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Getting to Know You – Supporting Research Through Communication and Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Background. Communication and collaboration are important skills for academic librarians offering research support. When everyday meetings are not possible, as during the Covid-19 pandemic, academic librarians are forced to develop new ways of supporting students and faculty. Traditional library expertise in literature searching and bibliometric complemented with newer skills of analytics, visualization and literature mapping of a field can help librarians to get acquainted and communicate with the researchers they provide research support to.

Objectives. This article presents the result of an effort to map out trends and changes in research and publication patterns in a university department over a 10-year time period (2009-2019), which reflect both developments in the department as well as the external environment. Further, the article discusses how this can help liaison librarians to communicate with faculty and provide more relevant and effective research support.

Methods. A document analysis was carried out on the publications of a department faculty to trace how research has developed in a growing department with different subjects and disciplines.

Results. The analysis found a trend of research the department becoming more international, with more publications in open access. Even though research in the department is becoming more interdisciplinary, there is a trend of sociology research moving towards a purer form of `sociology, and away from a previous focus on sociology and social work as a joint research interest. Furthermore, social work research has also developed a stronger focus on child welfare, and the teacher education staff has increased their publications in several focus areas.

Contributions. This article contributes to the field of research support, showing how mapping the research in a university department can help liaison librarians in face-to-face communication with faculty as well as in online interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Although research support has always been a core objective for academic libraries, research on this issue is still a nascent field. Research support can be generic or situated. Generic skills are general and transferrable, whereas situated skills are best understood from a socio-cultural perspective as a "socially and culturally influenced process and practice, shaped by the

situated nature of interaction between people and through embodied experience in specific information landscapes" (Lloyd, 2006, p. 579). Situated skills demand more in-depth knowledge and engagement with the information landscape. It is reasonable to assume that the best kind of research support is situated, and a liaison librarian will benefit from in-depth knowledge of the subject at hand. However, as research is becoming ever more interdisciplinary, this generates multiple challenges for individual librarians. As a research librarian is likely to have been educated in one field and not multiple fields, collaboration and communication are important to ensure that multidisciplinary challenges are met in a constructive way. A supplementary approach to navigating the information landscape (Lloyd, 2017) is to systematically follow and document published research to identify trends, which suggest helpful advice and services from the library. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced academic librarians to work in new ways, reducing the likelihood of casual meetings and informal chats. Including new co-workers in the workplace and building professional relationships are more difficult than it used to be. Consequently, liaison librarians who were already struggling to build relationships with students and researchers as they were not formal members of the faculty, are also feeling the detrimental effect of this. Therefore, librarians must be open to new approaches to build these relationships and ensure effective communication, so that lessons learned during the pandemic can be added as a complementary way of working after the pandemic. Librarians have the advantage of being able to map out published research, and build an understanding and overview of a research field, which contribute towards understanding individual researcher's needs for research support.

This article presents a document analysis to map out patterns of publication and scholarly communication in a medium-sized and multidisciplinary university department, to investigate how this can help liaison librarians get familiar with the information landscape and further, provide more relevant and effective research support. In other words: how can insight into a department's research over time help improve research support?

The department covers social work and child welfare, sociology, and teacher education. One single department has been chosen, because a liaison librarian often supports a whole department and not just one subject.

BACKGROUND

Sociology and social work are different disciplines that share a substantial amount of common ground. Therefore, it is not uncommon that the two disciplines are merged in the same department in universities around the world. The Department of Sociology and Social work at the University of Agder started out as two separate departments. Sociology was originally put together with political science, while social work was paired with health sciences. Over time the two fields have been merged into one department. The dynamics of this merging has been discussed, loved and hated for the last hundred years (Halvorsen, 2016). Additionally, as the department grew larger, teacher education also became a substantial focus of the department. This makes the department more complex, but perhaps also more complete. It can make it challenging for liaison librarians as they are supporting three different research areas that have much in common, but still differ substantially. The subjects complement as well as challenge each other, because they use many of the same theories and methods, but are fundamentally different in that traditionally sociology is a discipline subject, and social work is a practice-based profession. How does this affect research and the development of the department's subjects? One would think that these fields of research had some impact on each

other. And when research changes, so must research support. In a pandemic with challenging work conditions, it is important that librarians keep in touch with researchers and the research environment to better understand the changes and development of research, so that they may more effectively support the field of research.

