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Citation: Kitchin, Suzie (2015) Literature search consultancy - partnership working. SCONUL Focus, 63. pp. 48-50. ISSN 1745-5790

Published by: Sconul

URL: <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/sconul-focus> <<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/sconul-focus>>

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Literature search consultancy – partnership working



Suzie Kitchin

Research Support Librarian
University Library
Northumbria University
suzie.kitchin@northumbria.ac.uk

Context

Northumbria University's Corporate Strategy for 2013–18 states that the university's Vision 2025 is to be a 'research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence' (Northumbria University, <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/media/1898093/corpstrat.pdf>). Increasing emphasis on research is shifting Northumbria's traditional focus on learning and teaching, and presents challenges and opportunities for support services.

The university library has been exploring how to support this expanding research agenda. This is articulated in the creation of a new dedicated Research Support team, and services are mapped to the researcher lifecycle <http://library.northumbria.ac.uk/info-researchers> (accessed 28 January 2015).

Parallel to this, Gillian Maw, Senior Lecturer in the university's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, acquired funding for a research project to explore the Nursing and Midwifery Council's requirement for continuing professional development for non-medical prescribers to (Nursing and Midwifery Council, Standards for of proficiency for nurse and midwife prescribers). The latter are health professionals such as nurses who have a clearly defined role in prescribing medication, but are not doctors. Gillian had funding available for someone to undertake the review of supporting literature for the project – she lacked time and specific expertise to do this herself, and wanted to capitalise on the expertise of the university library's professional support staff.

Literature search advice is central to service provision in any academic library and involves supporting staff and students in developing effective search strategies and searching of relevant academic resources. This article explores Northumbria's journey in developing a consultancy service to support literature searching in funded research projects.

Partnership working

As one of the library's Research Support Librarians, I was partnered with Gillian to source literature for her project, and also to evaluate the process as a pilot for a potential costed literature search service which the library might offer across the university.

Part of the university's ambition to achieve the Vision 2025 is to have partnership working as a 'stylistic trait' (Northumbria University). This attribute was central to the success of the pilot. Gillian and I had worked together when I was a Library Liaison Adviser for the university's health programmes including courses for which she had responsibility. Our existing professional relationship meant we started the pilot with a solid grounding of respect and openness. This is vital when you are starting out on something new and constantly need to ask each other questions, evaluating each step as you try out new ways of working!

'To say yes to using the service lifts a huge grey cloud off my head, as [the] library will be doing [the] literature searching part of the project. It will make the process easier' (Gillian's comment quoted in Kitchin, 2013a, p. 2).

Scoping the project

The starting point when sourcing literature for someone else is to have a very clear picture of what is required, which we did as a scoping exercise with flipchart pad and pens. As any librarian who helps customers with literature searching knows, you ask a lot of questions to help the person articulate what they need. My questions included clarifying publication dates, keywords, exclusion criteria and literature format. Other key elements discussed and agreed in our scoping meeting were how to share the literature search results



(via EndNote Online), how to keep in touch with each other and deadlines.

Gillian found my questions helped her to focus on what she wanted to explore in the research project: *'Once I received [the] written scoping document from library, I used it to map my project. It helped me walk through the issues, it caused me to change questions I used in my focus groups. The thought-processes [the librarian used] had were crucial in helping my thinking'* (Gillian's comment quoted in Kitchin, 2013a, p. 3).

We were an equal partnership, each fulfilling our respective professional roles. After I had completed the subject literature review, Gillian realised she also needed action research methodology literature, so we tested the scoping processes already trialled to ensure they worked for a second time. They did, and both the scoping discussion and document have been embedded as key elements in the now live service. Gillian articulated the benefit of this partnership:

'Sharing part of the work was therapeutic, e.g. [the librarian] suggesting I include X keyword; helping me to focus on what I needed. We both had to consider what we are getting out of this process. My fears started to disappear' (Gillian, in Kitchin, 2013a, pp. 2–3).

Impact

The pilot was very successful in two ways. Firstly, it provided the researcher with the literature she needed to provide as a basis for her research project. Secondly, it gave me as the Research Support Librarian the opportunity to appraise a new concept of service delivery and to take this forward to service implementation. *'Our existing professional relationship enabled us to be honest, practical and reflective throughout the process, to the benefit of Gillian's project as well as the service development'* (Suzie, in Kitchin, 2013b).

From the experiences gained during the pilot, I was able to translate these into procedures and practices, which are now ready to implement when we receive expressions of interest from researchers. Without the pilot the library would not have had that valuable customer insight to help move this venture into new service provision.

For the researcher it had benefit in the professional practice arena – *'this project could not have been completed within the time span requested by HENE [health organisation] without [the librarian's] help. The experience was both professional and essential but also a personal sounding board during which concerns, choices, and knowledge sharing was implicit to the success of the work. Without this aspect of the project I believe it would not have resulted in a such a robust study or indeed one which has such implications for prescribing practice'* (Gillian, in Kitchin, 2013b).

Reflections and mapping the journey

As this article documents the journey of our pilot, details about the live literature search consultancy service are not included. However, if you would like to find out more, please contact me.

We use a customer journey mapping tool in the library, whereby you map the journey a customer takes when using a particular library service and explores their experiences. We started doing this when we applied for our first Customer Service Excellence accreditation. The ideal is to have a customer do this, but if that is not feasible, you can ask a member of library staff unfamiliar with the specific journey to act as the customer instead. It is a great way to explore how your services are experienced by customers, and consequently how you can improve.



In this instance, Gillian and I used the customer journey map as a reflective tool after the pilot had finished, to help us evaluate our experiences and the processes we developed. This helped identify important elements to be included in the new consultancy service being developed by the library, as well for Gillian as the customer to highlight areas of potential concern. The specialist professional skills brought to the table by the librarian were highlighted as fundamental to the process.

'Key is the understanding of the whole subject and scope of search by library staff. Search would be much more tricky if didn't know this. Library staff need to understand whole context otherwise it is pointless. Sharing skills between library and myself is key' (Gillian in Kitchin, 2013a, p. 2).

We both recognised the benefit that our existing working relationship gave to the pilot, as did my knowledge of the health sector and relevant bibliographic databases. This was particularly useful in interrogating the processes and practices used in the pilot. In implementing the service across the university, it is acknowledged that this pre-existing knowledge will not always be available. However, the professional transferable skills of the librarians delivering the consultancy service mean we do not require specialist subject knowledge of all subjects across the university. The pilot demonstrated the importance of excellent communication between both parties, and the need for the librarian to have a good appreciation of the context of the research project.

Conclusion

We both really enjoyed working on this pilot. It gave us the opportunity to work together on a project that had the specific requirement of sourcing the literature Gillian needed, and also to interrogate the processes we developed. For me, it provided the challenge and opportunity of using my professional skills to pilot and implement a new service. It was a step into the unknown for me as the librarian, in going beyond the usual 'I'm giving you XX advice and encouragement, but I'm not going to source the literature for you', to applying my specialist literature searching skills for sourcing literature for a research project. For the researcher, it involved delegating responsibility for part of the research project, which she found helpful and also released time to focus on the data collection and analysis.

It has been an excellent example of partnership working, where two professionals have come together to use their respective knowledge and skills to help develop a new library service. How often are we brave enough to take the opportunity to provide a service to a customer where the outcome impacts on real research, not relying on tried and tested methods but being innovative? With the current challenges in higher education, should we move out of our comfort zone, away from established practices, and consider different ways of working?

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