



Commentary

Project Output versus Influence in Practice: Impact as a Dimension of Research Quality

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In an environment where resources are few, research funders are expected to focus on projects that demonstrate value for money. Thus, in the context of service provision, proposed research projects should actively contribute to the building of an evidence base that both supports decision-making and is actively deployed in practice.

The Research in Librarianship Impact Evaluation Study (RiLIES) (<http://lisresearch.org/rilies-project/>), which ran from February to July 2011, was initiated by the Library and Information Science Research Coalition to investigate the extent to which funded research projects in the domain of library and information science (LIS) influence practice in the U.K. It focused particularly on identifying factors that increase or hinder the impact of research findings on those who deliver library and information services. The project

findings derived from a review of the LIS literature on impact, a practitioner poll, case studies of five LIS research projects identified as “impactful”, three sector-specific focus groups, and a validation survey.

By the end of June 2011 the RiLIES team was in the latter stages of data collection for the project, and it was possible to report some of the preliminary findings at the 6th International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference (EBLIP6). The RiLIES team also took advantage of the large number of EBLIP6 delegates who work in healthcare and medical settings to conduct the last of the three sector-specific focus groups (<http://lisresearch.org/2011/07/04/links-between-research-and-practice-the-health-and-medical-librarians-perspectives/>) at the conference. The preliminary findings of the RiLIES project were relayed to the EBLIP6 conference audience

in the keynote presentation entitled “Project output versus influence in practice: impact as a dimension of research quality” delivered by Hazel Hall on Thursday, June 30, 2011. The context for these initial findings was set against a discussion of impact as conceived in librarianship and information science, with acknowledgement of both the difficulties of measuring impact and the importance of doing so. The full set of slides for the presentation can be found at:

(http://www.dcs.napier.ac.uk/~hazelh/esis/Hall_EBLIP6_2011.ppt).

By June 2011 some strong messages had already emerged from the RiLIES empirical data. The factors identified to date as determining a research project’s level of impact in practice related to: (1) initial project conception and implementation; (2) the means by which research output is disseminated; (3) the nature of research output; (4) the level of interest that the project generates amongst key LIS research information hubs; and (5) the context in which the target practitioner audience for the research operates.

In terms of where research effort should be directed, the London and Perth focus groups (academic and public librarians respectively), for example, emphasized the need for studies that are of direct relevance to practitioners, both in terms of “subject” and “context” (time, place, sector), and that these need to be on a scale for the project recommendations to be applicable across a range of contexts. Three of the “impactful” case studies highlighted the importance of research approach. Projects that deploy action research, mix in development and engagement, encourage community creation around the project, and involve high profile, prestigious partners are most likely to have strong impact amongst the practitioner community. In terms of dissemination, face-to-face routes are favoured most by practitioners. Textual sources need to be accessible, both in terms of their presentation and in terms of “physical” access. It was interesting in the

context of presenting these preliminary findings that three of the five individuals identified in the early poll for the RiLIES project as LIS research hubs were in the lecture hall: Andrew Booth, Alison Brettle and Hazel Hall (the others were Rhona Arthur and Phil Bradley). The last area for consideration in this presentation referred to the contexts in which LIS practitioners operate, and how often this hinders access to research, for example when training and travel budgets are cut.

The full analysis of the empirical data for the project was completed at the end of July 2011. This largely confirmed the findings from the earlier literature review: that there is a disconnect between LIS research and the practitioner community; that the level of impact a project enjoys depends mainly on how it is planned and conceived, the extent to which practitioners are involved in its execution, and how its findings are reported. Organizational factors that support a receptive target audience for research output are also of important to the question of impact. The project’s findings also generated new insights related to the roles of research leadership and sponsorship, and the means of involving practitioners in research projects. In particular, the findings highlighted a greater preference for face-to-face channels for the dissemination of research results than was previously reported, and revealed the role of social media in raising awareness of research for the first time in a study on this theme.

The RiLIES project has confirmed that where impact is measured as a dimension of research quality, a number of strategies should be deployed to extend project outcome reach. These need to ensure that the LIS research undertaken has high level support; the execution of LIS research involves practitioners; dissemination plans for LIS research take into account practitioner preferences for consuming research output; LIS research output is accessible to the target audience; and practitioners are given support to engage with research by their employers and professional

bodies, drawing on good practice within the broad community of librarians and information scientists.

The Research Information Network (RIN) (<http://www.rin.ac.uk>) will publish the full RiLIES project report on behalf of the LIS Research Coalition later this year. In addition, the project team will be disseminating the findings in several other ways, for example, in a presentation at Online 2011 at London Olympia on Thursday, December 1, 2011 (http://www.online-information.co.uk/online2011/visiting/seminar_description_online.html?presentation_id=1700), in a series of posts to the LIS Research Coalition blog at (<http://lisresearch.org/>) and in the peer-reviewed journal literature.

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