# What researchers want: a personal case study

Donna Carroll
*Academic Services Development Manager*
*The Library, Academic Services, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL*
*Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 3251*
*Email: donna.carroll@warwick.ac.uk*

## Support for researchers

The increased emphasis placed upon research-intensive universities to enhance the quality of their research outputs, their wider impact and the research environment, has not only affected research staff but has also prompted the departments supporting these research communities to respond by broadening their range of offerings. As a consequence, research support is now high on the agenda of many academic libraries and over the last year or so I have attended numerous conferences and seminars designed to inform library staff about researchers' attitudes to the library, their information skills and their needs.

As someone who is new to the library sector I have found these workshops and conferences really interesting, but so far nothing reported has really surprised me. This is because I used to be a part of the very research community that the library staff are discussing and find it fascinating to hear librarians talk about researchers as though they were a newly discovered species! From these conferences I also found that people really enjoyed hearing about my experiences of research, and were often shocked by my prior ignorance when it came to information skills and use of the library. It was for these reasons that I wanted to write about my experiences, to share my insights and to highlight how I think the library could have helped me when I was studying for a PhD.

## Who am I?

I am currently the Academic Services Development Manager and Research Exchange Manager at the University of Warwick Library but I started my career at the library working in research and

innovation, developing library-wide services and researching Web 2.0 technologies and their applications. During this time I also took on the responsibility of managing and developing the newly opened Wolfson Research Exchange, an innovative library facility dedicated to the university's research community and aimed at encouraging cross-disciplinary scholarly collaboration. My background in teaching and learning (I used to lecture maths at a college of further education) and my experiences during my PhD (in experimental physics) were invaluable as they provided me with a good understanding of both the research and the learning processes.

I found my time in research difficult; I do not mean in terms of the academic challenges that arose, but rather of my struggle against the enormous sense of isolation it brought. I chose to complete my PhD at the institution where I had studied for my first degree, which should have provided a more gentle transition into research since I already knew the university environment, the area and even my supervisor. However, I found the transition from being surrounded on a daily basis by a hundred or so students on my degree course, to being alone in my office and my own laboratory, incredibly isolating and a severe shock to the system. These feelings of discontentment encouraged me to work harder so that I could write up and submit my thesis as quickly as possible to allow me to move on to something else. Despite this, I feel it is a great shame that at the time there was not the wealth of research student skills courses and other developmental opportunities for researchers that there is today, as this would have been an ideal means of reducing the monotony of my work and meet others in similar situations to me.

I am pleased to say that the skills sessions for researchers which can now be found in abundance across a range of universities (run by libraries as well as graduate schools or dedicated postgraduate support services) have more than addressed this issue, but the way in which sessions are advertised and marketed to your researchers needs to be carefully considered. To highlight this, let me begin with a story.

### 'WHAT IS A SUBJECT LIBRARIAN?'

You might not believe this, but until I started working for our university library, I had no idea what a subject librarian was. I should like to emphasise that this in no way reflects upon the efforts of the library where I studied as a student.

When I think back I am pretty certain that I was introduced to my subject librarian, it is just that the word 'librarian' conjured up something different in my mind (and the minds of many others I am sure) from somebody working within the library sector. I had always assumed that librarians were the people who stamped and issued the books on the desks near the entrance to any library. It is these customer services staff who are the most visible in the library. Aren't librarians just people who work inside libraries? My worst moment was during my job interview, when I was shown around the library where I now work. I had a 'lion, the witch and the wardrobe'[1] moment as we walked between the book stacks: right at the end, behind them all, was a door through which there was a staff office. An office! In a library?! It may sound incredibly naive but before that day I had never even thought about the large number of staff who work in a library, except those 'librarians' at the issue desk, the staff who reshelve the books and of course the people who rove the library and tell you to 'sshhh' – a definite case of out of sight and quite literally out of mind. I have learnt a lot in the short time that I have been working here, and I strongly believe there is something we can all learn from this story.

