Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Based Research Activities, Interests and Opportunities Exist for Practitioners in all Library Sectors in the British Isles

A review of:
McNicol, Sarah. "Is Research an Untapped Resource in the Library and Information Profession?" Journal of Librarianship and Information Science 36.3 (September 2004):119-26.

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Abstract

Objective – To scope the range, nature and challenges of present, planned and future research by practitioners within libraries in the British Isles.

Design – A series of survey questionnaires sent by mail.

Setting – Public, academic, health, special and school libraries of the British Isles.

Subjects – A total of 2384 questionnaires were sent out and 334 responses were received. 62 academic libraries, 83 health libraries, 78 public libraries, 63 school libraries and 48 special libraries participated in the study.

Methods – This study was undertaken in 2003 by a research team at the University of Central England. Survey questionnaires were sent by mail to library directors in all public library authorities, academic libraries, health libraries and special libraries in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In addition, questionnaires were sent to the librarians in all state and independent schools within a sample of nine local education authorities.

Each participant was asked to identify past and future research issues of interest and the barriers to research practice within their library. Research was defined to include work on both externally funded and in-house projects and examples of the types of activities that this might include were provided.

Main results – Half the respondents reported that they had been involved in some form of research in the past two years,

with the lowest level of involvement from school libraries and the highest in public libraries. Generally, only the library directly involved in conducting the research made use of the findings and a gap in the dissemination of results was identified across sectors. User surveys were the most common form of research undertaken across libraries and slightly fewer respondents intended to carry out research in the coming twelve months than had in the past (the area most commonly mentioned was user surveys). Information and communications technology (ICT) was an area of planned future research in all libraries, as were user needs and user behaviour. The most frequently cited barriers to research activity across all sectors were lack of time and financial resources. Staff skills and the lack of focus on practical problems to solve were indicated as a barrier in health, public and academic libraries.

Libraries reported a range of common uses for the research findings including: informing strategic and service planning; providing benchmarking data and measuring the effectiveness of services; identification of marketing and public relations opportunities; discovery of staff training needs; and use of the results to demonstrate the value of libraries to funding bodies.

Conclusion – This study provides insight into practitioner-focused areas of research interest and possible areas for future investigation. As the author reports in her conclusion, the survey results cannot be considered representative of the wider population.

Since research interests often overlap, a sector wide or cross-sectoral research approach should be considered to allow library staff to identify and resolve common problems. Wide dissemination of research results within the practitioner community would be of benefit to all. Greater

communication between practitioner and information science communities is also encouraged, as these communities' work is mutually beneficial.

Commentary

This study is a tremendous first step towards the identification of evidence based research activities, interests and opportunities for practitioners in all library sectors in the British Isles. This article should encourage those carrying out research practice in the British Isles, since it highlights the amount of research activity happening within the library community.

Key problems identified by this study were the lack of recognition and poor dissemination of practitioner-led research findings within the research community, as well as the tendency for practitioners to rarely see themselves as active members of the research community.

Further information about the design of survey instruments, mechanics of data collection, pre-testing of instruments, research ethics approval, how confidentiality was maintained, mechanisms for distributing the surveys, and follow-up with those invited to participate would help provide greater insight into the results. It was difficult to assess the validity or reliability of the results without the survey instruments. For example, the author notes that librarians did not report some research activity because they did not feel it would be of interest outside of their organization, yet there was no indication as to how this conclusion was reached. This research is timely, and access to the survey instruments could peak interest from other researchers who may wish to apply this study across other geographic regions.

The survey focused upon library directors in all sectors, with the exception of school

libraries, where it was directed to a sample group of practitioners. No indication was given about the collection of demographic information for either the institution or the individual completing the survey. These demographic variables could reveal factors that may have influenced participation and could provide a rich context for the results reported. Finally, throughout the article there was a mixture of reporting about libraries and librarians. It was not clear whether the survey was aimed at recording activities of institutions or individual practitioners, and the results were presented as if the study had investigated both.

A further study of this subject would be of great interest to both library practitioners and researchers who wish to know how evidence based practice is being carried out in the British Isles and beyond. A comprehensive survey should be undertaken and reported in a manner that assures the reader of a valid and authentic research approach. Further study with recommended strategies for improving the perception of practitioners as a part of the research community, the dissemination of research within the practitioner community and communication of research and results between the academic and practitioner communities would be of value.