



## Library Instruction – Not Just for our Users: Skills Upgrading for Librarians as a Way of Increasing Self-Confidence

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### Abstract

This article examines how librarians can improve their skills through a systematic skills upgrading programme, and how this can help improve their confidence in their own expertise. Two identical questionnaires have been issued to the same group of librarians engaged in research support services. In the time period between the two surveys, a skills upgrading programme was carried out. The aim of the second survey is to examine if the librarians' confidence has increased after the yearlong training programme. Even though one of librarians' main tasks is searching, research is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and thusly setting new expectations for librarians.

**Key words:** information literacy; research support; self-assessment; skills upgrading.

### 1. Introduction

Providing research support requires certain skills from librarians. For librarians who do not have a PhD degree, or experience in research, this requires knowledge of the research process to know what kind of library services are needed and when. A study from 2013 (Daland, 2013) indicated that

librarians feel less confident in contacting PhD candidates and researchers because they do not know what they can offer. The reason for this may be lack of confidence in their own skills, and it may also be lack of knowledge when it comes to the research process. This was a small finding outside of the scope for the 2013 article, but an interesting point worth further investigation. This article aims to give some suggestions as to how librarians' self-confidence can be increased through skills upgrading in a socio-cultural perspective.

The surveys presented in this study are part of a research support project. The project consisted of three parts and focused on "what do our users need, what do we know, and what do we need to work on?." In the first stage of the project, PhD candidates received an anonymous survey to map out their needs and expectations from the library. The PhD candidates were asked questions on how they experienced research support from the library, and if they considered library services as an important part of research support. They were also asked questions whether they were missing certain services from the library. Next, all librarians providing research support were subject to interviews and an anonymous survey mapping out their confidence in their own expertise. Thirdly, a systematic skill-upgrading programme was put into action. The main goal of the project was to make the library's research support services more structured and less dependent on which librarian was offering the research support. A strategy for further work on research support was formulated, stating that skill-upgrading courses should be repeated every year, and that the library should have a stronger profile on research support services. Print material displaying the librarians' expertise and their contact information was produced, and a new webpage on research support was published. This article presents the results after the completion of the skill-upgrading programme, and the aim is to investigate whether the skills upgrading programme has affected the librarians' confidence in their own expertise.

## 2. Mapping of the Field

The professional librarian is faced with multiple changes both in technological possibilities and user expectations. In order to provide library services of high quality, librarians are faced with several challenges. Studies have shown that the users' main expectation for librarians is still searching expertise

(Haddow, 2012). For research librarians collaborating and serving research and researchers, this means an increasing need for more interdisciplinary sources, and knowledge of an expanding number of specialised databases.

Much has been written about the expected and required skills for academic librarians. One study from 2010 explores the skills and knowledge needed for librarians in a world of ever-changing technology (Partridge, Menzies, Lee, & Munro, 2010) and another study from 2012 aims to seek out what skills are needed from librarians the next 10 years (Haddow, 2012). It has been concluded that “It was acknowledged that librarian 2.0 needed to be actively involved in retraining self and others but it was noted that retraining should not cast doubts on the core competencies and experience of already trained and experienced librarians” (Partridge et al., 2010, p. 270). Another example is a study from the Charles Darwin University in Australia, focusing on skills upgrading for librarians in relation with what is needed from research communities (Mamtora, 2013).

Although there has been focus on what skills librarians need to hold in the future, less has been written about how we make sure librarians possess these required skills, or let alone how confident librarians are in their own expertise. There are some examples, an article by Lindauer (2004) highlights that librarians need to bring their assessment skills more into focus, not just their actual training of users. Assessing library instruction will not only provide information about how the instruction was perceived by the participants, but it will also make room for reflection on librarians’ teaching practices and how to improve this. Elmborg (2006) stresses the importance of librarians taking the role as educators in information literacy and in this way play a part in how information literacy is developed and taught in academic environments. Elmborg further stresses that when one merges into a socio-cultural system in an academic surrounding, success follows. An understanding of what skills and competencies are required and matching this will be a positive approach.