### AWARENESS

The way that your library is marketed to researchers (or any potential library patron) is the key to a successful uptake of your services. Whether you are promoting your staff, services or space, you need to ensure that these are put into context for your clientele. You need to tell them what they will gain from the courses, not just in terms of what they will learn, but also of how the information will actually be of benefit to them. Often people talk about how a course will help someone in the long term, but it is often difficult to persuade them to invest time in something that will help them later on – they feel it needs to be relevant now. For example, reference management techniques is a topic that researchers need to be introduced to right from the beginning of their research as it is harder to embrace a reference management programme once they have started collating references in their own way. However, researchers will not usually see the benefit of using something like EndNote[2] or RefWorks[3] until they are writing up their theses. I had never heard of reference management software until I started working for the library and I was so disappointed that I had spent hours typing my references manually before submitting my thesis. Luckily for my friends who were still writing up their theses

when I started working for the library, I was able to share my newly found knowledge about reference management and many other topics, including the staff and services available to support them. This type of information and support can be invaluable, so it is essential to get this message across from the outset. There are many people who can say that they wished they had known about the courses and support available. Therefore I would encourage you to invite them to talk about their experiences in your information skills sessions, to get the point across to researchers in a language that they understand. You need to build up advocates of your services.

The use of 'champions' or ambassadors of your services can be helpful in other ways too: researchers respect, listen to and learn from the people around them. A PhD is rather like an apprenticeship for a career of research and PhD students learn from their supervisors and their peers (including more experienced PhD students or post-doctoral staff), rather than looking elsewhere for help and support. As library professionals, we cannot get the message across as effectively as other researchers can, so use your contacts to spread the message to their colleagues and friends. Invite them to your outreach sessions to provide first-hand accounts and use their experiences to build case studies to draw on when you are promoting your services.

### The modern library

Libraries have developed so much in recent years that they are no longer confined to offering traditional, silent reading spaces with stacks of books and journals; they have evolved to offer a wealth of other services. Many now offer a broader range of work spaces to encourage autonomy amongst their readers, from group study rooms to PC areas, coffee bars and flexible social learning spaces where food and drink can be consumed and mobile phones may be used. But as well as different spaces, libraries offer a range of services which sometimes include subject-specific advice from librarians on where and how to search for relevant literature, advanced web-search training, reference management workshops, advice on publishing, and repositories for promoting research outputs. As a researcher I had no idea that these were available from a library, and this should not be surprising: the fact that the library is so labelled creates certain expectations– just look at this dictionary definition[4]:

**Library:** a place set apart to contain books, periodicals, and other material for reading, viewing, listening, study, or reference, as a room, set of rooms, or building where books may be read or borrowed.

It is this very definition that has become ingrained in our understanding; nowhere it is there any mention of support available, so challenging these views is not easy. In fact, it may even be easier to rename your library, not to a 'learning resource centre' or similar, but, for example, 'support hub' or 'resource and support service', so that the name of the building does not predetermine people's attitudes before they have had the chance to explore the space and services for themselves. It is therefore all about making people think differently about what you have to offer. Why not rebrand your subject librarians as 'library tutors'? This may not be appropriate in an official capacity and in no way takes into account the full and varied range of responsibility of their role within the academic department, but the title 'tutor' may make more sense to students when you are promoting the help you have to offer.

### Getting the message across

Apart from this very drastic approach to marketing, what else could libraries be doing? The support available to academic researchers is so often dispersed across a university campus that it is difficult for researchers to know where to turn first; nor is it always clear that it should be the library. This is why it is so important to be proactive in getting information to your users rather than waiting for them to come to you. Whereas some keen students may take time to discover all that is available and broaden their skills beyond those offered by their own department, the vast majority will not, so it is important to reach out and provide opportunities for all. At the University of Warwick we have been experimenting with emailing lists, electronic newsletters, Twitter (see figure 2), Facebook, discussion forums, wikis and blogs to get information to our researchers. It is not about finding the single 'right' method for our users, because we now live and work in a complex, multi-faceted environment where there is a strong demand for a more flexible approach to the way we work and learn, and so there is no one preferred method for our researchers to receive information. By providing a range of options and making use of different media to cater for the varied preferences of your customers, you can hope to reach a larger segment of your intended