To support research, it is important to understand the research process, and better yet understand the researchers and their professional needs. Getting to know researchers can be done by being externally oriented, meaning that librarians, instead of waiting for researchers to contact the library, take a proactive approach and contact the researchers directly when they come to the university rather than waiting for the researchers to contact the library (Daland & Hidle, 2016). Information literacy skills are in the socio-cultural approach considered to be a set of skills developed in a social setting, or in information landscapes. Annemaree Lloyd described information landscapes as a principal element of the theory of information literacy, which are constituted through social, epistemic/instrumental, and physical corporeal information modalities which reflect the stable and established knowledge domains of a social site (Lloyd, 2017, p. 94). Further, information literacy is shaped, reproduced, and transformed by social and public discourses. These discourses influence language, activities and roles that are ascribed to practitioners and professionals (Hicks & Lloyd, 2021, p. 1).

Initiating the first approach can be done formally or informally (Daland & Hidle, 2016, p. 55). The informal approach may demand more of the librarian and his or her personality, while the formal way may be easier once it has been established as a standard procedure. Making this contact will be easier for a librarian who already knows the research at a department, as this will give a good impression and improve the trust in his or her abilities to support current research. Knowing a researcher is knowing the researcher's research, and this knowledge will help develop the librarians' understanding of the information landscape and increase the library's standing amongst researchers. The librarian and the researchers enter the information landscape with different skills and understandings. Many of these are tacit and situated in their education and profession. Through communication and collaboration, the skills of the librarian and the researchers can be made explicit and be grounds for a fruitful collaboration. However, in a pandemic with people working from home, this approach is challenging. The need for mapping out research, relying on written sources and bibliometric data is becoming more important. Having the opportunity to map out research over time to get acquainted with the department at hand is a great advantage that should be taken, and this first-hand approach through text is described by Lloyd as the first stage of becoming an information literate and further move from novice towards expert, before interaction happens in the second stage (Lloyd, 2006, p. 575). Most jobs will have a text-based introduction to the workplace, for example a list of rules or an introduction to the organisation. Working with academics, this text-based introduction will be quite substantial as it will include previous publications authored by the researchers in question.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Research support in this context is understood as librarians providing relevant library support and services to researchers. Relevant library research support is more than just purchasing books and providing a well-developed infrastructure. To secure relevance and efficiency, research support must be based on communication and understanding between the two professionals, meaning the librarian and the researcher. There is much to be learned for both parties in such a collaboration and in the development of community (Daland, 2013;

Hoffman, 2016; Olsen, 2012) where a deeper understanding and communication is developed. Understanding the information landscape where researchers exist as well as the research process makes it easier to offer relevant research support.

Research support has been delved into as a research area in librarianship for some twenty years, and many projects have been developed to improve this service. Many of them conclude that collaboration and communication is important to do so (Daland, 2013; Daland & Hidle, 2016; Haddow, 2012; Nickels & Davis, 2020; Olsen, 2012; Si, Zeng, Guo & Zhuang, 2019). Many researchers have too little knowledge about what the library can offer, and many librarians are not familiarised enough with the research process. Researchers may pay little heed to generic offers of support from librarians unless they are clear and helpful response to a felt need (Atkinson, 2016, p. 146). Communication and collaboration between researchers and librarians can help improve this understanding and furthermore the quality of research and research support.

Research support can be many things, from financial support to publishing consultations or access to literature. This study focuses on library research support as a more confined variety of services, yet still many-sided and complex. A study by Si, Zeng, Guo and Zhuang suggests seven such divisions of research support: research data management, open access, scholarly publishing, research impact measurement, research guides, research consultation and research tools recommendation (Si, Zeng, Guo & Zhuang, 2019, p. 291).

As the volume of accessible information is steadily increasing and publication practices evolve, well-developed research support services are becoming more and more important. Researchers need to navigate between trustworthy and predatory journals, and have a good overview of the research field as well as overlapping fields as research is becoming more interdisciplinary. This cannot be done by one researcher or one librarian alone, but through collaboration and the development of good professional relationships that help support good results. In recent years, research data management has become an important part of the library's research support provisions. Open data and data sharing need to be handled by professionals to make sure the data is available and accessible, and the importance and value of the sharing of data must also be communicated to the researchers (Hoffman, 2016). Open access and scholarly publishing are also an emerging part of research support relevant to the traditional task of publishing, but with several new possibilities and numerous possible pitfalls. Bibliometrics is an important way of measuring impact, and while it has its limitations for subjects like the humanities and social sciences, it is still emerging as an up-and-coming means of measuring how research is being used and is influencing society. Research consultation and research tools recommendations imply direct contact, even face-to-face between researcher and librarian, where knowledge and recommendations are shared (Daland & Hidle, 2016). Mapping out the different aspects of research support can help make implicit or tacit knowledge more explicit and manageable.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research support is one of academic libraries` core objectives. To be able to offer information services of good quality, it is important that liaison librarians understand the setting and the needs of the relevant library users, like researchers. Being familiar with research methodologies and theories of the field is part of knowing the information landscape. Annemaree Lloyd describes the creation of information landscapes as contextual collaboration with the construction of collective learning. These landscapes are constituted through social, epistemic/instrumental, and physical corporeal information modalities which

