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RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE COLLECTION IN SPECIAL LIBRARIES

A survey of librarians in the UK and Republic of Ireland



Evidence Base

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1. Introduction

In autumn 2006, Evidence Base (see www.ebase.uce.ac.uk) carried out a survey of special libraries in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland¹. The aim of this exercise was to determine the research issues and areas of evidence based practice most relevant to library practitioners. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A. The survey asked for information about:

- Research, evaluation and other evidence collection activities carried out in the last two years
- How the information gathered had been used
- Plans for future activities during the coming year
- Whether findings are shared with other libraries
- Gaps in current knowledge
- Research into electronic resources and the challenges this poses
- Barriers to carrying out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities
- Identified training needs.

This survey built on similar surveys carried out at the University of Central England in 2003². This had found more limited interest in research among special libraries in comparison to those from the public and academic sectors. The diverse nature of special libraries made it difficult to identify significant commonality within the sector in terms of research needs. Although common research issues, such as user needs, collection management and electronic resource provision were identified, these were not exclusive to the special library sector. However, a pattern which did emerge strongly among special libraries was the fact that the majority of research appeared to be driven by the needs of the parent organisation, rather than issues of interest to the sector as a whole. The need to link research, and its outcomes, to organisational planning was emphasised by numerous respondents. This meant that a common feature of research in special libraries was that it was likely to be linked more explicitly to long term planning than was the case in other sectors.

In 2006, 310 surveys were sent out to the named librarian in each special library in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (as listed in the CILIP Directory) and 30 were returned (9.7%)³. As might be expected, a diverse range of libraries were represented: professional associations, private subscription libraries, government department libraries, museums,

¹ This one of a series of surveys carried out by Evidence Base at this time. Other surveys covered public libraries, college libraries, academic libraries and SLS/children's libraries. Report relating to other sectors are available at <http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/publications.htm>

² In Spring 2003, the Centre for Information Research (CIRT) at the University of Central England carried out a series of surveys of libraries in the British Isles in order to obtain up-to-date information about the research issues of particular interest to library staff and to help identify future trends and further improve the links between research and practice. These are available at http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/cirtarchive/projects/past/practitioner_surveys.htm

³ 48 responses were received to the 2003 survey.

religious archives and research institutes. A further respondent provided information about data collected within their library, but did not complete the survey; this was, therefore, not included in the analysis.

2. Responses

2.1 Has your library service carried out any research, evaluation or other evidence collection activities in the last two years?

Twenty-one respondents (70%) reported carrying out research, evaluation or other evidence collection activities in the last two years⁴. The most frequently mentioned activities were user surveys (14 or 67% of the total carrying out research), and the collection of usage/enquiry statistics (6 or 29%). User surveys were used to investigate a variety of issues including user needs, satisfaction, attitudes and opening times. A full list of the types of activity carried out is given below.

Activity	Number of respondents
User survey	14
Usage/enquiry statistics	6
Focus groups/readers' forum	2
Process evaluation	2
Webstats	2
Public consultation	1
Questions included as part of a larger survey	1
Vote	1
User comments	1
Staff survey	1
Client interviews	1
User information analysis	1
Project/pilot evaluation	1
Informal methods	1

n=21

2.2 If you have carried out any research, evaluation or other evidence collection activities, how have you used the information?

Respondents were asked how the information they had collected had been used. Their responses are given in the table below.

⁴ This compares to 50% in the 2003 survey.

Use of information	Number of respondents
Reported to committee(s)	11
Reported to members	1
Reported to external body	2
To make changes to services	6
To introduce a new service	1
To inform planning and budgeting	6
To inform purchasing decisions	3
To bid for funding/resources	1
Journal article	1
Monitoring	2

n=21

The most commonly mentioned use of research, evaluation or other evidence was to report to a committee (11 or 52% of those carrying out research). Six respondents (29%) had made use of findings to improve an existing services, for instance, reviewing opening hours or improving enquiry handling and one introduced new services. Six respondents (29%) used findings to inform planning and budgeting decisions and three (14%) used findings to inform purchasing decisions. One respondent commented that much of the information related to issues beyond their control, so they were not able to act on it.

2.3 Do you share the findings of you research, evaluation or evidence collection?

Of the 30 respondents, 10 (33%) said they had shared their findings with other libraries. This happened in a variety of ways:

- Informal contact/networking
- Through regional groups
- Through subject groups
- Through professional associations and government bodies
- At meetings and conferences
- Via email lists
- On websites
- In journals.

One respondent commented that they did not share findings because they did not feel these were applicable to other libraries.

2.4 Do you have plans for any further research, evaluation or evidence collection activities during the next 12 months?

Twenty-one respondents (70%) said they planned to carry out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities during the next 12 months⁵. This included five who had not carried out research in the previous two years. Some respondents said they would continue, or repeat, the activities which they had carried out in the past. However, around half mentioned new activities they were planning. These included:

- More in depth consultation with users
- Virtual user groups
- Inspiring learning questionnaires
- New methods of monitoring user satisfaction
- Classification systems
- New databases
- Monitoring public library standards
- Activity and impact measures
- Publishing practices
- Wikis
- Access to online journals
- Website feedback mechanisms
- Improving the research infrastructure
- Induction survey
- User Group forum
- Use of electronic resources.

