How academic librarians, IT staff, and research administrators perceive and relate to research

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A B S T R A C T

Academic libraries are changing how they support research. For example, their involvement in research data management (RDM) implies a much deeper relationship with researchers throughout the research lifecycle. Perhaps we are witnessing a shift from support to partnership. This study examines how librarians, IT staff, and research administrators see research and their own relation to it. Within an interpretative methodology, 20 semi-structured interviews with librarians, IT staff, and research administrators were analyzed thematically. Librarians often talked about research via the discourse of research-led teaching. They also conceived of it via notions of collection and to a lesser extent through reference work or copyright expertise. They saw some of their own continuing professional development or service development work as akin to the work of university researchers, but at the other end of a spectrum. Some saw a categorical difference and considered that research was only conducted by people who had a job title of researcher. IT managers tended to see research via infrastructure or specialist expertise. However, at least one IT staff member saw himself as both partly a researcher and a bridge between research and support. Research administrators tended to see research through the roles of administrative support and policy influence. In summary, seven broad narratives about research were identified: influencing researchers to align with policy; being a researcher; being a bridge with research; offering expertise; providing infrastructure; supporting a research/teaching nexus; and relieving researchers of administrative burdens. As institutions develop research partnerships, e.g., around RDM, training and curricula will need to expand existing conceptions and build deeper empathetic relationships with research.

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1. Introduction

Research data management (RDM) is one of a number of agendas that are leading to a re-evaluation of how academic libraries support research. After a period when the demands on libraries to support learning and teaching (particularly through information literacy) intensified, there seems now to be a rebalancing with a greater focus on building services around research, particularly tied to open access (Corrall, 2014). Involvement in RDM also draws libraries into a deeper engagement with researchers across the whole lifecycle of research from conception, data collection, and storage to long-term data preservation (Cox, Verbaan, & Sen, 2012; Lyon, 2012). Given the centrality of research to universities (Scott, 2009), the imperative to support research is not surprising. From primarily providing access to a collection of sources and helping and training people to use it, there may indeed be a move towards becoming partners in research (Corrall, 2014; O'Brien & Richardson, 2015).

Yet what constitutes research is fuzzy and contested (Fanghanel, 2012). Librarians know quite a lot about how researchers themselves view this complex concept. One seminal perspective is summarized by Becher and Trowler's (2001) notion of academic tribes. This emphasizes the different conceptions of research that exist across disciplines, even sub-disciplines. Such an understanding is reflected in the RDM literature in the strong sense of diversity in existing data practices and attitudes to data sharing (Borgman, 2015). Another strand of scholarship investigates the experience of research, using phenomenographic methods and identifies a range of typical ways researchers conceptualize it (Åkerlind, 2008; Brew, 2001).

2. Problem statement

What is less explored is how academic librarians view research, in order to understand how this aligns with new roles in supporting it. Are they equipped to make an imaginative connection and empathize with researchers? In addition, it is widely accepted that support of research (at least in the RDM area) by necessity will require the library to work very closely with a number of other professional service departments, such as IT and research administration. The views of research

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current in these groups become salient. Given the need to align understanding of research between support staff and researchers, the purpose of this study was to explore how professional services staff thought about research and their own relation to it. More specifically it addressed the following two questions:

1. What is academic librarians' perception of their relation to and existing interactions with research?
2. How do academic librarians conceptualize research?

3. Background

Historically, the library's relation to research has been understood through the lens of the library's "principal roles of collection management, reference work, and library instruction" (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). Research has often been equated simply with information seeking (Falciani-White, 2016). Yet core library roles and their relation to research seem to be undergoing more or less fundamental reconstruction. Commentators are increasingly identifying that academic libraries are moving from being support services to becoming a "professional/scholarly partner" (Corrall, 2014, p. 19). Such a role implies active and creative engagement in the research process (Monroe-Gulick, O'Brien, & White, 2013). A number of studies have suggested that the importance of the book collection has declined and researchers are now less directly engaged with the library (Corrall & Lester, 2013). Partly in response to a perceived decline in researchers' use of libraries, they are "moving into areas such as funding opportunities and grant writing, ethics review, data curation and repository management, poster design and conference hosting, journal and monograph publishing, bibliometric evaluation and impact assessment" (Corrall, 2014, p. 18). The increasingly multi-disciplinary and collaborative nature of research aligns with the library also participating as a partner (Hoffman, 2016). As an example, evidence from recent surveys suggests that academic libraries are taking on or planning a range of roles in RDM (Corrall & Lester, 2013; Cox & Pinfield, 2014; Tenopir, Birch, & Allard, 2012; Tenopir, Sandusky, Allard, & Birch, 2014). Roles have been identified in the areas of policy, advice and signposting, training, auditing of research assets, and creating institutional data repositories (Alvaro, Brooks, Ham, Poegel, & Rosencrans, 2011; Corrall, 2012; Cox & Pinfield, 2012; Flores, Brodeur, Daniels, Nicholls, & Turnator, 2015; Gabridge, 2009; Lewis, 2010; Lyon, 2012). This work could be spread across a number of library teams (e.g., the liaison team, metadata specialists, special collections, and systems). Activities such as helping with data management plans, building data catalogues, and running data repositories are particularly significant changes in terms of repositioning the library more deeply in the research process. Incorporating data to the library collection is a major part of a shift from "outside in" to "inside out" collections (Dempsey, Malpas, & Lavoie, 2014).

