
LIS researchers and practitioners: creating a research culture

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The Occasion

The LIS research landscape: a review and prognosis was funded by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and undertaken by staff at the Centre for Information Research (CIRT) at the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE). The overall aim of the project was to review LIS sector research over the past five years and to make a prognosis for research over the next three years.

Abstract

The LIS research landscape: a review and prognosis, was a short research project initiated in response to a request from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The overall aim of the project was to review LIS domain research over the past five years (1997-2002) and to make a prognosis for research over the next three years (2002-2005). This exercise identified a number of issues of concern to those involved in research in the LIS domain. One of the most interesting recurring themes to emerge was the need to ensure that research is disseminated effectively within and beyond the LIS domain and to provide mechanisms to allow findings to feed into practice. This article describes the issues surrounding this strand of the review.

Introduction

During the first six months of 2002, the Centre for Information Research (CIRT) at the University of Central England, Birmingham conducted a brief examination of the research landscape for the broad library and information (LIS) domain. This project, entitled, *The LIS research landscape: a review and prognosis*, was initiated in response to a request from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The Director of CILIP, Bob McKee, had identified the need for the examination of the current state of research in the LIS domain, in his short article in the *Library Association Record* in June 2001 (McKee, 2001).

The project was considered timely, as the traditional research funder of LIS research, the Library and Information Commission (LIC), had recently ceased to exist and had become part of a broader Commission, Resource. This new body has different funding priorities and a remit including archives and museums. Concerns had been expressed within the LIS community that research funding had decreased and that there were fewer opportunities for funding for research in professional areas and for serendipitous research. This short project aimed to investigate this concern further and to build on work undertaken over the last few years, such as *Prospects* (LIC, 1998) and *Review of Research Funding for LIS* (Haynes, Streatfield and Cookman, 2000).

The overall aim of the project was, therefore, to review research across all sectors of LIS over the past five years (1997-2002) and to make a prognosis for research over the next three years (2002-2005). Within this aim, the specific objectives of the work were to provide the CILIP with:

- A broad picture of the LIS research landscape over the past five years, examining research trends, priorities, funding sources, both current and defunct
- An overview of LIS research priorities for practitioners across the LIS sectors during 2002-5
- An analysis of the potential sources of funding for the stated research priorities
- A clear picture of the potential gaps in funding for priority research activities within the LIS domain
- Recommendations to support policy decision making on whether to fund specific research and on which research priority areas and which organisations should be lobbied to support LIS research.

Methodology

Methodological, time and financial constraints limited the work and it was not intended to provide a complete picture of all research in the domain. Indeed, it is debatable whether a complete picture of research activities could be constructed given the great diversity within the broad LIS domain of real and potential research funders and of organisations involved in conducting research.

This first stage of the research involved reviewing the existing literature on research funding in the LIS domain. The literature included:

- LIC reports on research in the field (for example the LIC *Research Plan*)
- Resource reports and other publications on research priorities
- Papers and articles on research funding via Research Councils and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Additionally, reports and papers on research in specific LIS sectors, such as work conducted on public library research activities (eg Pluse and Prytech, 1996) and on the JISC initiatives in Higher Education, were reviewed. These documents were analysed to provide a broad picture of research activity, priorities, funding sources and research-active organisations within the LIS domain over the past five years.

The next stage of the project consisted of a survey of a sample of practitioners, funders and research organisations to investigate three broad areas:

- Recent research funded or conducted
- Views on research priorities 2002-5
- Views on sources of funding for these priorities.

The survey consisted of two parts: a questionnaire and follow-up interviews involving LIS organisations across twelve sectors identified as: public libraries, universities, colleges, schools, medical/health bodies, library/information schools, government libraries, commercial organisations, industrial organisations, trade unions/professional bodies, regional and national

library bodies and LIS research funders. The survey focused on these areas as core LIS sectors and did not include those organisations that work in areas close to the LIS core, such as archives or museums.