readership and increase the accessibility of your services.
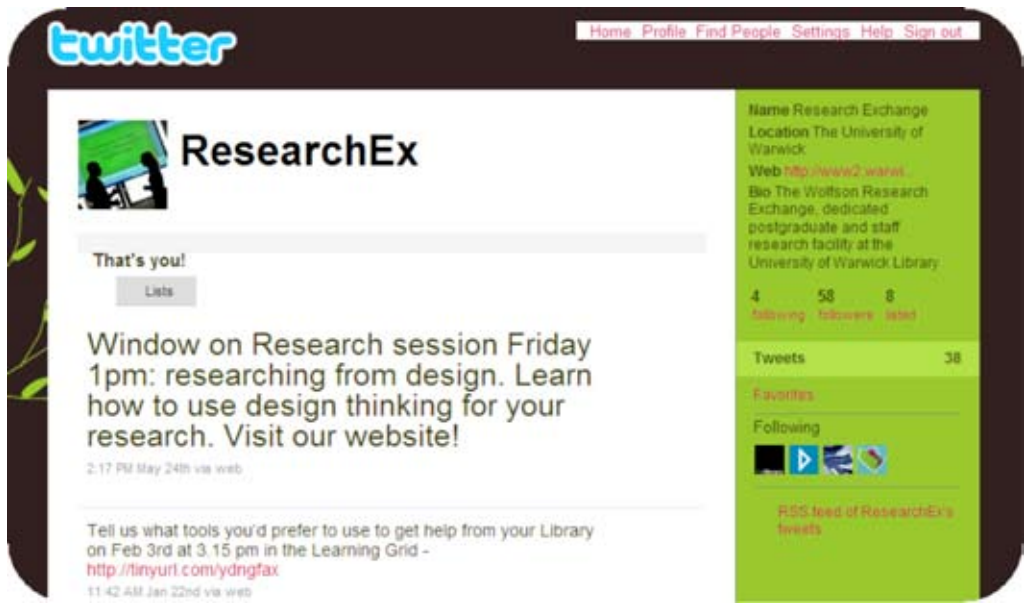


*The Research Exchange Twitter feed[5].*

### Community space

In addition to branding and promotion it is also important to consider the physical space allocated to your research community. A dedicated space for researchers might have alleviated a number of challenges for me as a 'lonely' researcher. It would have provided me with a place to work alongside peers and the opportunity to network with or learn from others. Moreover, this shared place may have increased my awareness of events and training relevant to my needs. In 2008 the University of Warwick opened its Wolfson Research Exchange, a dedicated library facility for researchers that aims to provide just this. The space is not only an environment for researchers to work away from the undergraduate-dominated areas of the library; it also offers a flexible and informal atmosphere for researchers to meet, discuss and share their research ideas and experiences. It has a mixture of work areas including seminar rooms where skills sessions and conferences may be offered not only by the library but by other university departments supporting research too. Such spaces contain a wealth of multimedia technologies and we have a team of advisers to offer on-the-spot support. The advisers are also expected to have an awareness of the academic research process so that they can not only support events and maintain the facility, but can offer peer guidance to users and pass their queries on should they not be able to assist personally.



*A groupwork activity in the Research Exchange*



*Academic coaching session from our research student skills team in the Research Exchange*

This type of environment based in a central location on a university campus provides opportunities for researchers to interact with peers and learn from those more experienced than themselves. Furthermore, it can reduce the solitude often felt by researchers; and having a focal point for the community allows it to be used to advertise and promote events and topics relevant to the users.

If you do not have a dedicated space in your own library (and many do not have this luxury), work with other departments who also support researchers. Collaborate and promote each others' services. Try running joint sessions, drawing on your different perspectives and knowledge; this can work well. Skills tutors may run academic writing workshops where the tutors may discuss writing styles and techniques, but a librarian could advise on the journal publication process, copyright or open access publishing, for example. Researchers do not mind which department delivers the services or courses so long as the material is appropriate and it provides a clear and coherent service.

## Summing up

I hope that some of my insights may be helpful. Having experienced both sides of the situation I feel I can certainly identify some of the problems and suggest solutions; I know that I am not alone in my feelings towards the research process.
To all librarians who are so willing to help and yet are so often forgotten by the research community, my apologies; I was once one of the ignorant masses but I am no longer. Even in the short time since gaining my PhD I have noticed great change in library services for researchers and I assure you there is hope! We need to remember that there are many researchers who will benefit significantly from library research services if we can capture their attention. It is imperative that we strive to promote our skills and services and train our staff accordingly so that we continue to deliver world-class facilities and support for budding researchers. Their futures are to some extent in our hands.

## References

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