Librarians’ need for competencies is unquestionably connected to researchers and students’ need for competencies. When we know what they need, librarians must map out their own competencies and initiate skills upgrades where there are shortcomings. Examples of researcher needs have been mapped out in several studies like (Daland, 2013; Drachen, Larsen, Gullbekk, & Westbye, 2011; Gullbekk, Rullestad, & Torras i Calvo, 2013; Partridge et al., 2010) to name a few. The emerging technologies is one of the things librarians need to

be on top of, as well as connecting with the researchers in order to be ready with the right help at the right time. Systematically searching databases, and help in citing sources and reference management programs are also listed as the most important and appreciated research support services. Searching for information is one of librarians' main tasks, but as research is becoming increasingly more interdisciplinary, this offers a challenge. Librarians need to have an overview of more and more databases and research subjects. Getting an overview on one's own is difficult, and it is more rational to draw on the expertise of one's colleagues.

When skills upgrading are linked directly to professional requirements, the motivation for acquiring these skills will be higher, especially when a group of professionals are working towards the same goal. One way of putting this is that "Information literacy is a meta-competency that engages generic skills such as defining, locating and accessing, evaluating and synthesizing information. In a knowledge-driven economy the ability to scaffold and adapt information in the construction of new knowledge is a critical prerequisite. Responsibility for developing information literacy skills in the knowledge workers of the future falls to educators, trainers and librarians" (Lloyd, 2003, p. 90). Also, "Information literacy is a collective practice, one which not only connects people to rational and instrumental aspects of their performance but also to the embodied and affective aspects that shape identity and situate people within that social context" (Lloyd, 2012, p. 776). Information is often created and utilized by members of a group, working towards a common goal (Harris, 2008, p. 248).

### **3. Methodology**

This is a small-scale qualitative study, investigating the effect of a skills upgrading programme. The response rate was 100% in two comparative surveys. Even though the number of respondents is low, the comparative aspect is interesting. It would also be of interest to see other, similar surveys conducted to provide a larger understanding and facts and information on this field.

Two surveys have been issued to librarians working with research support. The surveys were issued electronically, using the program SurveyXact. The same questions were issued in both surveys, with an addition of two questions

in the latter survey. The first survey's goal was to map out what competencies the librarians had, and how confident they felt in their own skills. The librarians were asked questions about their own confidence in skills like dealing with simple to complex EndNote problems, searching in different databases, and if they felt secure in their own knowledge about the contents.

In addition, the librarians were interviewed in 2013. They were asked how many PhD candidates their institutes had and how much time they spent on guidance and training, how they got in contact with the PhD candidates, how they marketed library services, the content of the research support they provided, and what they considered to be criteria of success. The interviews provided a more in-depth knowledge about strengths and challenges regarding research support. The interviews were short, and were not taped, but notes were made during the interviews.

The goal was to map out how the librarians perceived their own skills in basic research support services, programs and general knowledge about searching and content of library databases. This was the groundwork for a skills upgrading programme that was put in place the following year.

During the skills upgrading programme, the librarians were invited to participate in courses in different databases and programs, as well as a workshop on how to market library resources. Electronic and print material was produced to market the library's research support services. In addition a new procedure was put in place where the librarians were notified when a new researcher started working at the university. The objective was that within 4 weeks after the PhD candidates had started their thesis work, the subject librarian should have been in contact with them and presented the library's research support services. The notification service for the librarians and the print material was put into action to help achieve this goal. The content of the print material was also published online, so the librarian could send a link to the webpage in the initial e-mail to the PhD candidate ("Research support from the university library," n.d.).

The same questionnaire was issued again after the project was completed with courses for skills development, in order to investigate if this had had a positive effect on the librarians' confidence in their own competencies and skills. Two additional questions, concerning whether or not they felt that contacting new researchers had been easier when using the marketing resources

and with the notification procedure of new researchers, were added to the second questionnaire.

It must be stressed that the focus of this article is not whether or not the competencies as such improved, but how the self-confidence of the librarians increased by integrated skills upgrading and a socio-cultural approach to this.

There are, of course, some important challenges when doing research in one's own environment. While a challenge for the ethnographer is to avoid "going native", the self-ethnographer must make strong efforts to avoid "staying native" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 189). Researching a field one is participating in makes it important to focus on the actual professional setting, and not the meta-perspective.

This is a small survey with only 11 participants. Because this is a small survey from a small library, the professional profiles of the respondents have not been given in detail, in consideration to their anonymity. The response rate is 100% in both surveys, and the same respondents participated both times. The survey provides a good comparison basis for how skills upgrading affects the self-esteem of librarians when it comes to estimating their own level of competence.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

A socio-cultural view on information literacy would state that all professionals must be socialised into a work environment to meet the required expectations. In a changing world of information and technology, librarians are met with great expectations. These expectations may not always be so easy to fulfil.