The research team initially planned to send questionnaires to organisations selected from the findings of the literature review and in liaison with the CILIP. It was thought to be appropriate to contact funding organisations, Information Studies departments in HEIs and other organisations such as CILIP special interest groups by post. However, it was decided that a more appropriate way to contact other LIS organisations and ensure spread from across all sectors was via email discussion lists. The research team also anticipated that this might encourage individuals working in a greater variety of posts in LIS organisations to participate in the research.

Information and requests for participants was, therefore, posted on fourteen mailing lists. These included general lists such as: LIS-LINK@JISCMail.AC.UK, LIS-BAILER@JISCMail.AC.UK and LIS-IIS@JISCMail.AC.UK, as well as more specialist lists targeted at specific sectors such as health libraries, school libraries and academic libraries. It was believed that this combination of lists would publicise the project to a wide range of individuals within the profession and allow individuals and institutions from all sectors the opportunity to be included in the research.

Thirty-eight questionnaires were requested in response to postings on these lists and twenty completed questionnaires were returned. A further ten replies were received in response to questionnaires posted to funders, library schools and professional organisations. Although the response rate was lower than anticipated, the sample did include representatives from each of the twelve sectors of the LIS domain, as identified above.

A telephone survey was conducted to follow up the questionnaire responses. This focused on research priorities and potential funding sources and explored respondents' views on changes to the funding of research and the implications of these changes for the domain as a whole. The telephone survey also asked about related areas of concern highlighted by the literature review, for example, staff training needs, dissemination and the transfer of research findings into practice. The research team had anticipated that a maximum of twelve telephone interviews would be conducted. However, to attempt to compensate for the relatively low response rate to the questionnaire, it was decided to interview all those respondents who had indicated an interest in taking part in this stage of the research. Twenty-one respondents had indicated that they might be prepared to take part in a short telephone interview and, in total, seventeen interviews were conducted; the remaining four respondents declined to take part because of time pressures or other commitments.

Initial findings

Data from the literature, questionnaire responses, and notes made during telephone interviews were analysed using content analysis techniques to extract patterns and trends and to form some conclusions about the present and future shape of the LIS research landscape.

This exercise identified a number of issues of concern to those involved in research in the LIS domain. One of the strongest themes to emerge from the data was the need to ensure that research is disseminated effectively within and beyond the LIS domain and to ensure that mechanisms exist to allow findings to feed into practice. There was some evidence of this problem from the literature review. For example, Booth introduced the idea of a "research-

practice gap”, which is created by the failure of practitioners to implement research findings and the failure of researchers to address questions relevant to practitioners (Booth, 2001). Cullen described the suspicion of research that often exists among LIS professionals and argued that “we do not make enough use of research to improve services or practice” (Cullen, 1998).

The dissemination of research findings

Interviewees reflected on the difficulties of ensuring research was widely disseminated; many felt that findings often deserved a wider audience than they currently received. The plethora of LIS journals targeted at different audiences can mean that, unless research is reported in a range of journals, it is only likely to have an impact on a limited segment of the LIS community.

Interviewees acknowledged that a range of people might have an interest in the findings of LIS research. Several commented on the need for research to be disseminated beyond the LIS domain as many findings would be of interest to other professions and disciplines. For example, research into school libraries might be of interest to teachers and projects concentrated with electronic information sources may be relevant to those working in information technology and computing. Interviewees pointed out the importance of targeting dissemination and explicitly working with audiences to ensure research reached them by the most appropriate means. The need to report results in a way that is of interest to the particular audience was believed to be especially important when addressing those from outside the LIS domain.

One interviewee admitted that, as an academic researcher, her priority had to be to publish articles in top ranked scholarly publications because this was the emphasis of the RAE. For this reason, many academic researchers were less concerned about disseminating research to policymakers and practitioners. This interviewee admitted that researchers perhaps do not consider the needs of the practitioner as much as they should and so research findings are not disseminated adequately outside the academic world.

