
The value of libraries for research: some themes



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What are the roles that libraries most usefully perform for researchers in a rapidly-changing digital world? And what value do – or should – researchers and their universities attach to libraries and their services? Attempts to answer those kinds of questions constitute one of the threads running through the Research Information Network's (RIN) work over the past six years; and the questions become more urgent as the research and information environments continue to change apace, and as universities face new financial pressures and uncertainties.¹ Hence we were pleased in 2010 to join together with Research Libraries UK (RLUK) to commission a study to examine the contributions that libraries make to research; and more particularly to investigate relationships between the characteristics and behaviours of libraries from a range of universities and colleges, and the research performance of the host institution. The fieldwork for the study was undertaken by Curtis and Cartwright and was supported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); a report based on that work was published in March 2011.²

APPROACH

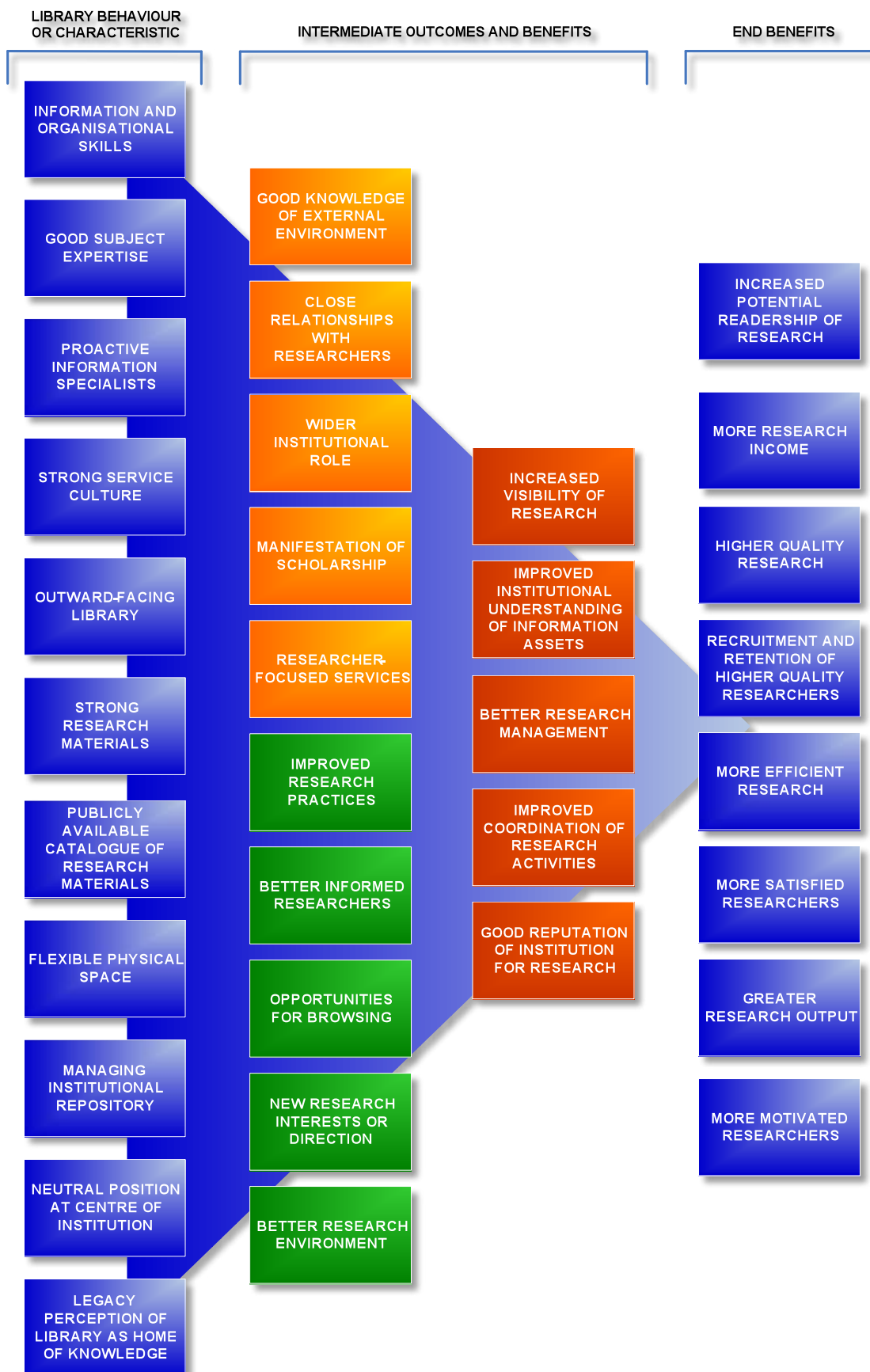
The study comprised two main elements: quantitative analysis of statistics – from SCONUL, HESA, and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), along with bibliometric data – to investigate correlations between the characteristics and behaviours of libraries in 67 UK higher education institutions, and the research performance of those institutions; and gathering and analysing a large tranche of qualitative information from nine institutions with a range of characteristics.

