



Do librarians in Irish Higher Education write for academic publication?

A review of activity, motivations and barriers.

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Abstract

The extent to which Irish academic librarians are engaged in publishing in the professional press is considered. This study is an attempt to put the research output of academic librarians on a firm evidence-based footing. A second and equally important research objective was to establish what actually motivates library staff to submit for written publication and concomitantly what barriers, perceived or real, inhibit library staff from doing this.

Keywords: *Publishing, Academic librarians, Ireland*



Introduction

Having identified a research gap, the primary research goal of this study was to establish whether or not academic librarians in Irish Higher Education publish. In identifying this research gap, we know that no comprehensive national exploration of the research output of library staff in Ireland had been done before. Anecdotally we know that librarians from across the spectrum of library work in Ireland are active and engaged practitioners - attending seminars, involved in CPD, presenting at conferences etc. However, we did not know to what extent library staff were actually writing for the literature and if so what did this look like, how much of it was being done, where, by whom and for what purpose. Some eight years ago, Helen Fallon (2009) spoke about “very few Irish academic librarians publish in the peer-reviewed literature” and of the need to “develop a culture of writing among librarians”.

Based on our research we have also been able to identify a number of likely predictors for publishing in the academic literature. We also make some suggestions for future research opportunities and suggestions for raising research involvement.

Approach and Parameters

The central focus of the research was to review the written published output of academic librarians in the Irish higher education sector. Two complementary research tools were used: an online questionnaire using Survey Monkey¹ to determine why or why not librarians are publishing, and a content analysis to assess what and where librarians were writing in the peer-reviewed literature over the period from 2000-2015.

The online survey involved questioning the library staff (estimated at 750 in total – 237 professional, 513 non-professional) of the 21 publicly-funded higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland – the seven Universities and fourteen Institutes of Technology. A survey was distributed to all library staff in the 21 colleges with staff choosing whether or not to participate. The final response

¹ The survey was carried out in late November-December 2015

rate was just shy of 30%, with all institutions participating and qualitative responses anonymized. The response rate from Institutes of Technology was higher than those from Universities, but proportionally as a % of overall responses there was little difference between the two. The survey consisted of 22 questions across a range of both quantitative and qualitative, open and closed questions, and utilised Likert scales. Cross-tabulation and analysis of the survey results were done using MS Excel. The content analysis was carried out to ensure that we had supporting and comprehensive data, the nature of a self-selecting survey meaning that some librarians that we knew had published would not be excluded from the study had they chosen not to complete the questionnaire. The content analysis manually reviewed all peer-reviewed publications within LIS using a combination of literature review, scoping, index and database searching. Relevant papers selected as fitting our parameters were papers published in a core LIS journal by library staff working in an Irish academic library during the period 2000-2015. These were then collated by author name(s), publication year, journal title, single or co-authored, methodological approach and primary subject content or theme. To set practical limits on the research, only higher education libraries were reviewed and only written papers submitted to core peer-reviewed LIS journals were included. All other types of library and research activity however meaningful were excluded.

An extensive literature review was also carried out looking at various models of scholarly communication and examining international perspectives on librarians’ publishing and writing, motivations, barriers and cultures.

Main findings

During the period 2000-2015, we estimate that some 93 articles were published in the core LIS by library staff from our 21 selected Institutions. In general terms, there has been a modest growth in publication rates since 2008, with little published before then. The rate of publication peaked in 2013, with steady levels in the last few years. About 60% of all papers published were in conventional blind peer-reviewed journals, the remaining 40% in journals categorized as Open Access. In the last 3 years there has been a definite move towards OA with ½ of the 10 most published in journals classified as OA publications.

