Inside-Out? Discussions in Research Librarianship

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Abstract: Libraries are continually evolving to support the processes of academic and other research, which increasingly involves use of technology and occurs in digital environments. Does this "inside-out library" signal a need for librarians supporting researchers to also evolve their digital capabilities? What skills do inside-out librarians require, how can they acquire these skills and how much discipline specific knowledge do they need to be effective? At the 2019 eResearchNZ conference a group of librarians discussed these and other related questions. The authors used an informal focus-group methodology to capture the major themes of the discussion, and the results indicate that there is no one right answer. Instead there are many different pathways and opportunities for librarians in the inside-out library, and personal attributes can play as much a role in being successful as specific qualifications and skill sets.

Keywords: Researcher-facing, Librarians, Capabilities, Inside-out, Skills, Attributes

Introduction

Supporting researchers towards success is one of the key mission objectives of libraries in research institutions, whether these libraries serve universities, Crown Research Institutions, government or corporate entities. The changing nature of researcher support in libraries is raising a number of challenges in the way these researcher-facing librarians are required to operate.

Lorcan Dempsey has coined the term "inside-out" to describe how academic libraries are increasingly supporting the processes of research at their institutions (Dempsey, 2016). Digital scholarship, changes in scholarly communication practices, advancing technology and the growing use of bibliometrics for research evaluation are all fuelling changes in library research support services. Researcher-facing librarians are increasingly being required to engage with the processes, not just the products, of research.

As part of the eResearchNZ 2019 conference, librarians Shiobhan Smith (University of Otago) and Jo Simons (University of Auckland) presented a lightning talk and lively follow up discussion on the topic "What is the inside-out librarian". The lightning talk was designed to provoke debate about the knowledge, skills and qualifications required by researcher-facing librarians working in this emerging inside-out model. Researcher-facing librarians often work in university libraries and have tasks primarily focused on directly interacting with researchers to support their research. The lightning talk introduced these questions:

- What skills do inside-out librarians need?
- How can inside-out librarians acquire these skills?
- How well do current formal library qualifications (MLIS or equivalent) prepare librarians for working in inside-out libraries?
- How much discipline specific knowledge do inside-out librarians need?
- Are attributes more important than qualifications for inside-out librarians?
- Should inside-out librarians have postgraduate research qualifications e.g. research masters or above?
- Have libraries outsourced too many IT tasks and lost valuable skill sets within the profession?
- Do we need more inside-out librarians with STEM backgrounds?
- What are researcher expectations and are we able to meet these?

The follow-up discussion probed deeper into the questions, attempting to deconstruct them further, and perhaps even to answer some. Focus tended to solidify around questions on qualifications, how to upskill and researcher perceptions. Attendees were nearly all librarians from New Zealand university libraries, with most of the universities represented.

Literature Review

Academic libraries are being affected by forces such as scarce resourcing, technological change and tertiary-sector restructuring. The profession is changing at a rapid pace to meet new demands in areas such as digital scholarship, research data management and bibliometrics. However, Dahl (2018) argues there are deficiencies in librarian knowledge and skills, and institutions are not necessarily investing in the infrastructure and staff development required to equip librarians for "inside-out" roles supporting 21st century scholarship. This skills gap is seen internationally in research libraries and has been apparent for some time. A 2016 survey of 124 American research

libraries identified significant skills gaps in support of digital scholarship areas such as visualisation, computational text analysis, statistical analysis and software development in over 50% of responding institutions (Mulligan, 2016, pp. 2–11). This lack of investment is echoed by Cox (2017) and Skene (2018), who add that the need to do more with less is challenging libraries to balance blended professional positions, where librarians have broad generalist knowledge and skills, with specialised positions that are more likely to be non-professional and technology focused. A number of libraries are facing these challenges by restructuring researcher-facing staff into functional, rather than subject, groupings (Cox, 2017; Orcutt et al., 2016; Skene, 2018). In particular, this team-based support of the researcher allows library staff to develop deep and specific technical support skills (Jester, 2016). There are excellent examples of research libraries creating training programmes and developing a learning culture amongst their staff (Freeman, 2016). However, whether in functional or subject roles, there remains questions over type, breadth and depth of knowledge and skills librarians require (Glusker & Exner, 2018; Raju, 2017; Skene, 2018). Furthermore, there is growing debate in the literature about whether the traditional Library and Information Studies (LIS) qualification is capable of preparing academic librarians for these new roles and demands, and secondly how much academic libraries should recruit beyond the profession to ensure they can be responsive and innovative (Glusker & Exner, 2018; Gonzales, 2019; Haycock, 2018; Raju, 2017, 2019; Skene, 2018).

Discussion

The lightning talk and follow-discussion brought these debates in the literature to a group of New Zealand librarians to consider in the context of New Zealand researcher-facing librarians. The following themes were generated from the follow-up discussion and have been circulated to those who attended for verification.

