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# Doing it together: effective collaboration in scientific and technological university libraries

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# Doing it together: effective collaboration in scientific and technological university libraries

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## Background

Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the declining South African research output was identified as a serious problem area needing attention (Pouris, 2003: 425). Academic institutions were not meeting even modest targets for postgraduate throughput or publication output (Department of Science and Technology 2005: 15). Major initiatives, such as substantial financial intervention by the National Research Foundation, were subsequently put into place to address the problem by increasing funding for research activities and boosting output (Cherry, 2010).

In this time, research libraries were also realising that they could play a more active part in supporting research at their institutions. At the University of Cape Town (UCT), the need for library support for research activities was tested and affirmed through the LibQUAL+ survey that was conducted for the first time in 2005 and which had illustrated that while undergraduate students were by and large satisfied with library services, postgraduate researchers were not (Daniels, Darch & De Jager, 2010:120).

In response to these findings, UCT with two other top ranked university libraries in South Africa, applied for and were granted funding by the Carnegie Corporation of New York for an extended project to enhance librarians' insight into the nature of research and their capacity to support research activities among both emerging and established researchers. The grant was renewed in 2009 and was expanded to include a further three research-intense universities (Darch and De Jager 2012: 145).

The Project proposed to address library research support in three dimensions; by building, staffing and equipping sophisticated research spaces known as Research Commons; by improving and enhancing mid career librarians' understanding of the research process and skills in assisting

researchers in different domains; and by introducing an integrated Web portal to facilitate resource searching at each of the three participating institutions.

Part of the intervention to improve librarians' ability to support research, was intended to expose mid-career librarians to the research process and to encourage them to become active partners in research activities, both through collaboration with researchers and to produce research of their own. This took place through a series of five Research Library Consortium (RLC) Academies that were held for two weeks at a time in a secluded venue, during the grant period. These academies were subjected to both formative and summative review and evaluation (Darch & De Jager, 2012).

During this time, the Carnegie Academies came to the attention of the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC), which promotes regional collaboration. Its primary focus is on resource sharing amongst the member institutions which comprise public scientific and technical universities situated in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, i.e. the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Stellenbosch University, the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape.

The Cape Library Consortium (CALICO) previously the Cape Library Cooperative, is a CHEC initiative which focuses on the benefits of collaboration amongst the CHEC member libraries. Areas of commonality are sought to share resources and to maximize opportunities through synergies and economies of scale in areas such as knowledge production through knowledge-sharing.

CALICO is sustained by membership subscriptions formulated from national subsidies and other related allocations to higher education institutions. In the CALICO governance model, the CHEC Board is advised by the Committee of Library Directors (CLD) who are responsible for identifying and implementing activities beneficial to the consortium. There is a continued recognition from the CLD that library silos have to be breached not only for the greater good, but because collaboration which generates knowledge-production enriches all participants.

After the end of the Carnegie grant period, CHEC, on behalf of CALICO, approached one of the original organising participants with a request that the UCT Library and Information

Studies Centre (LISC) design and facilitate a similar research library learning event in the region for librarians in member institutions who had not participated in the Carnegie Research Libraries' Academy. The request specifically was to create a programme (to be known as the CHEC Research Library Academy) for librarians in the Consortium as part of an ongoing process of collaboration within CALICO to provide training opportunities to librarians in their respective institutions. Two of the authors, both members of LISC staff who had actively participated in the RLC Academies, agreed. The conception and planning of the CHEC Library Academy drew on the experience of the Carnegie Research Library Academy.  Its specific aim was to expose mid-career librarians to the principles and practice of research librarianship in a more limited period. Having accepted the commission, planning proceeded with the third co-author, the CALICO Coordinator, who also presented the views of the CEO of CHEC and the CALICO Committee of Library Directors.

**Designing the programme**

The following principles informed the objectives of the curriculum:

- To maintain balance between theoretical input and opportunities for workshop activities
- To maintain balance between inputs from experts explaining the Higher Education sector and the research landscape, and from experts in the LIS sector with knowledge of the trends and programmes in the field
- To draw on expertise from the CHEC institutions to reflect representativeness as far as possible
- To create opportunities for participants' interaction and active engagement
- To encourage networking, with a view to creating collaborative spaces for the participants from the different institutions.