The 93 papers were published in a total of 29 core LIS journals, and half of these were published in just once. Eighty five percent of all articles were published in the remaining 14 journals, perhaps an indication that library staff from Irish libraries veer towards the same range of publishing outlets. The journals with the highest number of submitted papers include:

- **An Leabharlann:the Irish Library**
- **Journal of Information Literacy,**
- **Library Management,**
- **New Review of Academic Librarianship**
- **New Library World,**
- **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP)**
- **Journal of Academic Librarianship,**
- **Library Review,**
- **Journal of Library Innovation,**
- **Library & Information Research**

We can say that librarians working in higher education are writing about a wide range of topics using a number of well-established methods and methodologies. The most written about topic by far is information literacy (IL) with over 20% of all papers. Other common themes include eResources, eBooks, and open source technologies (11%), information-seeking behaviour (9%), library collections including bibliographic management, cataloguing, metadata, and special collections (9%), leadership, change and management (6%), and writing and publishing (6%). In terms of methods, case studies represented about 1/3 of all papers, with evidence-based practitioner style papers in excess of 50% and questionnaires, mixed-method, report-style, surveys and qualitative approached also common. Longitudinal studies, reflective or exploratory papers are rare.

A very significant feature of publishing amongst our cohort was the high level of collaboration. Sixty percent of all articles published were solo written with the other 40% a mix of co-authored. Of those librarians that do write, many do so with colleagues from within their own library. A small number collaborate with colleagues from other libraries, but very few collaborate outside the comfort zone of their own profession. Inter-institutional collaboration is very much the exception and it would seem that library staff from Universities and Institutes of Technology very rarely write together. Collaboration or partnership is a strong predictor for publishing as over 50% of papers published were of this nature. According to our survey the reasons given for deciding to collaborate were driven by a desire to combine expertise, share the workload, give a balance or different perspective, or because it was required by a joint project or research or simply because a colleague asked. The benefits to partnering or co-authorship are obvious and bear a positive correlation to research activity. Although more papers have been published by University than Institute of Technology, higher staffing levels mean that as a proportion of overall library staff, the rate of publication is pretty even. We therefore took the view that place of work is not a critical factor in likelihood to publish. Similarly from a gender perspective, even though library staff are predominantly female there was no significant

proportional difference in the levels of publishing. Further, amongst those that co-authored there are high levels of gender mix. Therefore, we took the view that gender was not particularly a significant indicator or predictor.

Much more meaningful as predictors for publishing according to our research are age, level of experience and education. Eighty six percent of all respondents have a level 8 or higher educational qualification – indicating extremely high levels of educational attainment amongst library staff in Irish higher education. The vast bulk of those that published have in excess of a level 9 qualification; $\frac{3}{4}$ of all those that published currently work in professional roles. Those with levels of work experience in the range of 11-20 years were much more likely to publish, although there were rising numbers of those publishing with between 6 and 10 years' experience. New entrants as of yet would seem to be publishing averse. The median age for those engaged in research publishing activity is between 36-55, not hugely surprising in that this would reflect a broad sense of those firmly established in the workplace and in their professional development. Reviewing the profile of those that did publish from both the survey and content analysis, we know that only a modest number of library staff have published more than twice and very very few are regular contributors to the peer-reviewed literature. The community of library staff from higher education in Ireland actively engaged in scholarly communication via writing and submitting articles is low but at least on an upward trend.

Barriers and Motivations

Despite the fact that very few library staff have had a paper rejected for publication, many staff still choose not write or to submit to the process of getting something published. One hundred and sixty respondents that didn't submit for publication detailed their reasons for this. The foremost reason listed was time restraints, although there would appear to be little evidence that librarians as a group are any more busy than other professions. That said we acknowledge that writing is consuming and often requires significant periods of unfettered time. Many librarians also commonly referred to perceived ability issues or lack of confidence in writing. This is not uncommon in the wider literature and is a recurring theme. Others felt that writing,

research or publication was not part of their job description and did not apply to them. The dichotomy between a service oriented profession and a more scholarly academic approach is ongoing. Of course this contrasts with the culture of writing for tenure that is evident in the United States and Canada. Some respondents felt that writing would aid their career and promotional prospects and were motivated in this regard. Overcoming these inhibitors is a challenge for the wider profession, professional association, library schools, institutions and library leaders. Other reasons listed included burdensome workloads and lack of interest.

