

Reflections on supporting research and being a researcher

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Introduction

I work at the University of Glasgow where I provide strategic development and management of library services delivery for the College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences. My role focuses primarily on research support, whether that be developing the research collection, researcher training, supporting literature searches for systematic reviews, or bibliometric and altmetric support. I also provide a liaison point between research staff and students and other library services such as the Open Access and Research Data Management teams.

As well as being a librarian, I am also a researcher as a current professional doctorate (DProf) candidate at the University of the West of Scotland.

From the earliest days of my library career I have always had a 'research mindset'. I would often seek to benchmark my service against another, learn from other sectors and professions and bring these experiences back to my workplace, but this never went further than being an internal exercise; I think this is the same for a lot of us.

That all changed when my previous employer offered its first professional doctorate programme – a chance to gain a doctoral qualification. A DProf is work-focused, so there is no need to take time out of work to study. Most study is self-determined and supervised and, therefore, similar to a doctor of philosophy (PhD). However, the DProf programme emphasises inter-professional learning and reflection, so there is an active online community via the university virtual learning environment, and we meet as a cohort four times a year for study weekends. These are a great chance to share professional practice with other sectors and develop inter-professional understanding. I am often surprised that many concerns that I consider unique to librarianship are shared by my fellow candidates in education, accountancy and health sectors, for example.

A DProf also differs to a PhD in that the first two years of study are taught, which gives candidates a supportive framework in which to develop advanced applied research skills whilst also developing an in-depth expertise in our research area. At the heart of a DProf is cultivating a deeper understanding of our profession and reflective practice in order to have a real impact in the profession itself.

Professional research problem

The second year of my study has focused on research ethics, finalising my literature review and research methodology. Studying at any UK university and being a librarian brings great strength into these areas of research. As a librarian, I am obliged to comply with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) ethical principles and code of professional practice, which have in turn provided guidelines for my own professional and research ethical practices. I also have access to a phenomenal number of resources through university, work and public libraries, through the SCONUL scheme in the UK, and through the British Library inter-library loans scheme for resources from abroad. The world's resources and how to access them really are at our fingertips.

Despite access to all these resources and expertise, one of my main professional reflections has been to ask where is the quality library and information science (LIS) research? My research is on the theme of digital competencies of university teaching staff. Whilst the digital competencies of students are relatively well researched, to date teaching staff have been an under-researched group. Despite this, one would have thought that there would be at least some academic literature on this topic within LIS, given the prominence of information and digital literacy in the sector. However, my literature review mostly contains articles from the education and IT sectors.

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Granted, neither digital nor information literacy is the sole domain of librarians, who are free to publish in journals across any sector, but I question why there is a lack of academic literature written by librarians and published in LIS journals. It would not appear to be a lack of research on my topic per se – there is a small amount of grey literature available, so is it a lack of professional confidence that stops us from publishing in ‘academic’ journals? Some have noted that LIS is a practitioner-based profession (Robinson and Bawden, 2013), one that sits outside academia. Some have questioned where the library research community is (Blakesley, 2016) and why we hire others to conduct our research rather than developing our own research skills. I would not go as far as to say that we cannot research, but as a profession we need to move beyond single, small-scale case studies and expand the research methodologies we use.

Benefits of research and publication

There is a simple answer as to why we should engage with research and publish in academic journals – our profession needs it, and it can be a great benefit to you, your work and your career.

As a librarian–researcher, I am now able to relate better to research students and staff. I can share my experiences with students and reflect on my journey so far, helping researchers to become more efficient in their practices – far more than I was able to do in the past. I can also reflect upon the other inter- and cross-professional support available to research students, thus enabling them to strengthen their networks whilst also improving mine. I can sit in a room with academic staff and feel I am an equal, albeit one with more limited experience to date. Anecdotally, I feel that I have become more accepted by my academic colleagues simply because I am on an academic par with them; I am no longer ‘just’ a librarian or member of the non-academic university staff. Deciding to embark on higher study of any type is difficult, but the benefits of doing so are great. I even have a new job!

To return to my professional reflection: It is notable that CILIP-funded research on the value of trained and professionally registered LIS workers found a large gap in ‘published evidence on the effectiveness, impact and value of the majority of library, information and knowledge sectors’ (Brettell and Maden, 2015, p. 20) – this despite research skills being part of the CILIP Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, 2016). It is quite clear that unless we fill this gap by formally publishing our research and improving our research methodologies, we shall never be able to prove our value, and our profession will always be under threat.

Towards an academic profession

LIS is a profession based in practitioner research. We are not generally taught ‘how to research’ in our post-graduate programmes, at least not systematically throughout the curriculum (McMenemy, 2010), and there are many individual and structural barriers to undertaking research (Pickton, 2016).

Academic libraries are in a prime position to conduct research, to work with and learn from our academic colleagues. To this extent, we should be learning from the efforts of the University of Northampton Library and Learning Services to build individual and structural capacity for conducting research (Pickton, 2016). More support for these initiatives is needed throughout academic libraries and the sector more generally.

I have tried to elucidate some of the benefits that I have witnessed from my own experiences of doctoral study. Whilst studying for a doctorate will not suit everyone, it is a route to self- and professional fulfilment. Regardless of whether many follow me into doctoral research, research practices and professional reflection should nevertheless be built into our daily work.

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I hope that the next generation of LIS students and doctoral candidates will have the opportunity to draw upon a wide range of high-quality academic literature produced by librarians and published in LIS journals, even though I won't be able to see those publications in time to include them in my doctoral thesis.

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