Our initial hope was that analysis of statistical trends and correlations might provide evidence and suggest avenues to explore in the qualita-

five phase of the project. The limitations of the available statistical data on library provision and characteristics, however, mean that the statistical analyses were of limited utility. SCONUL statistics were not designed for this kind of work: they cannot for the most part be directly related to support for researchers as distinct from students; they

are not broken down by cost centre; and there are gaps and some inconsistencies in the data.

The report is therefore based on a large weight of qualitative evidence, gathered from interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders – researchers, research pro-vice-chancellors, institu-



tions' research support office, graduate deans and finance directors as well as librarians – across nine institutions, and carefully analysed and cross-checked. Such evidence is based on individual perceptions and experiences, but in the aggregate, it is robust and unequivocal. Libraries contribute to the research performance of individuals and institutions in many different ways, even if the nature and extent of that contribution is not well understood by researchers and senior managers.

The findings are summarised in the form of map which sets out the key characteristics and behaviours of libraries, and the links between them and the performance of individual researchers and institutions. Libraries have changed and are changing and are developing new roles and services. The detailed findings are presented in the form of ten stories about the different kinds of value that libraries provide in supporting both individual researchers and the research performance of their host institutions.

KEY MESSAGES

Good libraries help institutions to recruit and retain top researchers

There is global competition for top researchers, and institutional reputation is key to attracting them. Many factors contribute to a good reputation, including league tables, RAE scores, research productivity and funding levels. But libraries also contribute, positively or negatively, to an institution's reputation. The quality, nature and extent of the library's collections, of its staff and the services they provide and of its buildings are all important. Successful and high-quality libraries can be a significant factor in recruiting and retaining top researchers.

Libraries help researchers win research grants and contracts

For research-intensive universities in particular, success in winning research grants and contracts is critically important. Research support offices help researchers to generate a regular flow of high-quality applications for such grants and contracts, but some libraries play an increasingly significant role too. On the whole they do so in response to specific requests rather than pro-actively, however, and in general researchers are not required to consult the library in generating their bids. Libraries could play a greater role if researchers knew that support was available, and if their involvement were more formalised. Libraries have an opportunity to use their skills to help researchers improve the quality of their funding

applications, and to increase the institution's success in winning research income.

Libraries promote and exploit new technologies and new models of scholarly communications

Libraries are critically important in helping researchers to exploit the full benefits and opportunities of the networked world, including such developments as open access and social media. But they are not always well equipped to promote change, and researchers sometimes resist efforts to modify their behaviours and practices. Nevertheless, many libraries have succeeded in addressing such problems by establishing stronger links with researchers and re-focusing their services to promote and exploit new technologies and new models of scholarly communication.

Repositories increase the visibility of the institution and raise its research profile

Most universities now have repositories to store and make available institutional assets such as research papers and theses. In most cases the library runs the repository on behalf of the university, and senior managers acknowledge the role the repository plays in increasing the visibility of the institution's outputs and raising its research profile. But repositories are only as valuable as the content they hold, and the focus of institutions is now on increasing the content by making it routine for researchers to deposit their outputs. Libraries are playing an increasing role in educating researchers and building more effective procedures and approaches across the institution.

Outward-facing libraries contribute to institution-wide initiatives

In recent years many libraries have demonstrated that they can seize opportunities to help institutions respond to changes in the research environment. Libraries' central and impartial position, together with their information and organisational expertise, puts them in a good position to play a wide institutional role and deliver new value. Seizing these opportunities is not always straightforward, since in some institutions libraries have to overcome traditional views about their appropriate role. But outward-facing libraries can help in joining up research support and administration, leading to better research management and a higher profile for the library across the institution.

Specialist staff work in partnership with academic departments

Information specialists – both subject specialists and those with a specific focus on the needs

of researchers – form a significant group of the library staff in most universities. The researchers who make use of them see them as vital, but too often information specialists and researchers are not well connected. Putting that right can alter specialists' roles profoundly, shifting them away from more traditional collection management roles. Where this has happened, information specialists take a more proactive role, working in partnership with academic departments and acting as consultants. Such developments have been welcomed by heads of departments and researchers.

