Mika [7], McNicol and Dalton [6] and McKee [4]. Only some of those reasons are repeated here to illustrate the point in case.

> …to create new knowledge and thereby contribute to the growth of LIS as a profession…to improve problem solving and decision making in the workplace…to make professional practitioners critical consumers of the research literature…to better equip librarians to provide optimal information services to researchers in other fields…to contribute to career advancement for librarians…improve the individual's ability to think critically and analytically…enhance the library's status within its community (Powell, Baker & Mika) [7].

Another question that is worth pondering upon is why libraries, and especially university libraries, are continuously hampered by the same factors in increasing the quantity and quality of their research. According to McNicol [5], Powell, Baker and Mika [7] and Turner [9], those obstacles include the following:

- Lack of time, including pressure of other work

- Lack of resources, especially a lack of adequate funding
- Lack of research skills
- Lack of research support
- Lack of practically focused projects
- Lack of motivation or incentive

Incidentally, the typical obstacles that university library practitioners experience or perceive are also the ones that Goodall [2] identified as being applicable to public library librarians.

Whereas the obstacles hampering library research are apparently fairly universal, the reasons why those obstacles occur and reoccur may be country or even library specific. My response to those obstacles is therefore from a South African perspective and from a university library manager's perspective, but it is very likely that the underlying situation is similar in many other university libraries across the African continent and even abroad. The situation that I am referring to is the following:

Practitioner research in university libraries is often performed only by a selective few – those with higher degrees who are part of management, and/or those that work in an R&D department, and/or those staff members who are designated or commissioned by their library management to embark on a research project on behalf of the rest of the library. Sometimes the selective few consist of or include individuals who conduct research that forms part of or support their own research for degree purposes. The selective few (research haves) are the ones who have an opportunity to present their work at workshops and conferences and in publications, and thus interact with the research community. By virtue of being research haves, they gain even more experience, get more money for research and gain more recognition, and are granted more time to do research. On the other hand, library practitioners who are not engaged in research (the research have-nots) are usually only spectators of research activities that are performed in their libraries. Sometimes they only become aware of research in their library when the research recommendations start to influence their work. The research obstacles that were mentioned earlier therefore apply mostly and often only to the research have-nots. At its worst, where this gap between the research haves and research have-nots exists, it also creates an opportunity for mistrust, envy, and other divisional lines that usually occur between haves and have-nots.

2 A strategy of total immersion

How then could a situation such as the one described above be rectified to eliminate or reduce the typical research barriers, and how could a library take full advantage of the benefits of practitioner research? The strategy that the author wishes to propose for embedding libraries in research is that of so-called total immersion. Stated simply, it is to get the maximum number of a library's employers from as many as possible sections or departments in the library involved in one or more ongoing or longitudinal research projects. This does not mean that staff members have to be involved in full-time research, or have to take part in a research project from beginning to end. It implies that, at one time or another, every staff member, over and above his or her full-time work, will play a part in the research process, whether it is collecting a portion of the data, assisting in analysing the data or proofreading the research report. In essence, it is a strategy to put the library on the path of developing a critical mass of research expertise and creating a culture of "research into practice". It is also a strategy that is in line with calls from some leading professionals in the library field "for connecting research to practice by involving more library practitioners in research more often" (Humes) [3]. The keyword in this case is "involvement". Before giving an example of such a strategy, it is necessary to discuss some conditions for success. A discussion of the conditions would also assist in further explaining and unveiling the strategy.

2.1 Conditions for success

- The head of the library should be absolutely committed to the success of the strategy. He or she should deliberately create an environment for library staff to do research. This means that research should become part of the library's approved goals and objectives, and the involvement of staff in research activities should become part of their job descriptions. Not in vague terms like "do research" or "keep up to date with developments in your field", but in clear, measurable terms. In addition, library managers should provide sufficient time and opportunities for staff to develop and practise research skills, and to interact with the broader research community.
- Research that the library undertakes should be relevant. It should be grounded in practice and lead to significant findings. Preferably, its relevance should go beyond the library's own setting and on to the university, and even to the wider library community.
- Research should be beneficial to the library practitioners who conduct it. In other words, they should gain personally from it, whether it is sharing in the financial benefits that accrue from research outputs, receiving opportunities to attend conferences, or acquiring new skills that would enable them to advance in their careers. The benefits should also be such that they serve as incentives for them not only to start conducting research, but also to continue doing so.
- The benefits of the library's research projects should be clearly outlined in advance and communicated to

all concerned. It is especially important that practitioners who participate in research know in what way they contribute, what the importance of their contribution is and what the relevance of the total project is. Library managers should also not forget to award and even celebrate achievements, whether of an individual or of a team.

