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Documenting practitioners' research experiences in the Australian Library and Information Science profession: A critical review

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Abstract

More and more the library and information science (LIS) practitioner is being called upon to incorporate research into their professional practice. This paper presents a critical review of relevant literature documenting LIS practitioners' experience with research. The paper explores the level of practitioner engagement with research, types of research activity, and the barriers and enablers to practitioner engagement in research as documented over the past two decades. This review reveals that there is considerable interest in supporting LIS practitioner-conducted research. A number of activities and initiatives in Australia and internationally are enhancing relationships between LIS research and practice.

Introduction

Like any professional field, library and information science (LIS) needs to continually grow, update, and develop its body of knowledge; this work enables practitioners to make appropriate decisions and improvements with guidance and direction from the relevant research literature (Hall, 2010, p. 85; McMenemy, 2010, p.321). Over the last two decades, the evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) movement has turned a spotlight on the research evidence base of the field, and a 'research-practice' gap is now well acknowledged (Booth, 2001; Haddow and Klobas, 2004; Koufogiannakis and Crumley, 2006). Practitioner involvement in research is one solution suggested to help close the 'research-practice gap' and to increase the impact of LIS research on professional practice and the advancement of the profession (Haddow and Klobas, 2004 and Koufogiannakis and Crumley, 2006).

This paper explores relevant literature documenting practitioners' experiences with research, with a focus on both Australian and international contexts. The paper explores the level of practitioner engagement with research, types of research activity, and the barriers and enablers to practitioner engagement in research as documented over the past two decades. By drawing this literature together, this review will inform future efforts towards developing research capacity within the professional LIS community and enhancing the relationship between research and practice, overall. Understanding the current state of the literature in this area will build a more robust research evidence base for the LIS profession, as well as for academic scholars who are interested in engaging with practitioners and/or encouraging adoption of research results.

Reviewing the Literature

There is a clear trend in the literature that promotes the view that library and information science practitioners should be engaging with research in practice and, ideally, also be involved in conducting research. This argument stems from two perspectives: 1) that research activity benefits practitioners on an individual level; and, 2) that research activity benefits the field at large, by closing the research-practice gap in both the evidence base and between researchers and practitioners themselves (Haddow and Klobas, 2004 and Koufogiannakis and Crumley, 2006). Research conducted by practitioners is encouraged as a “professional development” activity and a way to “give back” to the profession (Koufogiannakis and Crumley, 2006, p. 337). Career advancement, demonstrating value and impact of information services, and guiding improvements to services, are other reasons practitioners should engage with and conduct research (Lessick, 2016, p. 169). On a whole-of-profession level however, some literature suggests that the obligation to continue the growth in professional knowledge and credibility is set squarely on the LIS practitioner (Joint, 2005, p. 290-291; Powell, Baker and Mika, 2002, p. 49). However, accrediting bodies do list research skills as foundational to the profession; the Australian Library and Information Association, for example, notes that professional must “use research skills to provide appropriate information to users” and that “research methods” skills are expected of experience or senior practitioners¹. Similarly, the American Library Association includes research as important “to the advancement of the field’s knowledge base” and includes research skills as core elements for LIS curricula (see <http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/sites/ala.org.accreditedprograms/files/content/standar>

¹ For details: <https://www.alia.org.au/foundation-knowledge-skills-and-attributes-relevant-information-professionals-working-archives>

ds/Standards_2015_adopted_02-02-15.pdf). Whether LIS practitioners share these views about their role in research, and the perceived benefits to them, is yet to be fully understood.

Practitioner involvement with LIS research: International perspectives

Few empirical studies have been undertaken to understand the extent to which (and how) LIS practitioners engage with, and contribute to, the research evidence base. Varying levels of reading and applying research literature to professional practice is documented in three studies in the United States of America (US) and Canada. Powell et al (2002) found almost 90% of professional association members regularly read research from journals, while a more recent study of US health sciences librarians found only one third of participants read research literature once a month (Lessick et al, 2016, p. 167). In another study of US academic librarians, Kennedy and Brancolini (2012) found most participants indicated that reading research was an assumed part of doing their job. Applying the results of research to practice does not always follow, however, as only approximately half of participants reported doing so (Powell et al, 2002 and Lessick et al, 2016). This appears consistent with the finding that where respondents reported “very little skill” was the ability to understand and assess the validity of research results (Lessick et al, 2016, p. 169). While these studies found an overall desire by practitioners to learn more about research, respondents’ perceived research capacity, their lack of time, and the perceived lack of relevance of research to practice, affected the extent to which LIS practitioners were able to effectively engage with research literature (Lessick et al, 2016, p. 169; Powell et al, 2002, p. 57-58).