Connecting with researchers enhances the value of the library's services

The digital revolution has changed the relationship between libraries and researchers, many of whom do not use the physical library. As one librarian said, 'the more we do to make access quick, seamless and easy, the more invisible we make ourselves'. Libraries are becoming alert to the risks of separation from researchers, and are trying to find ways to reconnect with them and to fill the gaps in their knowledge and understanding of researchers' needs. Such an approach can lead to a strong service culture permeating the library, increasing researcher satisfaction as well as winning recognition and respect for the library across the institution.

Dedicated spaces provide a better work environment for researchers

For some researchers the physical library is valued as a place to work and study, particularly if they do not have their own departmental space or if they rely for their research on printed or manuscript content held in the library. Many researchers find, however, that the library is crowded with undergraduates, especially in term time, and that it provides a difficult environment in which to work. In order to meet researchers' needs, some libraries have created dedicated areas for them, providing a better environment for those researchers who depend on the library and its content.

Easy access to high-quality content is a key foundation for good research

Access to high-quality content remains crucial to research, and its value is recognised by researchers, senior managers and librarians alike. Libraries spend huge amounts of money in order to sustain and develop their collections, and researchers across the sector now have access to more content than ever before. But they always want more. The pressure on institutional budgets, continuing

above-inflation increases in subscription costs and fluctuations in exchange rates are making it more difficult to sustain the current level of purchasing. Some libraries are still seeking to increase the content budget, but others are reducing the amounts of content they buy, while yet others are seeking to be smarter by procuring more with less. 'Daring to be different', and taking a more evidence-based, strategic approach to content procurement should help libraries to meet researchers' needs more effectively as well as helping their dialogue with the senior managers from whom they seek funding.

Libraries are a physical manifestation of the values of the academy and of scholarship

Libraries are one of the most enduring features of the academy, central to the values and the practice of scholarship. Perhaps the deepest, yet most elusive, contribution that libraries make is to provide a physical manifestation of the scholarly ethos that universities exist to inculcate and preserve. There is a risk that this intrinsic value may not be recognised by future generations of researchers who work in an online world. In building the evidence of libraries' contribution to research, it is important to stress that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and that a key value of the library is as a crucial cornerstone and representation of the values of the academy and of scholarship as a whole.

CONTINUING CHANGE AND RISKS: THE NEED FOR AN EVIDENCE BASE

Libraries are changing and the value they provide will change too. This project has provided a snapshot of libraries based on current evidence, as the higher education sector begins a period of turbulent change. In a period of austerity libraries are increasingly being asked to justify their activities and even their existence, and the need to demonstrate value will endure. Arguing the case for libraries may get harder as the traditional role of libraries in providing access to content – the role most frequently mentioned and valued by researchers and senior managers – continues to become less visible.

The study found many senior researchers and managers whose experience of research began before the digital revolution, and who tend to see the value of libraries residing in their traditional role as content providers. Such perceptions may come under increasing scrutiny as budget pressures mount, and as current senior managers are replaced by those whose experience is of a differ-

ent world, with a different set of assumptions. A big challenge for libraries, therefore, is to communicate to both researchers and senior managers how they are changing, and the opportunities for the future. Should traditional perceptions persist, there is the danger that the development of new roles and services will be put at risk. Further work to build the evidence base is therefore critical. But in so doing, it is important to stress that libraries must be judged beyond the immediate needs they serve; and that the value of any library is inextricably linked to the values of the university of which it is a part.

We hope that the report provides a framework for demonstrating the contribution libraries can and do make currently to the performance of researchers, research teams and institutions. But further work for the future will require better statistical evidence on library characteristics and activities. That in turn will require working with SCONUL and its members, or finding other ways to gather statistics on how libraries support research, including, for example, training in information skills, support for individual research projects and the development of institutional repositories. If possible, the statistics should provide breakdowns of the provision focused on the needs of specific departments or cost centres. Gathering data of this kind need not be formalised to the same extent as the collection of the returns to SCONUL and HESA. Periodic lightweight surveys may suffice in order to gather evidence to test particular hypotheses or investigate specific areas of provision.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, 'Researchers' use of academic libraries and their services', RIN, 2007), available at <http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Researchers-libraries-services-report.pdf>; the two reports *E-journals: their use, value and impact*, published in 2009 and 2011, are available at <http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/e-journals-their-use-value-and-impact>; and 'Challenges for academic libraries in difficult economic times', RIN, 2010, available at <http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Challenges-for-libraries-FINAL-March10.pdf>
- 2 The value of libraries for research and researchers (RIN and RLUK, 2011), available at http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/value_of_libraries_for_screen_0.pdf