reflect the stable and established knowledge domains of a social site (Lloyd, 2017, p. 94). The best way of getting to know a research environment and researchers is to be part of their social or professional groups. Lloyd stated that to become an information literate, one must pass through two phases. In the first phase, the individual accesses the information environment through text. In the second phase, the person starts to engage with the landscape (Lloyd, 2006, p. 575). The first phase is easily accomplished for librarians working with researchers through access to the library catalogue and research documentation systems. Getting an overview of the published research and publication patterns will provide a useful insight to the information landscape. Being familiar with publications can be a useful ice breaker to communicating with researchers via email or online meetings like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. For librarians, it is a great advantage that the topography of the information landscape is documented through publications when face-to-face meetings are challenging to arrange. This way, a better understanding of the information landscape at hand can emerge.

METHOD

The selected methodology is a document analysis of retrieved publications from the Norwegian research documentation system Cristin (Current research information system in Norway). Cristin records all research related publications and documents like research articles, books, film clips, newspaper articles, interviews, etc. The Norwegian academic publication system divides academic publications into two levels. Level 1 indicates that the publication channel holds the criteria of scientific publishing. Level 2 are "perceived as leading publication channels in a wide variety of academic contexts and publish the most outstanding works by researchers from different countries" (Norwegian Publication Indicator, 2022). Only publications deemed to be approved at level 1 or 2 are included.

Document analysis has been chosen to ensure a qualitative approach to review, interpret and analyse research publications to "gain meaning and empirical knowledge of the construct being studied" (Frey, 2018). The goal is to investigate what information and meaning a librarian can gain from a systematic approach to research publications, and how this can be utilised to complement research support.

The inclusion criteria for the document analysis were academic publications (level 1 or 2) in Cristin approved as "NVI publications". "The Norwegian Scientific Index (NVI) in Cristin is used for registration of complete bibliographical references for academic publications which at the same time is unambiguously linked to persons at institutions which are part of Cristin" (Cristin, 2017). Cristin also makes it possible to search for the collective publications of one whole department, making mapping of the department's research more manageable.

Scientific publications between 2009 and 2019 have been included to display tendencies over time and to ensure a substantial number of publications.

Further, the retrieved publications have been analysed and put into categories of research subject, year of publication, open access publications, international/domestic publications, and publications channels.

This is a small study that will not be able to say much in general about the development of research and scholarly communication, but it will give a local insight and provide a suggested approach for liaison librarians as to how they can map out and understand research in the department they are supporting.

Much of library research in the field of research support is linked to researchers understanding of desired research support and what they need. Suggesting a document
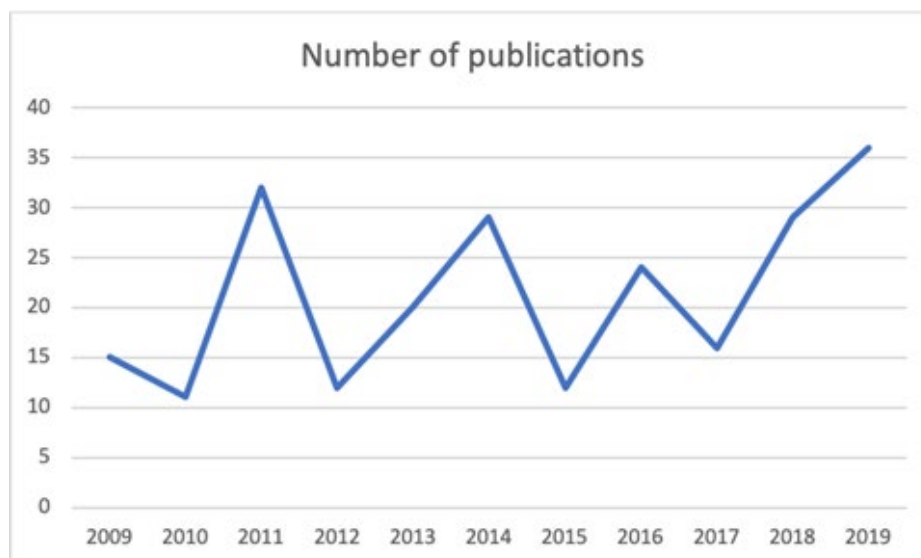
Figure 1. Total number of publications over time by department members

analysis of published research over time will offer a helpful insight into the bibliographic data for the liaison librarian and the library. It can also help the librarian analyse this data and further suggest relevant services to researchers to help them increase their research or research impact through, for example, open access publishing.