Ideas for curriculum content and associated activities were guided by inputs from the CEO of CHEC, and the Library Directors who had the following specific requirements for this CALICO Staff Development Programme:

- Advance preparation for the programme, e.g. a pack of pre-readings

- Guided interaction among delegates during the programme to break down institutional silos
- The expectation that the participants have a research question/matter to feed into the group activity
- A post-programme process to maintain and strengthen the bonds forged during the Academy

In our conceptualising of research librarianship, a number of themes and opportunities for hands-on activities emerged. It was recognised that an Academy of this duration could probably achieve no more than the following:

- Transmission of some knowledge about the research landscape and scholarly communication in South Africa, and an understanding of the challenges inherent in the world of the researcher
- Learning from the experience in some academic libraries that have already embarked on carving a niche in the terrain
- An attempt at identifying the skills sets required of a research librarian, and an opportunity to practise them
- Uncover some of the habits of mind and attributes of the research librarian
- Begin to understand the link between librarians' problem solving in the library and the opportunity to frame the activity as a research project
- Motivate participants to appreciate that the goal of being a research librarian as an active participant in the research process, is desirable and attainable
- Encourage participants to think about steps they can take in the short term to start their research journey in their institution
- Promote opportunities for networking and collaboration across the institutions.

These objectives would inform both the theoretical inputs and the practical hands-on learning opportunities making up the programme. A final evaluation questionnaire immediately after the intervention assessed the extent to which these objectives were achieved. All these aspects of evaluation will be discussed below,

**Identifying and selecting speakers and participants**

We were assisted in the task of selecting the speakers by the CEO of CHEC, the CALICO Coordinator and the Library Directors who saw and commented on a number of iterations of the draft programme. The programme was conceptualised according to insights gained from the RLC Academies, but focusing on expertise that was available in the CALICO Consortium. The speakers' briefs and letters of invitation were drafted by the CALICO Coordinator. The final programme was approved, and is attached. Generous responses to the letters of invitation were received from the guest speakers. Many of them have pressing demands on their time, but they nevertheless made themselves available for the Research Academy and in all cases specifically targeted their presentations to the needs of the participants.

Participants were selected by the Library Directors of the respective institutions who invited members of their staff to apply. Librarians who were interested in research librarianship, or who had responsibilities for supporting research activities in their institutions were targeted. The Directors were then responsible for choosing their most suitable staff members. The Western Cape branch of the distance-learning University of South Africa (Unisa) Library Service also approached CHEC with a request to participate, and three Unisa librarians joined the group at Unisa's cost.

Shortly before the start of the Academy, it became evident that it would be more practical for participants to stay over at the Academy venue rather than return to their respective homes each night, and it was possible to arrange this. Only four participants chose not to stay over.

The fact that most participants were able to stay on site, encouraged group cohesion and the sharing of ideas. The participants who for personal reasons had chosen not to stay on site, expressed regret at having done so after observing the productive and collaborative dynamic that had developed among the residents.

**Logistics & Organisation**

In addition to participating in the planning of the Academy and the development of the programme, the CALICO Coordinator most ably managed all the logistical and other challenges of the Academy. Her contribution included but was not limited to:

- Identifying a suitable venue, liaising with its staff, selecting meals, organising accommodation and arranging the opening dinner
- Communicating with speakers, following up on their requirements
- Communicating with the participants, informing them of pre-Academy tasks and activities and seeing to their needs during the Academy
- Setting up a site for the Academy on the UCT online learning environment, *Vula,* to facilitate communication
- Ensuring the availability of ICTs and other technologies
- Troubleshooting

**Participants**

There were 25 participants from the four CHEC institutions and from Unisa. They were all found to be highly motivated and interested in the proceedings. They were particularly concerned to hear from a number of presentations what they perceived to be a mismatch between what they were able to provide as librarians, and what they discovered that researchers really needed and wanted. While some participants from the outset were more outgoing and confident than others in voicing their own opinions, all were willing and able to contribute to open discussions towards the end of the Academy.

**Delivery of the programme**

The Academy opened with an evening dinner at a local restaurant before the start the next morning.  The programme was delivered over four days. Each morning was structured around a broad, research related theme which enabled an exploration of the South African research landscape from different points of view. The first day considered the national research agenda with a focus on SA higher education. The following day focused on research policy formulation and the crucial role of performance management and assessment.  Next, new and  mainly electronic approaches to supporting research were explored and finally the impact of new research resources in libraries and the impact of digital collections were considered.

The afternoons had been earmarked for different and more practice-oriented activities. It was found that the participants were particularly engaged in these hands-on sessions and they expressed their appreciation for focused learning opportunities where they could interact with the speakers and with one another.