- Closely connected to the former is to keep all participants informed of progress throughout, from the beginning to the end, even if an individual participates only in a small way or for a limited period.
- The library's research should be dynamic to maintain momentum and enthusiasm. Although some research projects, such as longitudinal studies, need to be repeated over time, a library should not refrain from adding new dimensions to its research once research skills have been sufficiently mastered. Even with relatively inexperienced research staff, libraries can still strive to shift the boundaries of knowledge, to discover something new, to engage in new methods. Furthermore, if the same staff members are going to do the same thing over and again, they will soon lose interest.
- Inexperienced researchers should find the research techniques that are to be used relatively easy to follow. Allow for the fact that your staff will learn during the research process and may need help from the project leaders and others.
- Notwithstanding the previous condition, the research should to be soundly based in terms of its methodology.

2.2 An example of a total immersion research strategy

An example of a research project that fits the conditions described above is contained in a research proposal that is currently in progress at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in South Africa. Hopefully we will have an opportunity at another IATUL conference to report on the implementation and findings of the project. The abridged and narrative version of the research proposal that I am presenting today serves as an announcement of research intentions, and will form the basis of discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of the forthcoming project.

Title. A citation analysis of master's and doctoral theses at the Tshwane University of Technology.

Background. The Tshwane University of Technology was established in 2004 as the result of a merger between three former technikons. After the merger, the newly formed university of technology placed great emphasis on research, especially on master's and doctoral research. This poses a challenge to the Library and Information Services (LIS): apart from having some knowledge on the casual, day-to-day (informal) use of library materials by master's and doctoral (M&D) students, the LIS has no scholarly founded information available on the formal use of information sources by M&D students. For instance, it is unclear what types of information sources are used more frequently than others, how the patterns of use differ across subject disciplines and faculties, and to what extent the LIS keeps or provides access to the journals that are mostly used by M&D students. Ultimately, answers to those and other questions would assist the library in making informed decisions on which information resources to make available to M&D students

Based on the lack of scientific information mentioned above, the research problem and subproblems to address are the following:

Research problem. How does the use of information sources by M&D students differ between the faculties and schools at TUT, and to what extent does the Library and Information Services provide access to a subset (journals) of the information sources that are mostly used by M&D students?

Subproblem. Which types of information sources do M&D students in different faculties use most and least, and to what extent does the usage change from year to year?

Subproblem. Which journals do M&D students in different faculties use most and least, and to what extent does the usage change from year to year?

Subproblem. To what extent does the LIS keep or provide access to the journals that are mostly used by M&D students?

Research design. Since one of the aims of the study is to study patterns of change in the use of information sources, the nature of the research design will be a longitudinal study. The study will use the reference lists of all theses submitted by M&D students and accepted by TUT since 2004 as data sources. No sample will be taken. The data itself will be collected per school or faculty and will include (a) number of citations per information type, (b) number of citations per thesis, (c) number of theses per subject discipline, (d) frequency of journal titles cited, and (e) cited journals owned by the library. The study will use citation analysis – more specifically, citation counting – as a method for data collection. This involves the following procedure: the analysis and measurement (counting) of citations according to predetermined and well-defined categories; quantification and

ordering or ranking of the categorised units; analysis and comparison of attained data; and interpretation of the data in terms of the research questions (Busha & Harter) [1]. The study will follow a retrospective timeframe or reference period: the first investigation will start in June 2006 and will use data from theses that were accepted in 2004 and 2005. Thereafter, the research design will be repeated in more or less April of each year, or as soon as the library has obtained copies of all the M&D theses that had been accepted in the previous year.

Problems and limitations. Like many other research methods, citation analysis is not without inherent limitations. Among the limitations that Sylvia [8] points out are the following: researchers are more likely to use materials to which they have local access; citations may be added to increase the thesis' length and scholarliness; researchers may cite works of marginal importance; researchers may not cite all works used to prepare the thesis; and textbooks often do not receive citations, as students sometimes take them for granted.