As mentioned, the publications have been located through Cristin. The different subjects of research have been mapped out and broader subject categories have been made based upon this. The publications will be categorised by categories of subjects, and publication language. The aim of these groupings is to support mapping out possible changes in different aspects of research, like publication language, research themes and open access publishing.

OVERVIEW OF THE DEPARTMENT'S RESEARCH

The total number of research publications over the ten-year period is 236 (Figure 1). With some ups and downs, it has gone from fifteen publications in 2009 to thirty-six publications in 2019. It is important to note that the number of staff members has almost doubled in this time. It would be almost impossible to double the numbers of staff and not see any effect in the research output. To preserve anonymity, the data have not been broken down to an individual level. However, delving deeper into
the statistics and examining publication trends with respect to publication language, and open-access publishing can yield interesting insights.

Research subjects

Three of the subjects offered at this department are professional education programs leading to placement in the workforce: Social Work, Child Welfare and Teacher Education. In addition to this, the discipline of sociology is taught. Research is becoming ever more interdisciplinary, and sociology along with several of the humanities subjects provide theoretical groundwork for many other subjects.

Sociology is the study of humans and societies. Looking at the structures of society, and how humans interact with each other teaches us a lot about how we can expect humans to

Table 1. Research themes

Child welfare	Gender	Health
Research and methods	Management	Unemployment
Social welfare services	Evaluation	Multiculturalism
Ethics	Politics	User involvement
Education and teaching	Practice and profession	Sociology of religion
Professional and knowledge development	Social class	Arts and literature
Collaboration	Innovation	Anthrozoology
Power	Personality traits, identity and behaviour	Institutional ethnography
Technology		

react and adjust to different changes and patterns of society. Sociology is a theoretical discipline where the researchers mainly qualify through a Ph.D.

Social work research focuses on practical problems in social work practice or social policy, and is closely related to the field of practice. Therefore, many social work researchers have a mixed background of practical work experience in the welfare field in addition to a Ph.D. degree.

The teacher education unit at the University of Agder is made up of a matrix where people from different departments teach their discipline to teacher students. Therefore, this unit is complex and has broad subject coverage. The Department of Sociology and Social Work has sociology researchers and social science didactics who teach the teacher education students. The research of these teachers is mainly focused within their field of expertise from their doctorate, and also related to social sciences didactics.

Child Welfare has always been an important focus area of the department, but not until 2019 did it start its own master's programme in this field. This led to an increase in child welfare research over time (see Figure 3). Traditionally, the social work part of the department has done more teaching and less research due to the Ph.D. in social work being a recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, the department's sociologists have traditionally focused their research on welfare sociology like social welfare services and professions. In addition, research from social work researchers is also increasing.

Many subjects have been covered in the department's research and they have been mapped out in this study. To make it more readily understood, some broader categories have been selected to serve this study. The selection of these have been made by finding common overall research theme and making a selection of categories. This has been tailored to the department. A thesaurus could have been used, but there is a risk of that not meeting the needs of this study as it is made for one specific department.