The practical sessions consisted of the following activities on the four afternoons:

*Becoming a researcher* was an interactive group session consisting of two PhD supervisors and three PhD candidates who discussed their research journeys and their own experiences of what  academic libraries could and did (or did not) provide for them. The session was well received and participants expressed considerable surprise at the extent to which the researchers did not know about the services they provided and the extent to which both students and supervisors perceived the librarians to be too busy to be bothered. The fact that all the presenters in this session were from the same institution, was criticised by some participants, but the co-ordinators thought that as the speakers knew one another and had prepared their presentations together to fit in with one another,  a very stimulating experience had been created.

A workshop on the *Librarian as Researcher: the reflective practitioner*, presented by the Head of LISC, was one of the most popular sessions during the entire Academy and many comments were received about how useful participants found it. According to the final evaluation, many participants thought that the whole afternoon session had been too short and thought that it could have taken up an entire day.

The third workshop consisted of four *case studies* of researchers with specific but varied information needs that four different groups had to satisfy. The cases were directed and mediated by the two course co-ordinators and demonstrated how the same problems could be addressed through a number of different approaches. This session was regarded as both meaningful and challenging and several participants expressed a need to do more work of this nature.

The last afternoon consisted of a guided discussion of *What is a research librarian?,* which was followed by a final group session in which participants worked with colleagues

from the same institutions to plot a way forward, in which they committed themselves to continue with the research agenda and to produce a plan of action that they would be willing and able to implement at their own institutions.

This plan of action from each institution was posted on *Vula*, shortly after the conclusion of the Academy. These plans were studied and it was found that they varied in both in depth and in length, from a single page to more substantial documents, but had a number of factors in common. All emphasised the importance of collaboration and partnerships in the research enterprise, and their own and colleagues' ongoing need for training. Other activities that were mentioned more than once, were the importance of enhancing research spaces and services, and the need for marketing new library services. One group set itself a short list of achievable targets for implementation by no later than the beginning of the 2013 academic year, the others mostly presented of "to-do" lists of activities, some without timelines or assuming any personal responsibility. All were convinced of the importance of librarians being more involved in the research agenda than before, and seemed committed to furthering that agenda in their own institutions.

**Evaluation of the Academy**

The authors solicited participants' feedback after each of the presentations by asking them to write comments on each speaker on "sticky notes" and to post these comments on a communal notice board for all to see during each break between sessions. This approach to immediate feedback through "analogue tweets" was adapted from the RLC Academies where it had been used very successfully. We were pleased by the unanimously enthusiastic responses, which were collated at the end of each day and transcribed. The comments were almost uniformly positive, even superlative, with words like "insightful," "challenging," "thought provoking," "informative," and "interesting" appearing repeatedly. Hardly any negative comments were received; the one session where we were let down by technology was regarded as "disappointing."

A final exit survey requesting participants to complete in their own time shortly after the Academy was mounted on *Vula*. All 25 participants responded. An analysis of the responses showed that the programme, the practical work and the entire experience were most

positively received and highly regarded.  The contribution of the CALICO co-ordinator was particularly noted. One participant commented: "… did a phenomenal job in organising the CHEC event. She paid individual attention to everyone's needs." The opportunities for networking and collaboration with colleagues were valued as well.

Negative responses were primarily directed at two issues; the time allocated to the sessions and the duration of the programme (e.g. that the sessions were too long, or that there was not enough time for discussion or questions). A few noted that the conference room was too small. Although inadequate internet access and a power failure one night also detracted from the experience, it is nevertheless obvious that the whole exercise was received overwhelmingly positively.

In the final session, participants inquired about the possibility of follow-up learning activities, and how they might be afforded opportunities in their institutions to apply their new insights. This query resonated with the original request of the Library Directors that there should be a post-programme process to maintain and strengthen the collaborative bonds forged during the Academy. Opportunities had been created for cross-institutional task activities, delegates were encouraged to socialise with one another, and the *Vula* site was intended to foster ongoing communication. The authors are of the opinion that we have stimulated in the delegates a desire to learn more about research librarianship and to be more aware of the special needs of researchers.  Although the mandate did not extend beyond this Academy to create formal programmes for the future or devise institutional structures to ensure longevity of the benefits gained by delegates, this Academy had seemingly generated sufficient interest for CHEC to consider providing follow-up activities for this group of participants, as well as perhaps another similar intervention in a year or two's time for librarians who have not yet participated in either this or one of the previous RLC Academies. At the same time however, we also believe that Library Directors should facilitate or provide more opportunities for members of their staff to become involved or more involved in research-related activities and to encourage initiatives that are being explored or initiated.

**In conclusion**

We found the Academy to be a worthwhile and fulfilling experience for all concerned, and believe that its participants will be able to make at least some positive difference in supporting the research endeavour in the Western Cape.

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