However, a different view was taken by another academic researcher, who claimed that her department “always consciously tried” to write for the professional press in addition to producing a research report and scholarly articles. She felt it was important that research was reported in “things people will actually read”. Another interviewee agreed that dissemination needed to be, “straight to the point and in something practitioners are likely to read”. One practitioner admitted that she did not regularly read academic library journals and argued that research should be disseminated in more popular journals with a wider circulation such as *Library and Information Update* or *Public Library Journal (PLJ)*.

However, some academics reported difficulties in getting articles published in professional journals, as the editors were not always convinced that reports of research findings were of direct value and relevance to their readers. This problem of a lack of communication between academic researchers and LIS practitioners was not confined to published dissemination however. Interviewees thought it would be equally difficult to reach both the research and practitioner communities through conference dissemination as few conferences attracted both academics and library staff or managers.

Ways to improve dissemination

In 1998, *Prospects* argued that a dissemination strategy should be costed into all research proposals (LIC, 1998). This view was echoed by several interviewees in the *LIS Research Landscape* investigation who argued that all funders should require dissemination as part of the research 'package'. They felt that funding to ensure findings could be adequately disseminated and adopted in practical situations where appropriate should be built into proposals from the start. It was pointed out that some research is already designed with built-in mechanisms to disseminate and to transfer the findings into practice. In particular, one interviewee praised the dissemination activities of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which sends out press releases and publishes research results in its own journals. This approach allows articles to be "written" by a short phone call between an academic and a journalist. An interviewee who had experience of this process described it as "a wonderful system" and one which should be copied by other funders.

Electronic sources of dissemination, in particular mailing lists, were mentioned as being useful by a number of interviewees. These were seen as a more immediate and less time-consuming form of dissemination than journals; they have the potential to reach people across and beyond the LIS domain. A LIS e-print archive was a further development suggested by one interviewee.

Transferring research into practice

As the Public Libraries Research Group acknowledged, there is a need to educate senior practitioners to regard research as necessary and fruitful and also a need to ensure that good advice gets carried into effective practice (Public Libraries Research Group of the Society of Chief Librarians, 1998).

While interviewees in the *LIS Research Landscape* review adopted fairly relaxed attitudes towards dissemination on the whole, the transfer of research into practice was regarded as a much greater problem. However, it was argued that this was a hurdle that was not limited to the LIS domain. A number complained that, after a period of initial dissemination, research often does not get taken any further. The need for research to have practical, action outcomes that can be developed in the workplace was stressed on a number of occasions. In the view of one interviewee, research findings are "useless" unless they are adopted by practitioners. The domain requires research that "lives on" by being transformed into practical actions:

Research needs to be useful and to be implemented, so it has a life, is not just shelved.

Several interviewees thought that dissemination needed to focus on helping people to develop and deliver services rather than simply reporting findings. However, this was clearly not always the main concern for academic researchers. An interviewee from a HEI admitted that this activity was not viewed as a priority because it was not an outcome on which universities are assessed.

The research culture in the LIS community

Interviewees felt that, at present, the greater part of the LIS community does not regard itself as a research-orientated profession and this lack of respect and enthusiasm for research made it difficult for researchers to get their message across. One practitioner-researcher was disappointed to find that people within her own organisation were reluctant to attend presentations outlining the outcomes of research; the majority of her colleagues did not appear to appreciate the significance of research findings for their day-to-day work. Convincing practitioners of the importance of research is clearly a long-term issue, which interviewees felt needed to start with students in library schools at the moment. However, it

was acknowledged that this approach would not solve the immediate problems facing the domain. More opportunities for staff development was suggested as one means to improve the current standing of LIS research. "Evidence-based librarianship" was seen as key by two interviewees. It was felt that, as this practice was being adopted by an increasing number of professions, LIS should take a similar approach to improve its image and professional standing.