Corrall (2014) acknowledges that some authors have queried whether librarians have the skills to fulfill such roles. In order to understand how librarians and professional services staff can support research, and RDM in particular, we need to understand how they conceive of research and how this aligns with researchers' own views. There have been few studies of professional services staff views on research. By contrast, academic librarians know more about how researchers conceive the research they do.

The importance to universities of research grew gradually through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brew & Lucas, 2009). In this century, research has been reshaped—like all academic practices—by globalization, neoliberalism, and new public management (Scott, 2009). The contribution from research to the economy has both led to increasing state funding but also to an environment of increasing evaluation and performance measurement. Thus, for many commentators, how research is done is increasingly shaped by *performativity*, the measurement of performance often against quantitative standards (Thornton, 2009). Research is undertaken in heavily proscribed ways (Fanghanel, 2012).

Equally, what is research is itself contested. There are an increasing number of modes of research partly created by the pressure for "application, interdisciplinarity and usefulness" (Fanghanel, 2012, p. 87). For many higher education institutions (HEI), a discourse of research-led teaching helps tie their excellence in research to teaching quality and so, student recruitment. Yet, generally, research carries more symbolic capital than teaching (Fanghanel, 2012).

Becher and Trowler's (2001) notion that disciplines are global tribes has been very influential in our understanding of research. The concept draws attention to the way that scholars operate in social worlds. Scholars share a sense of identity and personal commitment to the field, a common sense of what is a contribution. Developing institutions where journals and conferences act as formal communication channels and as an invisible college of informal networks. The logic of such a viewpoint is that what constitutes research is defined within disciplines. Much of the literature on RDM, for example, reflects the variation of definitions of data and practices of sharing across disciplines (Borgman, 2015). Yet disciplines have a complex nature of *soft* and *hard* elements. It is increasingly understood that "research tracks and specialties grow, split, join, adapt and die" (Klein, 1996, p. 55). At the same time, various flavors of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity (Huutoniemi, Klein, Bruun, & Hukkinen, 2010) are increasingly emerging, suggesting a much less monolithic picture than implied by a focus on discipline. Funders seek to support research that addresses key social problems, and by definition, this implies large-scale projects and inter-disciplinary and collaborative working.

A number of authors, in particular Angela Brew (see also Åkerlind, 2008), have brought out a somewhat different emphasis in understanding the nature of research through exploring it as an experience. Brew (2001) found that differences in how research was seen did not relate to discipline. Rather, she identified four broad conceptions of research among the 57 experienced researchers she interviewed.

1. The domino conception, in which research is seen as an ordered process in which different atomistic elements are synthesized.
2. The layer conception that sees research as more of a process of uncovering layers to reach underlying meanings.
3. The trading conception that sees research as about operating in a kind of "social market place" and has a focus on products such as projects and publications.
4. The journey conception that sees research very much as a personal, potentially transformational journey for the researcher.

Brew does not report the relative prevalence of these conceptions. She does ask whether certain research agendas are being driven by particular conceptions of research. Indeed, one can certainly see an alignment between the domino conception and the stress in the digital curation agenda on the data lifecycle. Equally, since the trading conception of research focuses on things like projects and citation patterns, it aligns with the case to share data as a valid research output. The transformational journey conception of research seems much more aligned with a sense of the creation of data as a researcher's life project, creating resistance to data sharing.

Similar research has not been carried out for professional services staff, certainly not for librarians or IT staff. If they are seeking to establish research partnerships, the character and alignment of conceptualizations of research will be increasingly important. There have been some studies into the professional identity of research administrators and managers, mostly in relation to the academics they support. Such studies have happened because (1) research administration involves liaising closely with academics about research, more so than is the case for the other support services, and (2) the function of research administration originally belonged (and to a large extent still belongs) to the standard task set of academic staff. Macfarlane (2011) discusses how all-round academic practice—consisting of teaching, research, and administration—is being unbundled with some specialist functions becoming the domain of what he calls the *para-academic*. Institutional