One of the more recent articulated expectations for librarians is research support. A considerable part of librarians working in academic libraries do not have a PhD degree. Therefore, they need to obtain knowledge about the research process and researchers' needs for library services. Knowledge about the research process and the associated expectations and possibilities could be said to be part of librarians' workplace information literacy.

In developing knowledge about the research process, and how the library fits in, it will illustrate what skills are subject to need for upgrading. "The information literate individual is an expert within the specific workplace

environment, with the ability to adopt and adapt, create and recreate, contextualize and recontextualize.” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 88). This means that librarians, in their work environment must be socialised into the research community and understand how they are connected to it.

After completing the formal education in the classroom, all professionals are expected to socialise into a work environment and master what is expected of them. This is also the case for librarians. Librarians in academic libraries must be able to connect with several research subjects. To do so, the socio-cultural view of learning and developing information literacy skills is important. “Information literacy is a collective practice, one which not only connects people to rational and instrumental aspects of their performance but also to the embodied and affective aspects that shape identity and situate people within that social context.” (Lloyd, 2012, p. 775). Lloyd calls this a “people-in-practice” perspective that focuses on the complexity of how people get acquainted with the information and practices around them (p. 780).

The library is a support service, and an important one when it comes to research support. Making literature available and providing guidance as to how sources should be used and cited is an important part of this. Some researchers may wish for a personal librarian to do their searching for them, but a better approach would be dialogue between the librarian and the researcher to make the information handling more efficient (Bent, Gannon-Leary, & Webb, 2007, p. 93). This way, both the librarian and the researcher are socialised into an academic way of collaboration. Lloyd (2010, p. 65) focuses on information literacy also as a way of librarians reflecting upon their pedagogical knowledge and ways to further develop this.

Being part of a professional group is important to develop information literacy skills because it focuses on a common goal and develops a joint understanding of required skills. Communication is an important factor both among library colleagues, but also with the research communities in order to stay in touch with their academic needs (Mamtora, 2013, p. 368).

## **5. Results**

In the interviews conducted in 2013, some of the librarians stated that they were reluctant to contact new researchers, because they believed them to

be self-sufficient. The librarians were also uncertain about what they had to offer, and what the PhD candidates needed. The guidance provided was reported to concern searching, reference management and requests for books and journals to be purchased for the library.

The librarians' criteria of success were related to the PhD candidates doing independent research of high quality. Some also stated that they considered a mentioning in the thesis preface to be criteria of success.

Two of the most interesting finds from the interviews were the following statements (author's translation):

"I think it would be an advantage if we could clarify what the PhD candidates can expect from the library, and make an assessment based on this, whether or not we have achieved success."

Another librarian stated that: "I should send out information about the library's services, but I do not know who is attending the PhD programme."

The quotations show that the librarians had a pronounced requirement for a systematic approach to contact PhD candidates and other researchers. Instead of relying on the faculty to approach the library, or monitor new employments, an automatic notification is a time-efficient way of staying up-to-date. Because the IT-department in the university needs to create user accounts, they are notified when new employees are hired.

In the second survey, the librarians were asked two additional questions concerning the new notification service and print material, and whether this had made their work with research support easier. The results show that the librarians consider it to be easier to establish contact with new researchers after this has been put into action. 8 of the 11 librarians stated that they to a large degree or to some degree found it easier to contact new researchers after the notification service had been put into action.

When the university employs a new researcher, or a PhD candidate, they are registered in the administrative systems. When this happens, the library is notified so that a library user can be set up. Further, the liaison librarian for the institute of the new employee is notified. The librarian is expected to contact the employee within 4 weeks to market library research services. This

