



## Information Behavior and Expectations of Veterinary Researchers and Their Requirements for Academic Library Services



Marguerite A. Nel \*, Ina Fourie <sup>1</sup>

Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, IT Building 6-65, Lynnwood Road, Pretoria 0002, South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

Increased pressure for quality research at South African universities, and limited research done on the information needs of veterinary science researchers and the role of veterinary libraries supporting them, motivated a case study at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria (South Africa). The study aimed to determine what the information needs, information seeking behavior and information use behavior of veterinary researchers are, and how these needs are being met by the library. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from researchers as well as information specialists by means of questionnaires, focus group interviews and a citation analysis. Findings and recommendations are based on descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data and thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The study found that the information needs of researchers are influenced by the research environment and expectations for research output. Most needs for information and support services are met. Collection building practices, library space, and awareness of services offered by information specialists need attention. Findings reveal considerable gaps between researchers' expectations from information specialists and their own perceptions of roles to fulfil. The paper contributes to the limited literature on the information behavior of veterinary researchers and library services supporting their needs.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria is the only veterinary faculty in South Africa and one of 46 in Africa. Research in the Faculty has an impact on the health of humans and animals locally as well as globally (Swan & Kriek, 2009). All higher education institutions in South Africa are under pressure to improve their research output and international research visibility (Kahn, 2011; Nel, 2015; Sooryamoorthy, 2013). Individual researchers are peer-rated according to the National Research Foundation (NRF) rating system which has become a prestige mechanism for research intensive institutions in South Africa (Pouris, 2007). The NRF is a South African institution responsible for facilitating the peer rating of researchers and especially academics at higher education institutions, as well as for promoting research through grants, etc. (National Research Foundation, 2015).

The Veterinary Faculty is supported by services of the Jotello F. Soga Library (hereafter referred to as the Library) with six full-time and two part-time employees, of whom five are professional librarians and three are library assistants. With an increase in expectations for the quantity and quality of research output and international visibility of researchers, it is expected that there might also be an increase in needs for support from the Library and information specialists (the term used by the

Library, for those who the literature often also refers to as librarians). With this in mind a study guided by the following research question was launched:

*What are the information needs, information seeking behavior and information use behavior of researchers at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria, and how are these needs being met by the information support delivered by the Jotello F. Soga Library?*

Several issues were pursued: a literature review on the pressure in South Africa for internationally competitive research output and international visibility of researchers; a citation analysis of the research output of veterinary researchers in the Faculty; and a literature review of the information needs and information behavior of veterinarians (students, practitioners and researchers). Data were collected through a survey with veterinary researchers (masters and doctoral students and faculty/academic staff) and three information specialists from the Library. Although the study focused on a specific library, the purpose of the paper is to show the value of using a diversity of methods of data collection to plan and adapt library services according to environmental pressures, the realities of research output, the needs of the users (i.e. the researchers), and the opinion and perceptions of the library staff providing the services and support.

The research design and methods, findings for each of the issues, and recommendations for a framework to explore the services of veterinary libraries that meet with the information needs, information behavior

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 12 529 8474; fax: +27 12 362 5181.

E-mail addresses: [marguerite.nel@up.ac.za](mailto:marguerite.nel@up.ac.za) (M.A. Nel), [ina.fourie@up.ac.za](mailto:ina.fourie@up.ac.za) (I. Fourie).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +27 12 420 5216; fax: +27 12 362 5181.

and expectations of veterinary researchers, and input from librarians are discussed in this paper. The value of the findings for studies of information behavior aimed at the design of information systems and services is also noted.

## BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted between 2011 and 2014, with the survey and empirical data collection between October 2013 and February 2014. At the time of the study the Library was offering core services such as interlibrary loans and information resource access services (including delivering online services through a website with access to a collection of multi-disciplinary electronic books, journals and databases, as well as digital and institutional repositories, electronic theses and dissertations, subject portals, library blogs, online tutorials) and library liaison and instruction services to the Faculty as well as information support to veterinary practitioners. Considering the pressure on institutions of higher education in South Africa, it was not clear if these services were fully meeting the information needs and expectations of the researchers, and how the Library's services and the roles of the information specialists need to be adapted.

Literature searches in core databases from library and information science as well as those covering veterinary science, health, and agriculture were searched (Library and Information Science Abstracts (ProQuest), ScienceDirect, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (EBSCOHost), Medline (EBSCOHost), CAB Abstracts (ISI) and Google Scholar) and found limited research reports on the information needs and information behavior of veterinarians and library services to veterinarians. A study of the status quo at the Jotello F. Soga Library and a core user group – veterinary researchers in the Faculty of Veterinary Science (University of Pretoria) – thus seemed timely and appropriate.