The most common categories registered are in Table 1. The list is not exhaustive, but it aims to capture the department's variety as well as the most common research area. It also tries to capture changes in research foci and output, and emerging research areas. To be included in this list there must be at least two publications or more in the research area during the ten years. As the department is growing, new fields like climate change and prison research are increasing, but the number of publications did not meet the threshold for inclusion in this study's list. Publications containing more than one research theme are all
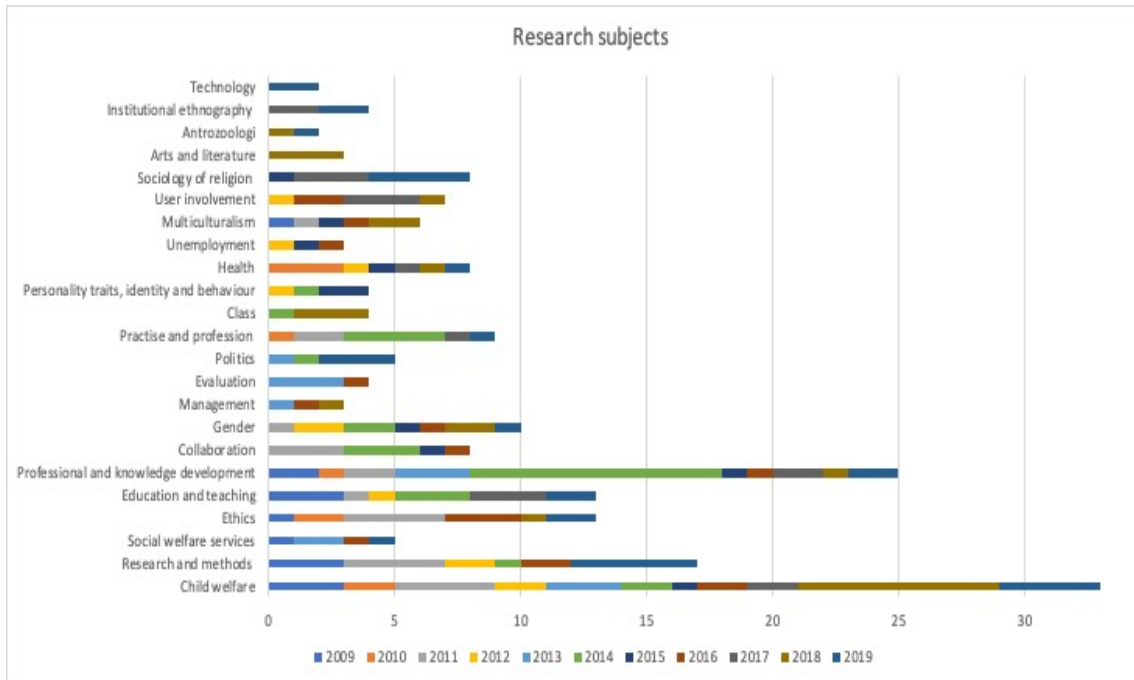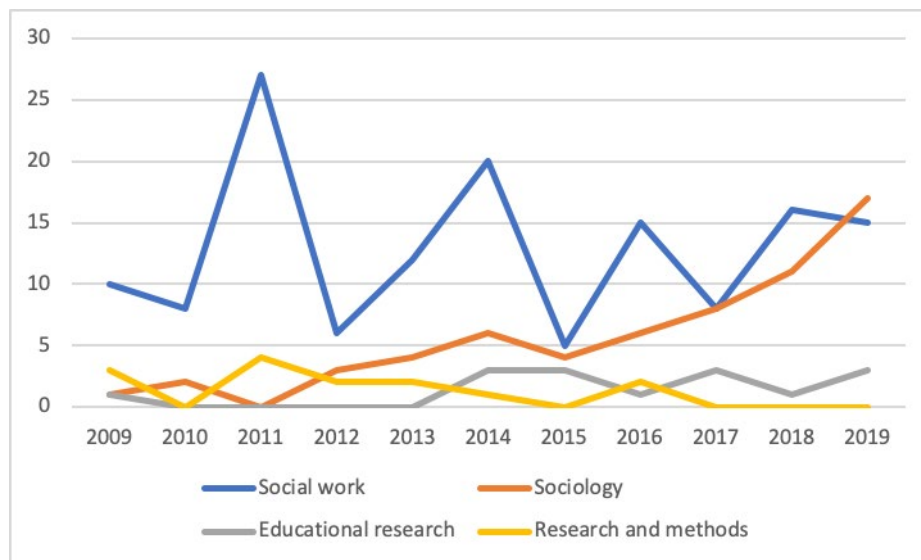
Figure 2. Research subjects

Figure 3. Research themes

included in the counts. For example, a sociological study of welfare services is listed as both sociology and social work.

FINDINGS

The two main peaks in Figure 2 are professional and knowledge development and child welfare. The peak of child welfare correlates with the initiation of the child welfare master's programme in 2019, and also with one of the researchers simultaneously becoming a professor. It appears that rises in publication numbers are associated with applications to become a professor, which makes sense.
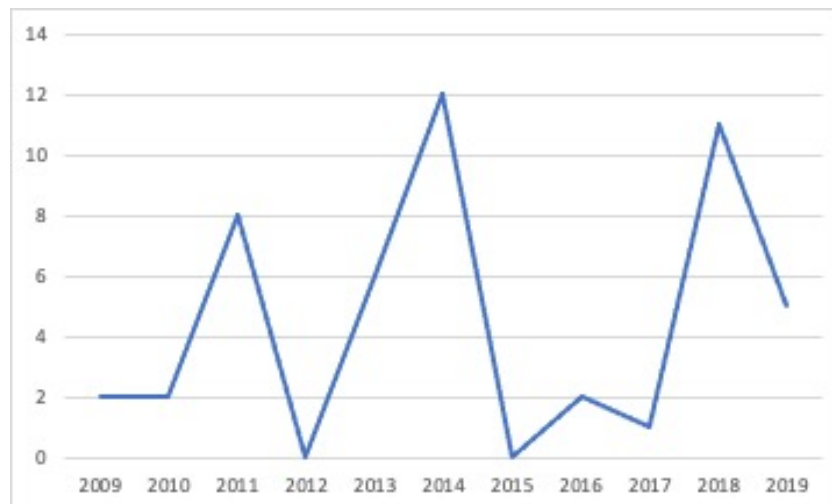
Figure 4. Child welfare research

If we combine the research areas into bigger categories it presents a more comprehensive overview whilst subsuming important details that may be lost in the big picture (Figure 3).