One respondent said their research activities would be more limited than they had been during the previous two years and five respondents (24%) who had carried out research in the past had no definite plans to do so in the coming year.

2.5 Are there any areas where there are gaps in your current knowledge where you would like to carry out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities in the future?

Sixteen respondents (53%) identified definite gaps in their current knowledge where they would like to carry out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities in the future. A further three indicated that there probably were gaps, but did not give specific details or said they were unable to investigate these because of resource constraints. A number of topics was suggested:

- Electronic services (4)
- Use of remote enquiry services (1)
- Value and impact of services (3)
- Journal usage (print and electronic) (2)

⁵ This compares to 42% in 2003.

- General stock usage (2)
- User needs and expectations (4)
- Non-users (1)
- Classification systems (1).

2.6 Do you do any research specifically into the use and other aspects of your electronic resources?

Fifteen respondents (50%) said they had carried out research into the use of their electronic resources and a further three said that they had plans to do so. The difficulties identified in researching electronic resources were:

- Differentiating between paid for and free online usage
- Understanding trends
- Difficulty getting usage figures from suppliers
- Asking users in a way they understand
- Difficulty collecting information about users
- Lack of staff time
- Lack of expertise
- Problems getting staff together to discuss the results.

However, one respondent believed that there were probably more challenges in assessing print resources.

2.7 Are there any barriers which prevent you carrying out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities?

Twenty-six respondents (87%) said there were barriers which prevented them carrying out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities. The barriers they gave are listed in the table below. A lack of time was, by far, the most common problem encountered. A shortage of funding was a problem for some libraries, but was not reported as frequently as had been the case in 2003⁶.

Barrier	Number of respondents
Lack of time	21
Shortage of funding	10
Shortage of staff	7
Problems engaging with users	3
Lack of skills	1
Lack of methodologies to monitor impact	1
Unreliable data	1
Lack of trend data	1
Limited information provided by suppliers	1
Lack of management buy in	1

n=26

⁶ In 2003, a lack of funding was a problem for 52% of respondents.

2.8 Are there any areas where you feel that more training for library staff would help you to improve service provision?

Fourteen respondents (47%) felt there were areas where more training for library staff would help to improve service provision. Another said that, rather than training, there needed to be more opportunities for staff to network and share experiences. Respondents mentioned skills such as customer service, enquiry handling, librarianship skills, working with children and young people, research methods and performance measurement, but it was noteworthy 8 out of the 11 who listed specific areas of need mentioned some aspect of IT or electronic services. This included:

- Electronic resource provision in a particular subject area
- Researching on the web
- New developments/the potential of IT
- Wikis.

3. Summary

This report is based on responses from 9.7% of all special libraries in the UK and Republic of Ireland. It therefore represents a very small sample from a diverse population.

Seven out of ten libraries reported some form of current research activity. User surveys were the most common activity, followed by the collection of usage statistics. The same number of respondents were planning further research or evidence collection during the next twelve months, but this did include five who had not reported activity during the previous two years. Furthermore, more than half said there were still gaps in their knowledge and they would like to carry out research in the future. The main barrier which prevented more research being carried out was a lack of time, although a lack of staff and funding were additional problems.

More than half those who had carried out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities reported the findings to one or more committees. Making changes to existing services, or in one instance introducing a new service, was another way in which research evidence was used, as was planning, including budgeting and planning. Just one-third of respondents said they shared their findings with other libraries.

It is difficult to identify future trends based on the findings of this survey, especially given the diversity of the sector, but electronic resources would seem to be an area of interest to a number of special libraries. In addition, there would seem to be some interest in greater investigation of users and their needs.

Appendix A

Survey of Special Library Managers

Evidence Base, a research and evaluation unit at the University of Central England is carrying out a survey to help to determine the research issues and areas of evidence based practice most relevant to library practitioners. We would be grateful if you could complete the questions below and return the questionnaire (in the pre-paid envelope provided) by **4th December 2006**.

Contact name : _____

Organisation: _____

Contact phone number and/or email: _____

1a) Has your library service carried out any research, evaluation or other evidence collection activities in the last two years?

Yes No

1b) If so, please give details below, for example: user survey, weblogs, project evaluations, user focus groups

2) If you have carried out any research, evaluation or other evidence collection activities, how have you used the information?

(E.g. reported to a committee, making changes to a service, introducing a new service, budget planning)

3a) Do you share the findings of your research, evaluation or evidence collection activities with other libraries?

Yes No

3b) If so, how does this take place?

4) Do you have plans for any further research, evaluation or evidence collection activities during the next 12 months?

Yes No

If so please give details.

5) Are there any areas where there are gaps in your current knowledge where you would like to carry out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities in the future?

Yes No

If so please give details.

6) Do you do any research specifically into the use and other aspects of your electronic resources?

Yes No

6b) If so, does this pose any challenges?

7) Are there any barriers which prevent you carrying out research, evaluation or evidence collection activities?

Yes No

If so, please give details (E.g. lack of time, lack of skills, lack of funding).

8) Are there any areas where you feel that more training for library staff would help you to improve service provision?

Yes No

If so, please give details.

Thank you for your participation.

The findings of this survey will be written up as a short report which will be made available on our website, but all responses will remain confidential

Do you wish to be notified when this is available? Yes No

Would you like us to contact you to discuss any research needs? Yes No

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