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## **From Practice to Research at Flinders University Library: Sustaining a research culture.**

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the mechanisms used by Flinders University Library to sustain a culture of research. Flinders University Library has been supporting its librarians to undertake research projects using a formal support group mechanism, known as the Research Working Group (RWG), sanctioned and resourced by library executive since 2010. This established a culture of practitioner-based research in the library, with librarians developing a greater understanding of both the theory and practice of qualitative and quantitative methods by undertaking their own research projects. However, sustaining this culture brings new challenges which this paper now explores.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

This case study describes the methods used at Flinders University Library in sustaining a culture of practitioner-research. This arose from a review of the formal support structure, as well as a previous study that surveyed staff responses to the Research Working Group.

#### **Findings**

As academic libraries face ongoing challenges and engage more broadly with research support, librarians need experiential knowledge of research. In the case of Flinders University Library, in seeking to sustain a research culture, we have needed to adapt our support mechanisms, including a greater emphasis on peer support, a different model of resourcing, and more inclusivity for all staff to engage with research work.

#### **Research limitations/implications**

This paper is limited by its scope as a single-institution case study; however there are opportunities for other academic libraries to learn from this experience.

#### **Originality/value**

Establishing a culture of practice-based research is not an easy undertaking, requiring dedication from all parties whether management, practitioner-researchers or mentors. While there are many examples in the literature of case studies examining the establishment of research culture, few if any take the next steps to explore how to maintain it. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

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**Keywords:** practitioner researchers, practice-based research, academic libraries, staff development, research culture, case study, Australia.

### **1. Introduction**

Libraries need to undertake assessment and evaluation of services and resources, not only to demonstrate their value but also to ensure we are delivering what our communities need (Partridge et al. 2014). To do so, librarians must become practitioner-researchers, using applied research methods to support the

resolution of an immediate research question ( Watson Boone 2000, 87), to learn from their practice, and create their own body of knowledge (Jarvis, 1999, 90). However, not all librarians readily become practitioner-researchers, for a variety of reasons. These include a lack of skills and confidence (Kennedy and Brancolini 2012, Luo, 2011), a service-provision model of librarianship (Schrader, Shiri and Williamson 2011), time pressures (Clapton 2010, Fox 2007) and a lack of organisational support (Havener and Stolt 1994, Sassen and Wahl 2014). In the Australian context, academic librarians do not have academic status and research activity appears in few, if any, of their job descriptions (Charing and Gardiner, 2017, 382). Further, for many academic libraries, it is a case of bringing about organisational change in order to develop a culture of research and assessment (Farkas 2013, Jantti 2005).

Seven years ago, Flinders University Library recognised that we were not engaging deeply enough with practice-based research, and that our librarians lacked the incentive or support to do so. Seeking to address this, the then library executive instigated the Research Working Group (RWG) which was tasked with the brief to “support the development of a culture of research and professional reflection among the library staff” (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall, 2013). This paper now looks at how our model of support has adapted over time as we have moved from establishing to sustaining a research culture. Knowing that organisational change is a long term undertaking and needs ongoing development and support to sustain it (Smith 2003), we want to ensure the RWG retains its relevance to our practitioner-researchers and the library executive. But more importantly, our research needs to improve the services and resources we provide to our scholarly community, and our staff must be equipped with the skills to do this effectively.

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## 2. Background and Institutional Context

Flinders University is a publicly funded, PhD granting university based in South Australia. Comprising regional and interstate locations, the student population is approximately 25,000, and the academic staff number 1,115 (Flinders University 2016). The University comprises six Colleges (Science and Engineering, Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences), and has research strengths in a range of medical specialties including ophthalmology and cardiology, as well as nanotechnology (Australian Research Council 2015). The University is committed to a research active culture with high expectations of research performance.

Flinders University Library employs approximately 85 staff across four divisions/depts, comprising Library Resources, Library Services, Collections, College and Research Service, and Teaching and Learning Services. More than half the staff are professional librarians (Flinders University Library n.d) and, like most academic librarians in Australia, do not have academic status. The motivation to undertake research is therefore different; however, the incentives and support required are not.

Changes in the Australian higher education landscape have seen Flinders University, like many other institutions, review both its structure and support of research priorities. This of course has implications for the Library and its service delivery to support research. Government-driven research reporting, including an impact assessment exercise, funder mandated open access requirements, and an emphasis on strategic publication has meant that our academic librarians need a broad understanding of the research lifecycle. However, few librarians at Flinders come from a research background, and while we have had some engagement with researchers, it has not always been from the personal experience of undertaking research. (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall, 2013, 449).