Studies related to practitioners’ experiences with doing research often focus on their research output and productivity. Influencing factors such as motivation, research skills and knowledge are well acknowledged in the literature, including enablers and barriers (see Powell et al, 2002; McNicol, 2004; Clapton, 2010; Klobas and Clyde, 2010; Kennedy and Brancolini, 2012; Lessick et al, 2016). Studies that examined practitioner-conducted research found that on average over half of practitioners design and conduct research (Powell et al, 2002, p. 58; Lessick et al, 2016, p. 168). However, it is not known what definition of ‘research’ was used to measure this activity. In cross-sector comparisons of practitioner authorship, Finlay et al (2013, p. 410) found that the number of journal articles written by librarians had decreased between 2002 and 2011, but the number of journal articles that had been written collaboratively (with academics) had doubled over this period. This appears consistent with the desire from practitioners to collaborate on research projects found by

Lessick et al (2016, p. 169). Opportunities to do research with academics and/or more experienced practitioner-researchers were welcomed (Lessick et al, 2016, p. 169). This may be a reflection of the most commonly reported barriers to practitioners doing research – time, a lack of skills, and a lack of confidence (Lessick et al, 2016, p. 169 and Clapton, 2010, p. 15) – where partnering with established researchers could address these types of concerns.

Overcoming barriers to practitioner-conducted research is mainly driven by motivations on a personal level and enabled with support. In a study that sought to understand research productivity of post-tenure academic librarians, Fennewald (2008, p. 107) found that research is viewed as an expectation of being a professional. Also, the desire to share ideas with peers, to raise professional profiles, and to satisfy intellectual curiosity were reported as motivations for practitioners to do research (Fennewald, 2008; Clapton, 2010). Environmental factors and supports such as access to funding, workshops, and software, as well as formal and informal mentoring between staff, enabled research to be seen as part of being a librarian (Fennewald, 2008). Being around like-minded professionals engaged with research was also reported to provide a supportive environment (Fennewald, 2008, p. 111). From a more structural perspective, Pickton (2016) describes top-down and bottom-up approaches to facilitating a research culture at the University of Northampton in the United Kingdom (UK). In this case, a formal research policy, encouragement from senior managers, and a skills development program were implemented together with the expectation of staff to provide peer support and share research with others (Pickton, 2016). Perspectives and reported practitioner experiences with research in the US and Canada shed some light on this issue. However, if the LIS profession in Australia is to fully embrace research, as well as ensure enhanced capacity to undertake research activities, attention to this specific geographic context is needed.

In recent years, a number of international initiatives have been undertaken to enable practitioner involvement with LIS research. In 2001, the first *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* Conference was held in the UK. This biennial event brings together LIS academics, practitioners and managers from around the world who are committed to best practice and excellence in the information and library industries. Since the inaugural event in 2001, the conference has been held in Canada, Australia, the US, and Sweden. Another initiative emanating out of the UK is the *Library and Information Science Research*

*Coalition*². Established in 2009 the Coalition was a three-year project with the broad mission to facilitate a co-ordinated and strategic approach to LIS research across the UK. A number of key projects were undertaken via the Coalition. The Development Research Excellence and Methods or DREaM project was a formal UK-wide network of LIS researchers working together to improve library services by sharing expertise in research, via training events and opportunities for knowledge exchange. Similarly, the Research in Librarianship Impact Evaluation Study or RiLIES explored the extent to which LIS research projects influenced library practice in the UK.

In Canada, the *Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*³ (C-EBLIP) opened in July 2013. Based at the University of Saskatchewan, C-EBLIP aims to support librarians as researchers, and to promote evidence based library and information practice. Activities to date have included an annual symposium, and the formation of the C-EBLIP Research Network, an international affiliation of institutions committed to librarians as researchers and/or interested in evidence based practice. C-EBLIP complements the work of another Canadian University, the University of Alberta, which established the *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Journal* in 2006. This open access publication provides a forum for librarians, academics and other information professionals to discover and publish research that may contribute to decision making in professional practice.