Of the 50 survey respondents that had published, intrinsic motivation was a big factor – with research interest and 'like to write' marking highly. The possibility of career progression was also an important factor, along with personal development and continuing professional development. It would seem that many of these that publish or write do so, not because they are required or feel they need to, but because they are personally driven and want to. This in no way negates the very real practical reasons other library staff gave for not writing. What is important is that we find ways, both personal and institutional, of assisting and supporting those who do have an interest in writing and wish to pursue it, ultimately benefitting the profession and the academic discipline of LIS. Interestingly those library staff that did write indicated in the survey that they received institutional support and that a culture of encouragement existed. However it would also seem that practical supports or incentives such as time off or reduced workload are rare. Those that publish are more engaged with the literature and research in the LIS profession than those who do not, supporting the notion perhaps that personal motivation and drivers are predictors of research commitment. On a positive note, over 120 respondents valued academic writing as being important or very important for the profession of librarianship. There was also an optimistic response when asked about intention to potentially publish at a future date with over $\frac{1}{4}$ of respondents indicating an affirmative intention. This intention was much higher in instances in which the respondent had previously published.

Over 50 respondents gave detailed qualitative comments in the online questionnaire. Quite a number referred to time barriers and what they perceived as professional or institutional obstacles. Others were more upbeat and credited individual and institutional supports they had received, recognizing the value of writing and research in educating, changing and championing the profession. Librarians sense of self and identity were also mentioned with some respondents discussing where librarians fit in the wider education landscape.

Future opportunities

Research and writing can be of personal and professional benefit. As librarianship as a profession and academic discipline evolves, recognising the value in research – practitioner, evidence-based and academic is important. The need to develop wider skill sets and research competencies in workplaces that are increasingly data and evidence driven should be key drivers for libraries.

We encourage library staff from all library types and roles to get involved and get out there. Research activity is not just writing – it can take many forms, the most important thing is engagement. Barriers to writing and anxieties particularly amongst junior or new professionals can be overcome through building confidence from collaborating, mentoring, institutional support, co-authoring, writing groups. As Fallon (2009) argues, it can increase “the visibility of the library” and help us to look outwards, telling our library story. If the modest emerging patterns of research publications in Irish LIS are to continue to grow beyond their current piecemeal levels, a more coherent and targeted approach may be needed. Library research champions and leadership from within the profession and the professional bodies can support this and build towards a culture of writing. A profession that is willing to question itself and reflect on its value and role must be mature and reflective enough to engage in writing and research. This baseline national study can act as a basis for future research on not just publishing output amongst academic librarians but other libraries – health, public, special and others of the many forms of research activity and the impact this can have on our profession.

Summary

- Only about 1/3 of higher education colleges have library staff actively publishing.
- Publications are a combination of academic research, evidenced-based and practitioner approaches.
- Submitting a paper is a strong predictor for publication – very few papers are rejected outright.
- Career progression is an important factor for those involved in research activity but there is little evidence to date that promotion or status is crucial to this.
- The growth of publication rates although coming from a very low base in 2000 has been upward if rather modest.
- Open Access is growing significantly as a publication outlet representing almost 2/3 of all papers’ since 2011.
- Confidence is a key factor and the dominant predictor in likelihood to publish.
- The number of librarians publishing habitually is relatively low; ½ of those who have published have only done so once.
- Library staff from higher education publish across a wide range of journals, but the bulk of publishing is limited to a small number of journals.
- The key barriers to research activity are time and perceived lack of institutional support.
- Collaboration among academic library staff is pervasive, most commonly but not exclusively among internal library colleagues.
- The most common types of papers are empirical, evidential, or case study-type research.
- Level of educational attainment and years’ library experience are more likely predictors for publishing than where you work.
- Library staff working at professional level are much more likely to publish.

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