Advantages of the research method. Citation analysis, notwithstanding its limitations, provides an unobtrusive method of obtaining data on which information resources are being used. Furthermore, by using citations from theses and dissertations as data sources, even relatively inexperienced researchers could gather the data easily and comprehensively. And since citation analysis is a method that avoids voluntary submission of data, "researchers can actually gather a true population of citations" (Zipp) [10].

Operational environment of the research project. Library staff of TUT will carry out the research at its Pretoria campus library, during normal library hours and in addition to their existing library duties. However, the time spent on the research project is expected not to have a negative impact on regular library activities, since the research involvement of individual library staff members will be relatively small, due to the fact that approximately 30 staff members will participate in the research project. The time that each staff member will spend on research or research-related activities will be set by the project leader in consultation with all the staff members involved, and taking factors into account such as (a) their agreed upon research tasks, (b) the time schedule of the project and (c) their other, non-research-related library duties.

The responsibilities and tasks of individual staff members will also be set in consultation with all library staff members, taking into account their existing research skills, administrative and support skills, report-writing and communication skills, and project-leading skills. The research team will consist of sub-teams that will be responsible for separate tasks. For instance, one subteam would determine and define data categories, while another would analyse citations and do the coding. Each year, the library will recompile the subteams in order to give all staff members an opportunity to participate in the longitudinal study. However, some staff members will remain in the same team for a second year in order to ensure continuity and to train new team members. The following allocation of duties and responsibilities will serve as a discussion document with library staff members, to be finalised and agreed upon:

- Coordinate project, allocate resources, monitor progress (Library Director)
- Train staff in research methods, report-writing, etcetera. (Training Librarian)
- Research administration (Library Secretary)
- Literature study (Subteam A)
- Determine and define data categories (Subteam A)
- Collect data sources (theses) (Subteam B)
- Make copies of reference lists and distribute to Subteam A (Subteam C)
- Analyse citations and codes according to predetermined categories (Subteam B)
- Verify outcomes of previous task (Subteam A)
- Count citations per data category and capture on database (Subteam C)
- Verify outcomes of previous task (Subteam (D)
- Tabulate and cross-tabulate frequency of data categories (Subteam E)
- Analyse tabulation and cross-tabulation data (Subteam A)
- Verify outcomes of previous task (Subteam B)
- Compare list of journals cited most often with library holdings (Subteam D)
- Verify outcomes of previous tasks (Subteam C)
- Write research report (Subteams A and C)
- Proofread research report (Subteams B and D)
- Present research report (Subteams B and D)
- Implement recommendations (Director, Subteams A, B, C and D)
- Present research paper (Subteams A and C)

Significance of the study. The significance of the study is that it incorporates a strategy to develop the research capabilities and research-mindedness of a large number of library practitioners at a time. At the same time, it will improve library practice and lead to better service to the university's master's and doctoral students. More specifically, the study will develop a means of measuring the use of information sources by M&D students and thereby improve the library's understanding of the information sources used by those students. On a more practical level, the outcome of the study will assist librarians in making informed decisions regarding collection development, especially in terms of journal subscription or cancellation decisions. For instance,

the study could identify core lists of journals critical to the research needs of M&D students, and it could identify less used titles, which could help the library decide whether to cancel those copies and rather provide other means of access to those titles. The study could identify shifts in subject emphasis across time, that is, where certain topics and usage of particular journals rose and fell over time.

Limitations of the study. Initially, the research skills of the majority of the library staff will be very low, and in some instances even nonexistent. It will therefore pose great challenges to the few staff members with sufficient research experience and knowledge (the research haves) to introduce those with less or no experience and skill to the process and to act as research mentors until the latter can go solo.

3. Conclusion

The research proposal presented in this paper is merely an example of a research project that library managers could use to introduce relatively large numbers of staff members with little or no research experience to a culture of conducting practitioner research. Granted, citation analysis of master's and doctoral dissertations has its limitations, as many researchers have pointed out in the research literature. Surely other techniques than citation analysis would also suffice. The advantage of citation counting is that it is a relatively simple research technique that could start with limited data sets, but gradually develop into a more substantial research project. However, although a research technique is an important part of a strategy to embed libraries in research, the success of the strategy depends on meeting the conditions that were pointed out earlier in this paper. Once the conditions are met, the path is set for libraries to embark on a journey of ongoing research – not for the sake of research, but for the benefits of research.

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