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### 3. Establishing a Culture of Research

The Research Working Group was established in 2010, initially for a three-year pilot period. It was endorsed by library executive to continue in 2013 and has now been in operation for seven years. It has three complementary purposes: to develop research skills in library staff; to encourage ongoing analysis of the library's services and resources; and to engage more widely with the profession through dissemination of research results (McBain and Walkley Hall, 2014, 129) The establishment of the RWG has been the subject of a separate paper (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall, 2013), so only a broad outline is given here. From the outset, library executive were clear in their support for projects that aligned with the library's operational goals and the university's strategic plan. Thus the focus for research projects has been that of assessment and evaluation of the library's services and resources, with the aim of making recommendations for improvements.

This is consistent with how the literature views practitioner research. Jarvis (1999) states that practitioner researchers want to "learn from it [their practice] so they can devise a form of practice that works for them and build up their own body of knowledge about their own ways of doing things." (90). Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy (2011) note that research undertaken by practitioners is usually "focused on professional practice and thinking as manifested in the workplace ... [and] is often concerned with the improvement of practice" (80). In the LIS field, Wilson describes librarians who are practitioner-researchers as being "on the inside looking around ... being curious about practice in a formalized way and wanting to know more about practice in order to make that practice better." (2013, 112) while Watson Boone, in examining academic librarians as practitioner-researchers, believes they "... approach projects and problems in ways that yield (1) solutions, (2) an enlarged understanding of their actual field of work—their *practice*—, and (3) improvements in that practice." (2000, 85). For all, the emphasis on the rationale for undertaking research is to improve practice.

The question of the legitimacy of practice-based research has also been explored in the literature. Jarvis acknowledges that scholars and practitioner-researchers take different perspectives: "a great deal of practitioner-researchers' work is local and specific; the scholars still take a broader perspective and are still able to place the local and specific into a larger context." (168), while Wilson notes that "[p]ractical research undertaken from within the space of an intellectual discipline will provide well-rounded and robust evidence to the field" (2013, 116). However, Jarvis is emphatic in his statement that "practitioner-researchers are researchers" (1999, 70). This is our position too.

In a practical sense, the RWG operates as a rotating membership that reflects current projects. A Chairperson, nominated by library senior executive, coordinates the Group, and is the only permanent member. Prospective practitioner-researchers who wish to join the group do so through an expression of interest process, and the Library's senior executive then selects projects. Projects have a two year timeframe for RWG support in which to complete their work, with the understanding that there will be no more than five consecutive projects at any one time.

In the pilot period, RWG support mechanisms were designed to overcome what we had established from the LIS literature to be the most common barriers to librarians undertaking research - skills, motivation, time, and role models (Clapton 2010, Fox 2007, Havnener and Stolt 194, Kennedy and Brancolini 2012, Sassen and Wahl 2014). A research-active consultant joined the group, and \$AUD10,000 p.a. was allocated

to help address these issues. The consultant acted as both a support for the chair and a mentor for members. The resource allocation was for training, specialist consultant support, and ‘buy out’ time to work on research projects. Separately to the annual \$10,000 allocation, library executive pledged to fund RWG members’ attendance to present papers at local or national conferences, as well as an undertaking to fund international conference attendance every two years. While these commitments were not new, it was the first time they had been formalised, and provided some incentive for RWG members (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall 2013 p453).

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#### 4. Past RWG Projects

Over the past seven years, the RWG has supported six projects to completion. Our first Expression of Interest (EOI) in 2010 saw four projects selected which were different in both subject area and staff involved. These projects had two years in which to undertake and complete their research work: one terminated early due to personal reasons and two completed by the end of the two-year period. The fourth project requested, and was granted, extra time for their project.