Over time sociology has increased in number of publications, while social work and welfare studies have stayed high. Educational research is also increasing, while publications on research and methods, seems to be declining.

One of the themes that has experienced a large increase in publications is child welfare (Figure 4). Social work researchers are publishing mainly in social work and welfare studies, whereas the sociologists are publishing in a variety of fields, including social work and welfare. In recent years, as the number of sociologists has risen, so has the number of publications that are primarily concerning sociology. Social work seems to have a small decrease. That may be attributed to sociology researchers changing their focus from sociology of welfare to a purer form of sociology research.

This is interesting as the dynamics between sociology and social work has been described as sociology being the main influence. "It has been stated that there is an obvious connection, though it seems more evident that sociology influences social work than the other way around" (Halvorsen, 2016). The two subjects are closely connected through shared methods and interest of research, but also divided as a discipline and professional subject. When the SSSA (Southwestern Social Science Association) was founded in 1920 it was very gendered. The sociologists were men, and the social workers women (Shaw, 2009). However, the relationship is described as having an "essential interdependence between the two and that their separate disciplinary developments had converged on a mutual while still distinguishable set of linked research interests" (Shaw, 2009, p. 1249). This is very visible in the research covered in this survey. A lot of the sociological research is closely connected to social work.

Language / Internationalization

Looking at the development of international publications, publications published in English is increasing. Between 2009 and 2019, 143 publications were published in Norwegian and 80 in English (Figure 5). In 2018, the numbers of English publications saw an upturn and in 2019

surpassed the number of Norwegian publications. This is indicative of the department's research becoming more internationally oriented.

Open access publications

The increased number of open access publications may be related to the university`s new open access policy where all publicly funded research should be published for open access (van der Eynden, 2020). This means that some journals have gone from being traditional journals with paid access to being open access journals. This also means that the researchers did not necessarily choose open access journals, but that the journals have been made open access later. However, open access publishing appears to be steadily increasing (Figure 6).

The number of publications in this ten-year period that was deposited to the institutional open access archive AURA (Figure 7) has also been mapped out. In 2019 there
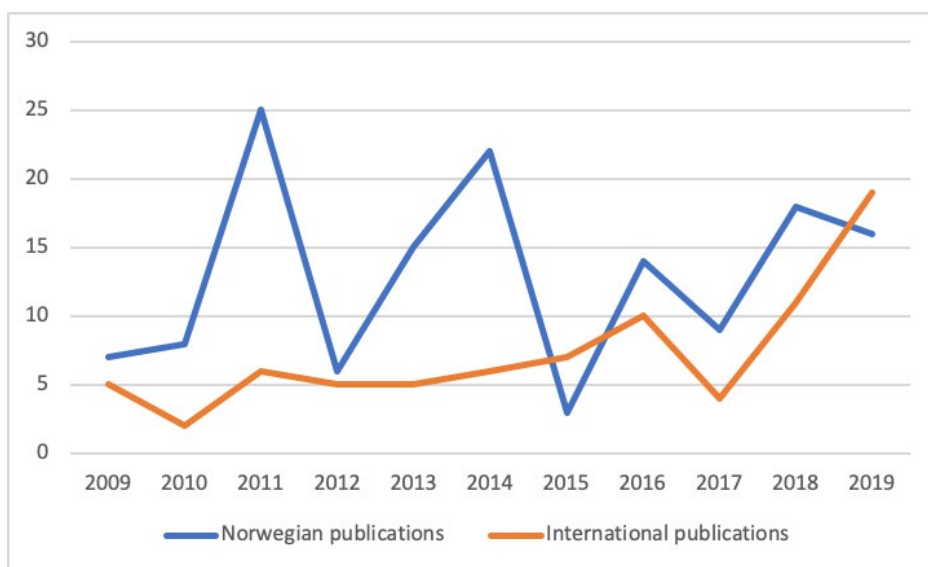