Practitioner involvement in research: The Australian journey

So far in Australia, few studies explore practitioners' experiences engaging with and/or conducting research. An environmental scan of the LIS research landscape showed Australian practitioners were publishing their work locally, with 60% of material published in Australian publications, including a practitioner as principal author (ALIA, 2014, p. 25). The scan also found published materials spread across different sectors, with school and public libraries the most highly represented (ALIA, 2014, p. 33). In the school libraries sector, Klobas and Clyde (2010) identified beliefs, attitudes and barriers to publishing. The study found over half of practitioners indicated that research activities and publication were not expected in their professional roles (Klobas and Clyde, 2010, p. 243). Looking to the future of the LIS profession, one study of new information professionals identified barriers and motivators in their experience with writing and presenting (Bradley, 2008). Motivation to write and publish, for example, is enabled by supports such as peer review, mentoring, access to

² For more details: <https://lisresearch.org>

³ For more details: <http://library.usask.ca/ceblip/index.php>

databases of relevant literature, and access to relevant software (Bradley, 2008, p. 736). Personal motivation to undertake and publish research is highlighted by both Klobas and Clyde (2010) and Bradley (2008), indicating a need to establish ways to harness and cultivate enthusiasm, particularly that of new information professionals.

One recent initiative, the *Research Working Group* (RWG), describes one approach designed to encourage research activity in an academic library. Flinders University Library in Adelaide, South Australia, established the RWG, a pilot staff development program initially implemented over three years (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall, 2013, p. 451-452). This initiative aimed to “support the development of a culture of research and professional reflection among the professional library staff” (McBain et al, 2013, p. 449). Walkley Hall and McBain acknowledge practitioner research activity need not only involve developing and undertaking original research, but may “involve participation, assistance or a combination of both” (2014, p. 134). Peer support and space and time for meetings were found to be key enablers in achieving the goals of the RWG (Walkley Hall and McBain, 2014, p. 136). In evaluating the impact of the RWG, Walkley Hall and McBain (2014, p. 137) also found a desire among participants to work collaboratively on research projects, particularly with academics.

Beyond a local, organisational setting, the Australian LIS profession has seen collaboration between ALIA and other industry bodies; LIS educators, researchers and practitioners, in an effort to enhance communication and relationships with regards to research, and to develop a targeted and well-defined way forward in building the research evidence base to better inform professional practice. The *Library and Information Science Research Australia* (LISRA) project is a three-year project funded by the Australian Research Council that commenced in 2016. The broad aim of the project is to “encourage and enable research culture and practice within Australia’s library and information profession” (LISRA, 2016). More specifically, key questions this project seeks to answer include, what capacity does the Australian library and information profession have for research? And, what are the existing and potential links between Australian library and information practitioners and academic researchers? The project brings professionals and academics together in a program of activities designed to establish a community of practice to tackle issues identified as important to the Australian LIS sector. The end result is to encourage open dialogue about research and to develop an empirically derived “framework that provides a set of strategic directions and

recommendations for sustainable research LIS culture and practice in Australia” (LISRA, 2016).

The *Library Applied Research Kollektive*,⁴ or LARK, is another example of how different parts of the Australian LIS profession can work together to build awareness of and capacity for evidence based library and information practice. Established in 2012, LARK is an ALIA group that provides a community of practice for applied and industry based library and information research in Australia. Most recently, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) partnered with Charles Sturt University to hold a series of events in capital cities across Australia, called *Relevance 2020*. These events aimed to bring practitioners and academics together to align future LIS research activity in Australia. For practitioners, personal motivation and research orientation were highlighted among the enablers of practice-based research. However, the events also demonstrated that successful research activities rely on the development of environments that are conducive to research, which provide practitioners with institutional support, mentoring and training, funding, and time to engage in research activities (ALIA, 2017, p. 23). On both a local and a whole-of-profession level, initiatives such as the RWG, LISRA, LARK and Relevance 2020, indicate that practitioners’ experiences with research can be enhanced with institutional supports, as well as closer connections between practitioners and researchers to forge shared understandings and directions for research.

An expectation for practitioners to undertake research, as a core skill for an LIS professional, is often cited as part of a solution to close the well-documented, research-practice gap. Few empirical studies shed light on practitioners’ experience with research; yet, existing studies demonstrate that there are consistencies across the US, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. These studies indicate a desire and enthusiasm among practitioners to engage in research and to learn more about research activities and methods. Issues related to research capacity need to be better understood to identify ways to enhance practitioners’ experiences. One way that is clear from the literature and worth further exploration is building a closer connection with, and understanding between, LIS academics and practitioners. A shared desire to collaborate can only spell out new opportunities for the Australian LIS profession to

⁴ For more details: <http://lark-kollektive.blogspot.com.au>

further encourage practitioner-conducted research and, ultimately, build the country's research evidence base.

Conclusion

This paper explored the relevant literature documenting LIS practitioners' experiences with research within Australia and internationally. This review demonstrates that there is considerable interest in supporting LIS practitioner-conducted research. A number of activities and initiatives in Australia, and around the world, have already begun to enhance the relationship between LIS research and practice. More work focussed on understanding practitioners' experience with research will further identify ways to enhance research capacity within the LIS professional community.

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