Theme 1: Personal attributes are key

It was generally agreed by the discussion group that librarians must be comfortable with uncertainty. This means accepting that they may not have the answer. More training will not necessarily make them feel more prepared to deal with challenges that may arise. Confidence comes with exposure, having conversations and building relationships with people who do know the answers.

Theme 2: The problem of traditional service model of librarianship

Traditionally libraries like to produce polished services and tools. Librarians like to provide the right answers and to be seen as knowledgeable experts. Silos are often maintained both within libraries and between libraries and other support services to protect services and ensure that things are done right. However, the group felt that librarians working with researchers should be prepared to say "I don't know the answer" and break through silos to pool skills and knowledge to solve a problem. Library management need to give librarians space to experiment and fail, and encourage a culture of rational risk-taking. Equally, librarians need to give themselves permission to take risks and fail. It was noted that having conversations where you present a different view or challenge a researcher's thinking are extremely difficult for librarians working in the traditional service model of librarianship, yet are an integral part of being a researcher-facing librarian in the inside-out model.

Theme 3: The value of qualifications – level, discipline and the place of the MIS (or equivalent)

There was robust discussion on the value of having certain qualifications to be an effective researcher-facing librarian. There were mixed opinions on whether librarians working with researchers would benefit from having a PhD. It was noted that qualifications can be a type of currency at Universities, and the PhD is valued above all others. It also signals that the librarian has a shared experience with the researcher and is a significant factor in opening doors and enabling the establishment of relationships. There was clearly concern amongst our participants regarding the ability of the MIS qualification to prepare librarians for working with researchers. Having a professional library qualification is no longer seen as a requirement to being employed in a research-facing librarian position.

Attracting people with STEM qualifications into researcher-facing librarian roles is becoming more of a priority, but we need to think about how we integrate these researchers into library positions. The personal and professional attributes of candidates, particularly around relationship building and understanding of research context, were considered to be more important to the ability to effectively carry out these roles. It was suggested that the PhD and the MIS shouldn't be the only options to entering a library position at this level and that more energy is needed in providing upskilling opportunities once in the job.

A tangential line of discussion also considered whether the name librarian even needs to be in the position title. The feeling in the group was mixed with some concerned about the implications on librarianship as a profession if the title of librarian is removed, and others noting that aligning titles with those more commonly used in the wider

university community helps with outreach and marketing.

Theme 4: Librarians supporting researchers or researching librarians?

It was suggested that another pathway to building shared experiences with researchers is to make completing research a part of the role. By becoming research active themselves, librarians can experience many of the highs and lows of getting ethics consent, managing data, reviewing literature, analysing results, becoming published, sharing data and publications and so forth. However, this requires library management to allow space for non-business-as-usual experimentation and research. Another aspect of this could be an increased focus on evidence-based library practice, where the research carried out could be both of direct use to the library and publishable in a research context.

Theme 5: What do researchers think about librarians working in this space? Do they think about them at all?

General consensus was that librarians are not very good at marketing our value to researchers, making it more challenging to develop relationships and partnerships in research spaces. This is complicated by researchers also not being aware that librarians are active in the space of supporting digital scholarship, scholarly communication and data management. The discussion also revealed that libraries are not consistent in what research support activities they do and do not support. For example, some librarians in the discussion group were already actively engaged in research data management education and support, while others did not have this as a task in their job at all.

It was suggested that librarians need to put themselves into the spaces where the researchers are and raise awareness. That means attending research committees, departmental meetings, seminars and other similar gatherings. It was also suggested that completing some tasks for researchers, rather than solely focusing on skill development, may be an avenue for librarians to demonstrate worth and make a tangible difference to research practices. However this was met with some resistance on the basis that libraries are not resourced for ongoing support of such services and these sorts of activities may not help researchers long term, especially those who go on to careers outside of universities where they are required to complete those tasks themselves.

Theme 6: Building confidence

To build confidence as a researcher-facing librarian it was generally felt that librarians need to be prepared to have conversations about how researchers work, not just about what they produce. Topics that the group felt were good places to begin those conversations included publishing decisions and bibliometrics, preprints, open-access policies and persistent identifiers.

Conclusion

Although the notes above are arranged in tidy, discrete themes, the actual discussion was fluid and the themes interrelated. No concrete conclusions were made, and while some themes tended to generate strong consensus, others were more polarising. The question initially posed in the lightning talk was "what is the inside-out librarian?" From the follow-up discussion we may discern that this librarian may or may not:
- hold a professional qualification,
- have a PhD or Research Masters,
- come from a STEM background,
- support all the areas identified as the core concerns of the inside-out library model.

They will need opportunities to:
- talk to researchers, attend project group briefings, departmental meetings etc.,
- further their professional development through on-the-job training,
- take risks and try new ideas even if they don't succeed.
- They will also need support from library management to:
- be researching librarians,
- have the time to experiment,
- have frank conversations with researchers on sensitive, emerging and sometimes controversial issues,
- work alongside researchers and experience the process of producing research.

Jo Simons and Shiobhan Smith are keen to continue these conversations. If you wish to contribute, please contact them:
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