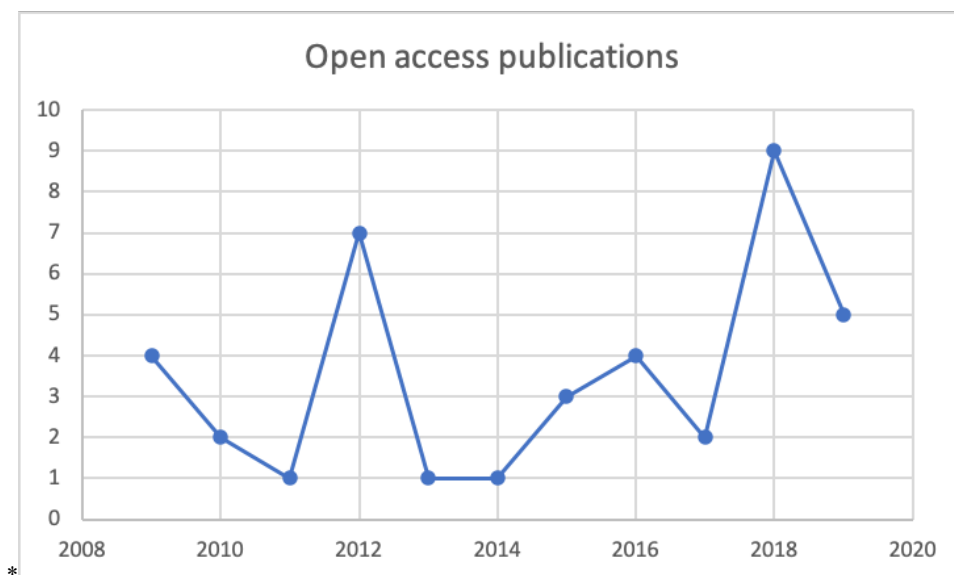**Figure 5. National and international publications**

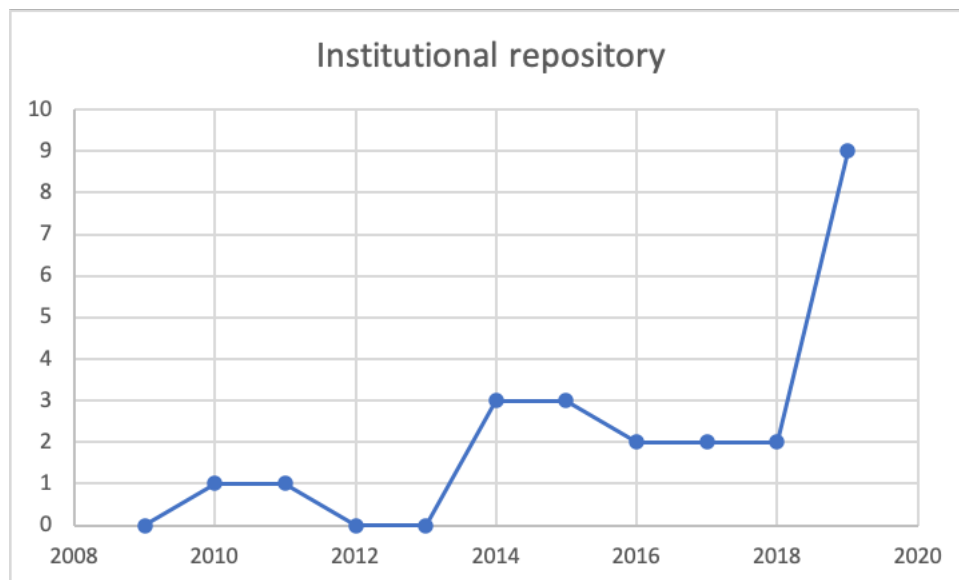**Figure 6. Open Access Publications**

Figure 7. Institutional repository

was a significant increase, correlating with the number of open access publications published that year. The library probably benefited from a stronger marketing of the possibility of depositing non-open access publications into the institutional repository.

General Tendencies in the Department's Research Development

The research at the department of sociology and social work has increased in number of publications in total (Figure 1). The number of international publications has gone up (Figure 5). Open access publishing is increasing (Figure 6) and so is depositing in the institutional open access archive (Figure 7).

The main research themes are sociology and social work, with sociology on the rise. Social work research has remained as the most frequently published theme in the department research publications (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION: HOW DO THESE CHANGES IMPACT RESEARCH SUPPORT?

As the pandemic has revealed, face-to-face meetings are not always possible. It has also made it obvious that more flexible ways of working are possible. Online meetings reduce the need for travel and make it possible for employees to work from different locations and still collaborate. As we move forward from the pandemic and substantial use of home offices and remote work, some experiences may be further pursued and developed into a supplementary principle of working. As experience shows, communication isn't always easy to establish. Therefore, an alternative way of getting to know the information landscape of researchers the library is offering research support to, may be a useful approach. Lloyd described this as the first stage of getting to know the information landscape through text on the way to becoming information literate, or going from novice to expert (Lloyd, 2006, p. 575).

The overview of development of research topics can give a useful insight to what online resources, books and journals should be purchased for the library to help develop its collection. An objective and measurable overview like this provides a good overall insight to what research subjects are most current, where face to face communication may give more biased feedback depending on who one talks to.