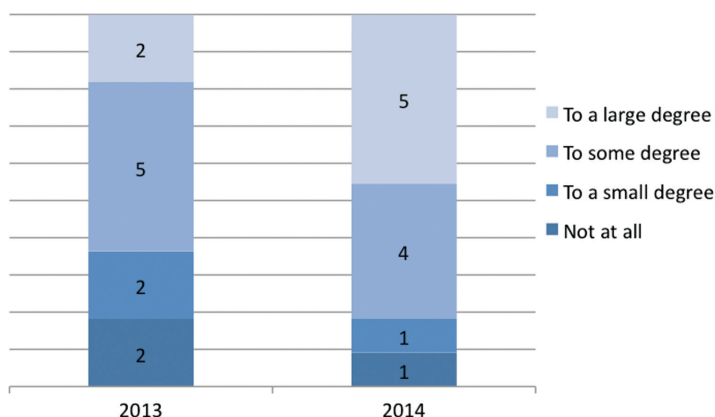


notification service saves time and effort, because the faculty administration does not have to remember to notify their librarian, it is done automatically. 9 of the 11 librarians stated that they to a large degree or to some degree found it to be easier to make contact with new researchers after the print material had been produced and distributed.

The librarians working with research support have received a personal poster to distribute how they see fit. The poster includes a photo, and the contact details of the librarian and bullet points about research support services. The posters are displayed in the faculty, outside the library’s course rooms and in the library. The idea was inspired by Limerick University Library’s way of marketing their research support and librarians’ expertise (Bracken, n.d.). The results show that this has been a useful tool for the librarians to market library services. The bullet point in the posters works as a script, and makes the first conversation with the new researcher easier.

The results of the surveys show that the librarians had a higher confidence in their own skills after having completed the training. Most categories showed a moderate change in the librarians to the positive side from 2013 to 2014. Some categories stood out as more distinct change. A few examples will be shown below. The full survey consisted of 69 questions, so only some questions have been chosen to display in this article. It is also important to stress that a selection of 11 librarians provides only a small insight.

*Question 13: EndNote - making changes to citation styles, i.e., changing the p. to colon in citation parentheses. Estimate of your own level of competence: (N=11).*

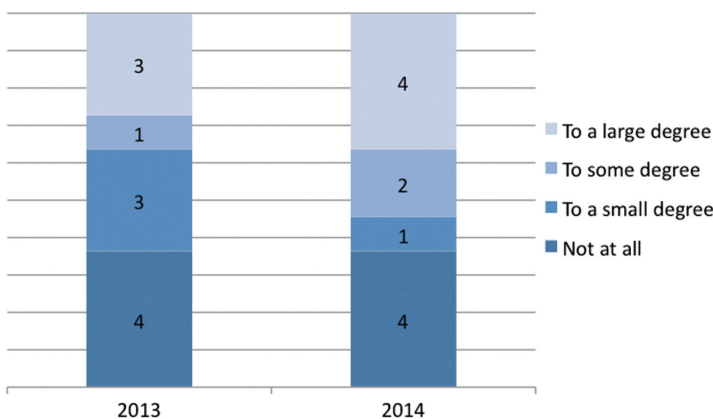


Making changes to EndNote templates is an advanced use of the software. The survey from 2013 made it clear that some of the librarians were experiencing difficulties, or lack of confidence when managing more advanced problems in EndNote. After the skills upgrading programme, the confidence in their own expertise was increased.

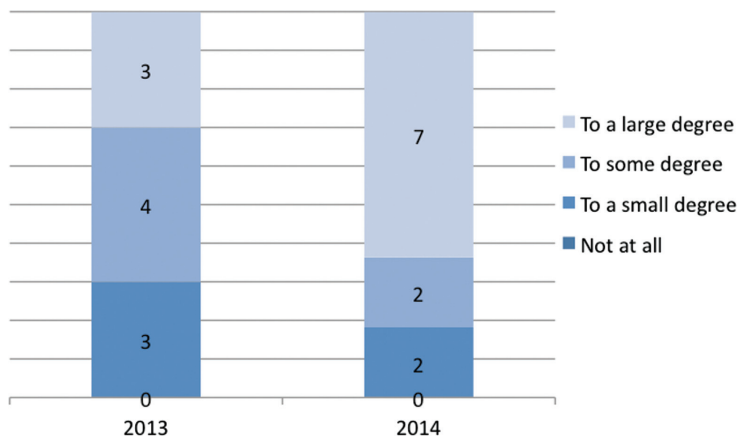
Merging two documents with EndNote references was one of the subjects that did not change significantly after the skills upgrading. Although a change for the positive is registered here as well, almost half of the librarians still report that their level of competence is close to non-existing when it comes to solving this problem. This may be related to this being a complex operation that is not a frequently asked question. Or, it may indicate that the training session in this area was not sufficient. Still, the table shows that the number of respondents reporting to have a small level of competence in this area has decreased.