From the subject literature (Case, 2012; Courtright, 2007; Leckie, Pettigrew, & Sylvain, 1996; Musoke, 2008; Wilson, 1981, 2006) it was clear that contexts, including the country and institutional environment, as well as the situation in which researchers find themselves, can have an important impact on needs for information, and thus also library services. With regard to context it was therefore decided to review the research situation and expectations from researchers in South Africa, as well as the research output of the Faculty. The latter was done by means of a citation analysis. Although a fair amount of information is available on library services to researchers (Brophy, 2008; Fourie, 2004; Wakeham & Garfield, 2005; Webb, Gannon-Leary, & Bent, 2007), information specialists cannot use these alone to guide decisions on their role and the services to render. A survey was thus conducted with researchers in the Faculty as well as with the three information specialists dedicated to serving the information needs of researchers. The first author of this paper is also a member of this library, although not directly assigned to offering support to Faculty researchers.

Although this paper is presented as a case study at the University of Pretoria and from the South African perspective, it has relevance beyond this institution and country. Other academic libraries also face institutional and country specific pressures, they are also required to assess research impact and they need to offer relevant services to users including institutional staff and students. The diversity of methods reported in this paper can guide similar projects by other academic libraries.

## RESEARCH LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND RESEARCH OUTPUT OF THE FACULTY OF VETERINARY SCIENCE

Veterinary researchers fulfil their research and tasks against the background of what their country and the international scholarly community expect from researchers. South Africa, like many other countries, is experiencing an increase in demands for quality and quantity, and the visibility of research output. According to Courtright (2007, p. 273) it is important to examine information practices as part of a

“process that takes place within specified situations and contexts”. (The term “information practices” is often used interchangeably with “information behaviour”, although there are differences in their meaning; Savolainen, 2007.) This section briefly considers the South African research landscape as well as the status quo of research output from the Faculty of Veterinary Science (University of Pretoria).

Research and knowledge production in South Africa are high-priority strategies for the South African government (Jeenah & Pouris, 2008; Sooryamoorthy, 2013). One of the initiatives developed by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) is to link research funding and remuneration (i.e. government subsidy) for higher education institutions to the quality and quantity of research output (Diab, Gevers, & Academy of Science of South Africa, 2009; Habib & Morrow, 2006; Jeenah & Pouris, 2008; Kahn, 2011). This requires researchers to publish in journals approved by the DoHET. These journals are referred to as accredited journals. They are peer-reviewed journals meeting with criteria set by the DoHET for high quality reputable local journals. The Thomson Reuters (ISI) Web of Science list of indexed journals is accepted by the DoHET as accredited journals that qualify for government subsidy. It is also often used in bibliometric studies to determine the research ranking of institutions and countries. The scheme of the South African government subsidy to universities based on publication in accredited journals encourage researchers to publish in accredited journals and especially international journals appearing in the ISI list (Vaughan, 2008).

For further encouragement a system for peer review and rating were introduced by the National Research Foundation (NRF). The NRF is a South African initiative that facilitates the peer rating of researchers on various levels, ranging from category A (top international scholars in their field) to C (established researchers with a sustained research productivity record), as well as categories P and Y for younger and upcoming researchers. This system allows researchers to benefit directly in the form of project-related research funding and support for post-graduate students (NRF website).

Apart from rated researchers receiving incentive funding and research grants, the number of rated researchers also adds to the prestige of the institution, as well as international visibility and acknowledgement of institutional research activities (Diab et al., 2009; Pouris, 2007; Vaughan, 2008).

Meeting national goals, as well as the goals of the University of Pretoria is a priority at the Faculty of Veterinary Science (Swan & Kriek, 2009). A citation analysis of the 2012 and 2013 research output of the Faculty was thus conducted to investigate whether there had been an increase in publication quantity as well as publication quality (impact factors of journals), whether there was an improvement in international visibility (publication in international journals), and to reveal choices of journals for publication.

Figs. 1 and 2 indicate the publication output as well as the average impact factor per journal respectively according to Faculty departments. Publications from most departments increased and an overall increase of 109 articles between 2012 and 2013 is seen in Fig. 1. There was also an improvement in the journal impact factors for most departments as well as an overall tendency for the Faculty as a whole to publish in higher impact factor journals (Fig. 2).

Journal titles in which researchers published during 2012 and 2013 were checked for international visibility. All publications were on the Thomson Reuters (ISI) Web of Science indexed journal list or the DoHET lists of accredited journals (thus journals which are included in the South African Government subsidy scheme for higher education institutions). Journal Citation Reports (JSR) of the ISI was used to obtain the impact factors of the journals. During 2012 journals with the highest number of publications were *Veterinary Parasitology* (9%), *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* (9%), followed by the *Onderstepoort Journal of Veterinary Research* (7%), and in 2013, *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* (8%), *Transboundary and Emerging Diseases* (4%) and *Plos One* (3%). Both the *Journal of the South African*

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