In order for research findings to be successfully transferred into working practice, interviewees stressed that the practical applications and benefits of research needed to be made clear to practitioners. Most agreed that practitioners would be most interested in research projects that had the potential to make their work easier or allowed them to offer a better service to users. In general terms, one interviewee felt that it was often easiest to persuade practitioners to take research findings on board when they were related to a new service; changing established working practices was seen as much more problematic. Reflecting on the attitude of practitioners to implementing research findings, one interviewee felt their "attitude can range from indifference to hostility". Another interviewee suggested a "change agent" as a way to take things forward and implement research findings when people were reluctant to try out new ideas.

At a cross-sectoral level, the application of research was thought to be particularly limited. It was acknowledged to be difficult enough to implement research conducted in the same sector; convincing practitioners to adopt new practices as a result of research originating in a different sector was even more of a challenge.

Joint research

Several interviewees felt that academics and practitioners working together on research projects was now a more widespread phenomenon than it had been in the past. However, while some had been involved on a number of collaborative projects, others had no such experiences. One interviewee said that, while she was not adverse to the idea, it had not been possible to arrange because "everyone is so busy".

Joint research involving practitioners and academics and was recommended by several interviewees as one of the most effective ways in which to transfer research into practice. A frequent comment was that a collaborative approach is a good way to achieve a balance between practitioners, who may have a tendency to be inward looking, and academics, who sometimes appear divorced from the real world. Joint working can help practitioners to appreciate the potential benefits of research and, equally, it can act as a means to ensure that academic researchers have a "good feel for development needs on the ground" and engage in research that is actually relevant to the needs of practitioners. As one interviewee said, involving both academics and practitioners gives "a different perspective" to research. However, both groups need to have confidence in each other and to communicate effectively. Academics admitted they were frequently unaware of constraints operating in practice, such as a lack of resources, in the face of which, it can be difficult for researchers to have any influence. The guidance of practitioners was crucial in ensuring that research takes account of the circumstances within which libraries and information services function.

Several practitioners commented that they benefited from working with academic researchers as such collaboration helped to give their research "academic standing" and meant that it carried more weight in the research field. It was believed that involving academic researchers would ensure more rigorous academic standards and mean that the work done was more likely

to benefit professional practice. Conversely, working with practitioners and involving working library and information services gave greater credibility to the academic research within the practitioner community. Several interviewees thought that purely academic research was often viewed with scepticism by practitioners, but involvement of library and information service staff in the research process could help to overcome these negative attitudes and to communicate the benefits of research.

One interviewee thought that collaborative projects could be thought of as a way of disseminating research deeper into the practitioner community. Joint working helped to show that research can have a practical meaning and made applied outcomes more likely, either immediately or in the future.

There were, however, a number of problems identified that prevented this type of collaboration being as effective as it otherwise might be. Several interviewees referred to the difficulties that can occur if academics and practitioners do not follow the same agendas. For example, practitioners might have more immediate concerns, while academics prefer to want to work to longer-term goals. Another potential barrier was that day-to-day concerns, such as management demands may mean practitioners were not able to devote as much time to the work as a dedicated researcher would; practical demands mean that they are not able to be as committed or focused. To help alleviate this problem, it was suggested that academics needed ensure their research methodology was simple and straightforward and their expectations of individuals working in library services were reasonable. It was felt that this might encourage more people to become involved in research.

Conclusion

To successfully disseminate and implement research findings, it is clear that co-operation between the research community and practitioners is required. However, the backing of product developers, the government, publishers and other commercial organisations is also vital. They need to support research through direct funding; the implementation of research recommendations; and general awareness raising.

It is clear that the length of time taken for research findings to be implemented is not always fully appreciated. A number of interviewees said they had the impression that many people were looking for the instant application of research ideas. However, practitioners cannot realistically be expected to digest all research and implement it immediately, indeed, it may not be appropriate to do so. The bulk of research is added to the general store of knowledge and subsequently feeds into practice over a number of years. For example, research may be incorporated into LIS teaching and only be implemented when students become managers of library and information services in future decades.

The issues relating to the dissemination of research and transfer into practice described in this article represent just one strand of the *LIS research landscape review and prognosis* report. However, along with funding issues and research strategy, it has emerged as one of the most important issues facing the LIS research community in the medium and long term.

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