In a complex department comprising both discipline subjects and professional education programmes, the liaison librarian needs to have an overview of the different subjects. It is implied that good collaborative relationships with other liaison librarian colleagues to ensure that all aspects are adequately supported is a vital component for the liaison librarian. It is also important to collaborate and communicate effectively with the research community that one is supporting.

As the research landscape has evolved, so too have scholarly communication, making the backdrop of library redefinition and development and services moving towards more collaboration among library colleagues (Lang, Wilson, Wilson & Kirkpatrick, 2018, p. 329). This also indicates that communication, not only between library colleagues, but also between the liaison librarian and the researchers in the department is important to improve and further develop understanding and effective and productive research support. Much of the published research on research support is highly situated and connected to specific subjects. This is also an indication that research support in practice is situated, and there is a need for the liaison librarian to know the subject at hand and be aware of and understand the bigger picture. In other words, a centralisation of research support services where librarians develop specialist knowledge on a smaller number of areas and consequently move away from the researchers and the regular communication with them may be profitable in some cases, but it may also entail the loss of important tacit knowledge.

"The growing complexity of the scholarly communication landscape is driven by constant changes in the publishing industry, as well as new developments in national research assessment frameworks, which influence the range of services needed" (Brown, Alvey, Danilova, Morgan, & Thomas, 2018, pp. 343–344). As a librarian, part of the job is to be on top of scholarly communication trends and publishing pattern to better advice researchers about this.

As librarians, we also have the possibility of getting to know the researchers through their publications. Keeping up with recent publications is an obtainable strategy of mapping out the research interests of researchers, even if a personal relationship has not been established. As lockdowns and home office during the Covid-19 pandemic has characterised great parts of 2020 and 2021, establishing in-person relationships at work has been challenging. Getting to know someone on a Zoom meeting is very different to meeting in person. Having knowledge about publications and research may be an ice breaker for such meetings, and will also decrease the need for them, or at least shorten them. The reality is that the pandemic has forced a new way of working and maintaining work relationships, and this means that a more thorough knowledge of publications may be needed.

Being aware of the department's research strengths and challenges, a liaison librarian can make educated suggestions for publishing strategies that will strengthen the department's research profile, and further the library's goal for institutional archive deposits. For example, in this department, the number of level 2 publications is relatively small. This may not be clear to department or faculty management. Every researcher will be focusing on their own research, but it may be in everyone's best interest that the number of level 2 publications increases. Also, as the number of international publications is increasing, it may be interesting to map out how the department is communicating with the rest of the world, and what impact the department's research has? It is also interesting to question how the department is contributing to the development of the research and research language of their native language. While it is important to partake in the international discussion, it is also important to contribute to own country's development and interest for the research subject. As Norwegian research is mainly funded by the government, it is also a goal that taxpayers

should be able to access published research. This can be done through open access publishing, and also through publishing in an accessible language. This is of course open to debate, as publishing in Norwegian might open the research up to Norwegian readers, while making it inaccessible to an international audience.

Another interesting question for the library is to map out how the number of open access publications is developing. In Norway the main goal is that all publicly funded research should be published through open access publication channels. As the graph (Figure 7) shows, open access publishing is increasing. Looking into these numbers, one can map out what journals or other trigger factors may help encourage researchers to publish open access. Many researchers worry that the journals they prefer to publish in will not be open access. As this is changing and more journals are changing to the open access publishing model, bigger opportunities arise for choosing to publish in open access publication channels. The university has signed the Dora Declaration (Dora, n.d.) and established a new open access policy indicating an expectation that all publicly funded research should be available in open access. This means that there is still work to do to fulfil this goal.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows the development of research in a medium-sized department in a small university in Norway. The number of publications is increasing with a tendency to select international and open access publications which correlates with the national trend. There is still room for improvement in regard to depositing into the institutional archive. Insights as to how many publications and where they are published and in what language can help librarians develop their marketing strategy and communication to ensure a higher number of publications being deposited to the institutional open access archive, as one example.

Establishing communication lines can be challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this evident as many people have been forced to work from home offices for a longer period. The everyday communications easily get lost when one doesn't randomly meet people in the hallways or perhaps in the library. It forces new ways of work and communication to emerge. Although this is a replacement for well-established ways of working, some experiences could be useful to build on to and help complement traditional ways of communication and collaboration.

Working towards better communication and collaboration both between library colleagues and liaison librarians and researchers is highly advised and encouraged. Furthermore, having a look at and investigating and analysing the university research statistics can help this happen. This is not to suggest changing perspective from face-to-face communication to merely bibliometric overviews, but rather to accept a supplement of other methods to complement verbal and in-person communication.

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