Our second EOI was in 2011 to replace the terminated project, through which we added a new project. Subsequently, we added another when an academic group sought to collaborate with a librarian on a research project. We also had a change in personnel in the RWG due to the retirement of the inaugural chair. The group’s consultant became the new chair, and a new consultant member joined to the group. By the second half of 2012, with two projects nearing completion, we were ready for another new project. We selected two due to a strong field; however, one terminated early due to a change in staff responsibilities. By this stage, we had five concurrent projects running, at different stages of the research lifecycle. Although two projects were finished by the end of 2012, it did mean RWG activities were using more resources than anticipated so we made the decision to wait until at least three projects completed before starting anew. It eventuated that we were not in a position to select new projects until 2016. This was in part due to the retirement of the then University Librarian, resulting in a transition period of more than 6 months before a new UL was appointed. Details of past RWG projects, including outcomes and outputs, appear in Table 1.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Outputs</b>
<b>2010-12</b>	Exploring Student Information Seeking Behaviours through the Review and Re-Design of the Library Assignment	The Library Assignment completely redesigned	International conference paper
<b>2010-12</b>	Primo Discovery Layer Online Survey and Usability Testing	Local modifications made to our Discovery layer	Local conference paper; peer reviewed journal article
<b>2010-14</b>	Exploring the potential for wider institutional learning benefits in practical on campus work integrated learning projects	Partnership with an academic colleague to undertake this project has lead to greater integration between the Library and	Two local conference presentations

		undergraduate coursework	
<b>2011-14</b>	eBooks and Patron Driven Acquisition	A greater understanding of both patron library staff capabilities with eBooks; in-house training developed for library staff	Local conference presentation and paper
<b>2012-14</b>	Assessing Information Literacy in first year Science students	Redesign of information literacy classes and assessment for first year science students	Two national conference papers and one peer reviewed journal article
<b>2012-15</b>	Fridays at the Library in the context of the University's Community Engagement program	Evidence of audience preference and analysis for future directions	National conference presentation and paper; Peer reviewed journal article

Table 1: Past RWG Projects

As well as the improvements made to library services and resources as a result of these projects, there have also been many soft outcomes. One that has permeated across the staff involved is a greater appreciation and understanding of the research process, as well as new relationships that have formed during research work both within and outside of the library (Walkley Hall, 2015, 36). This is consistent with other findings on non-tenured librarians' research work especially in describing partnerships with non-LIS academic colleagues for example Charing and Gardiner (2017): "the collegial relationships that develop can enhance the development of networks and opportunities for more 'traditional' librarian activity in supporting faculty teaching, learning and research" (392).

A major outcome of the RWG has been an increase in participation in LIS-related research work. An initial assessment of the RWG found that at its inception, few staff had undertaken any LIS research: just 5 staff members from the professional, nonexecutive staff of 34 (15%). However, 2 years later, this had built to 18, i.e. more than half (52%) (Walkley Hall and McBain, 2014, 134). Since our 2014 study, total numbers of staff involvement have continued to grow: we have tracked these through the application and acceptance process, and have had a further five librarians engage formally with research work through the RWG.

While the RWG's aim is to find solutions to specific questions faced by Flinders Library, there is also an emphasis on publication and dissemination of our research for the benefit of the profession. We consider these goals mutually beneficial, as does Jarvis "the more research undertaken by practitioner-researchers, the more information we will have about the processes of practice, the development of practical knowledge, and other relevant factors among practitioners" (1999, 137).

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5. Sustaining a Culture of Research

Research culture - whether practice-based or otherwise - is not static. The change management literature suggests that organizational change needs ongoing development and support to maintain momentum and relevance, and takes time, with a minimum of six years necessary (Lakos and Phipps 2004, Smith 2003). Knowing this, and with a new executive at Flinders University Library, it was apposite to reconsider the Research Working Group model.

In 2015, the new University Librarian and the Chair of the RWG (the latter the author of this paper) reconsidered the role of the group, seeking to understand our practitioner-researchers needs as well as Library executive needs. That we needed to continue to support practice-based research was not in doubt: the Group's existence had coincided with an increased emphasis on data analytics and data driven decision making in both higher education and libraries.

As a catalyst for cultural change, we had initially focused on four steps in establishing the RWG; analysis, action, evaluation, and reflection, based around Kotter's 8-step program as explored by Paton, Beranek and Smith (2008). We also incorporated a 'guiding coalition' in the form of a Chair and a Consultant for the group, both of whom had some experience in managing and undertaking research themselves, and who were able to work collaboratively together and commit fully to the change (Gorran Farkas, 2013, 20). Our change management process was documented in an earlier paper (Walkley Hall, 2015).

In seeking to sustain the cultural change, we also understood that change is iterative and constant. With this in mind, we considered:

- what supports were being used by our practitioner-researchers, and what would be necessary to take them forward ;
- what the library executive needed from the RWG in both project content and skills;
- how best to ensure wider engagement in practice-based research across the professional staff, both within and without the RWG.

#### 5a. Understanding our Practitioner-Researchers' Support Needs

Our earlier analysis of RWG support had found that our practitioner-researchers gave consistently high ratings for the peer support offered by the group. This included regular meetings and reporting, making available documentation from current and previous projects, and having 'expert peers' to call upon (McBain and Walkley Hall, 2014, 136). These measures were also part of our knowledge management strategy, specifically knowledge sharing (Walkley Hall, 2016, 232).

Peer support is often cited as a key strategy that encourages a culture of research in academic libraries (Cirasella and Smale, 2011, Clapton 2010, Fallon, 2012, Pickton 2014). Cirasella and Smale found that 71% of the members in their peer support group indicated that they received support that they do not get elsewhere, and that 81% felt it had helped them achieve their research goals (2011, 104). Fallon's examination of peer support for writing librarians included both a face to face and online component, noting that such support provided ongoing motivation as well as "help[ing] develop a sense of being a *community of writers*" (2012, 23). Pickton notes that, at the University of Northampton Dept of Library and Learning Services, colleagues are encouraged to collaborate on their research projects, as well as working in pairs or playing a minor role (data collection, "critical friend") in a research project for those not ready to take on a full project (2016, 116).

We decided to concentrate on the peer support component in our new RWG projects, by allowing only partnered or group submissions and to bolster management support by including senior staff in RWG projects as project leaders. RWG meetings would also continue but as a semi-formal mechanism for advice and feedback, as would our other peer support strategies of reporting and documentation in order to ensure effective knowledge sharing.

Support from library management is also a crucial part of a successful research culture (Gratch, 1989, Havener and Stolt, 1994, Picketon, 2016). Havener and Stolt (1994) noted in their survey of US academic librarians who received institutional support were twice as likely to receive grants and had significantly higher publication rates (33) "institutions wanting to encourage their librarians' continuing professional development can do so by providing time release and financial support" (35). Picketon, describing the approach at the University of Northampton LLS, notes there is both research policy and infrastructure; the former demonstrating the highest level of support in terms of management sanction, and the latter in the form of a research committee and research funding through a formal application process (112-113). Picketon notes that, over approximately 10 years, 150 research outputs have been produced - "demonstrat[ing] that engagement in research activity is high, varied and ongoing." (120). Whatever its form, support from library management has been described as "essential" (Gratch, 1989, 1997) for a successful research culture.

The RWG initially had a \$AUS10,000 p.a. resource allocation that was mainly used to 'buy out' staff time. However, not all staff were in the position to use it, meaning the funding was not applied consistently. Instead, we decided that we would reduce the administrative burden for both the RWG Chair and our practitioner researchers, as well as their supervisors, by resourcing research time differently. For new projects commencing 2016, we asked that practitioner researchers estimate how much time they would need to undertake their projects as part of their Expression of Interest submission, endorsed by their supervisor. We also added these projects to our Library operational plan, to ensure that all library managers would be aware of each projects' time management needs. Other forms of resourcing include the opportunity to attend local and national conferences, researcher training workshops, and professional activities associated with research.

#### 5b. Meeting the Needs of the Library Executive

The Library executive team - comprising the University Librarian and two Associate Librarians - need reliable data, as well as assessment and evaluation of library services on which they can draw for both internal planning and external reporting. In addition, they need skilled staff on whom they can call to undertake smaller research projects and analysis, often at short notice. Due to involvement in past RWG projects, we now have a cohort of staff on whom the library executive can draw to undertake further practice-based research projects on a needs basis. However, in the last round of RWG projects, we took a slightly different approach: the Library executive team nominated two of their own. The first is a study to understand user experiences of the library website; the second will investigate the textbook needs of undergraduate students. Library staff were invited to express their interest to join one of these groups, again a different approach to what we have done in the past. Eight staff expressed interest and were nominated – four for each project. To aid this approach, the Library applied for and obtained University funding to bring an internationally recognised library-UX expert to deliver two days of targeted training to support these projects. RWG members as well as selected professional staff from across the Library attended. It also demonstrated library executive support for the new projects, as not only did our

executive team support the training proposal, they also attended the training itself. This modelling is invaluable in demonstrating the value of practitioner-research work in the library.

Such modeling has received limited attention in the literature. McClure (1989) observed that "the greater the research skills and knowledge of the library director, the better the impact of a research study on practice" (286), and Berg, Jacobs and Cornwall's study of University Librarians in Canada "consistently reported [their] commitment to supporting research activities" (2013, 571). There does seem to be a gap in exploring whether library managers can make a positive impact on research culture by themselves being practitioner-researchers.

### 5c. Developing Wider Engagement across the Staff

In seeking to sustain a culture of research, we are also developing wider engagement in practice-based research across the professional staff, independent of the RWG. We are using a number of complementary strategies to do this. Delivering research training opportunities more broadly, such as the abovementioned UX workshop, is one such strategy. More than twenty professional library staff were involved in the first day of training, which was an introduction to UX in the form of a hands-on workshop. There was an overwhelming positive response to this, with many staff commenting that they had not realised research could be done so easily, nor that it could be so much fun! Approximately 16 staff were invited to attend Day 2 of the workshop, where we tested our newly-found UX techniques with student participants. Senior managers - including the University Librarian – attended for part of both days, as further evidence of support for a research culture and endorsement of the research training.

Another strategy we are using is to support selected research projects independent of the RWG. The RWG was always intended as a professional development activity for staff in the HEO (Higher Education Officer) 5-8 range (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley Hall, 2013, 460), which represents staff at the junior and middle levels of professional roles. This has meant that if staff have been promoted, they no longer qualify for RWG support. However, there are now have a number component of staff who, having been involved in formal RWG projects, are confident and competent practitioner researchers who have continued to engage with research in practice. They provide valuable role models, and the library has supported them in their ongoing research endeavours by ensuring their projects have a presence on the library's annual operational plan. Two projects are currently in progress in this way.

A third strategy is to ensure that senior staff model evidence-based practice and data driven decision-making. We are including senior managers on RWG projects as project managers, who can offer advice and support as 'expert consultants' for the more inexperienced members of the group. We are also looking at ways to share any data and accompanying internal reports written by library managers to the wider professional staff where appropriate. These strategies, we hope, will reinforce to the staff that library executive value the importance research work because they are undertaking it themselves.

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### 6. Current RWG Projects

While we initially selected three new projects for RWG support, only one is ongoing twelve months later. This is in no small part due to a major University-wide restructure of professional staff, including the Library . During this time, attention and efforts of both library staff and management were understandably focused on the restructure process, leaving little energy and time for research work. Of the three projects

initially undertaken, one was voluntarily withdrawn by the researchers and another was completed as an internal review only. We therefore now only have one RWG project currently underway. However, for the record, all three projects are detailed below in Table 2. In the original iteration, these projects involved eight staff, all of whom ~~are~~ were relatively new to LIS research. Training and support requirements were higher, due both to a larger number of staff involved who had less research experience than in previous iterations of the RWG. However, this is an opportunity that we embraced and ~~have~~ sought new ways in which to support our newest practitioner-researchers. This was not limited to research specific training: for example, we ~~have~~ also addressed project planning and time management skills.

Date	Project	Status
2016 -	Undergraduate students' textbook usage needs	Ongoing. Expected completion 2019
2016-	Tutors' experiences of using LibGuides as a teaching tool	Withdrawn
2016-	User experience of the Library website	Completed. Internal report and recommendations to library executive

Table 2: Current RWG Projects

Maintaining our focus on practitioner-research has been challenging during a time of institutional change; however, it is also clear that we need these skills to support the University's mission for research excellence. While our institutional change management process did not explicitly state the need for research skills, the fact that we have created a new team in the Library with a research support focus speaks to the need to understand the research process firsthand better than ever.

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## 7. Discussion

From the outset, the main aim of the RWG has been clear: to deliver support for practitioner-based research in the Library. That we have been able to sustain our research culture for more than seven years has not been by accident: library executive, as well as library managers and our practitioner-researchers themselves, both new and experienced, have all played a part in this success. This speaks of an overwhelming professionalism, from both our librarians in their desire to develop new skills as practitioner-researchers, as well as from our library executive who have recognised the importance of the RWG, especially during a time of institutional change. For those seeking to learn from our experience, we offer the following guidance:

- Maintain a strong leadership, in both actions and words, to support practitioner-based research
- Include research projects in operational/annual plans
- Seek to continuously improve and develop the support model as needed.

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## 8. Conclusion

Establishing a culture of practice-based research is not an easy undertaking, requiring dedication from all parties whether management, practitioner-researchers or mentors. And once established it cannot be taken for granted; sustaining that culture, embedding it in ongoing practices, and ensuring that it remains

an integral part of library operations are just as important. We are confident that the steps we have taken will ensure that practice-based research is an ongoing part of the culture at Flinders University Library, giving our librarians the skills to take them into future roles.

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