Several databases were present in the questionnaire to map out the librarians' confidence in searching them, knowing what information was available and how to find the most relevant journals in these databases. One of the databases that stood out was ISI, Web of Science. There was a significant increase in knowledge on how to find the most relevant journals in this database.

*Question 23: EndNote - merging two documents with EndNote references in them. Estimate of own level of competence: (N=11).*

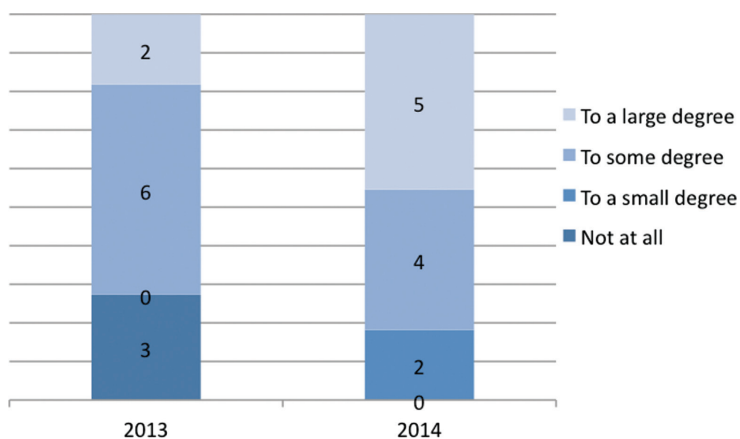


Question 33: ISI Web Of Science – finding the most relevant journals within a subject covered by ISI. Estimate of own level of competence: (2013 N= 10) (2014 N=11).



The number of librarians reporting that they considered their expertise in finding the most relevant journals available in ISI to be of a large degree increased from 3 to 7. This is a change of over 50%, which must be said to be significant. Even though searching and information management is a key competence for librarians, the training programme had a positive effect on this.

Question 69: Estimate of own level of knowledge about available university software (N=11).



One of the things that did not change was the estimate of their own knowledge about the use of software for collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data. These did not change at all. This may be related to the fact that researchers mainly use these applications in parts of the research process where the library is less involved, and the library does not focus a great deal on user support. However, the knowledge about what software is available at the university shows a significant change.

## 6. Discussion

The majority of the questions asked showed that the librarians had an increased level of confidence in their own level of knowledge in 2014 compared to the results in 2013.

One could argue that the training sessions are not necessarily the reason for increased confidence in one's own skills. Librarians within an institution often talk to each other and ask each other for help; however, this is an ongoing process and had been happening before the first survey was issued. The second survey was issued 1 year later, when all training sessions had been completed. While some of the results may be caused by informal chats in offices, it was the first time there had been a systematic training for all librarians focusing on important services linked to research support.

Formal training sessions are a good way to increase the overview of different databases, software and services. Creating a forum for discussion and learning is a good way of finding common ground, and in this way a common goal. Lloyd (2012) calls this a "people-in-practice" perspective that focuses on the complexity of how people get acquainted with the information and practices around them. Librarians in academic libraries are highly affected by the practices around them, and need to adapt to the needs of the students' and researchers' academic needs.

Developing skills for research support is highly situated, because one is not only learning how to use certain databases and software, but one also has to consider the meta aspect of information literacy and how this can be applied to research and research support and user training. "Information literacy is a collective practice, one which not only connects people to rational and

instrumental aspects of their performance but also to the embodied and affective aspects that shape identity and situate people within that social context” (Lloyd, 2012, p. 775). For librarians to be situated in the context as research support staff, they need to know the research process and where library services fit in. Also, they need a social community with their colleagues to teach and learn from each other. Furthermore “We learn how to take on professional or occupational identity and learn to identify and affiliate with others in the same field, through the practices and performance of our occupation; we learn to become members of a community in the same way” (p. 775). This means that working together on skills upgrading not only serves as an upgrading of skills but also socialises co-workers together into the same social and professional community. This is achieved through collaboration and the quest for a common goal.

The results are quite clear: the librarians had a higher confidence in their own skills after the year of systematic training. Perhaps part of the result connects to the fact that the expectations for librarians have been made visible and thus more tangible and accessible to focus on.

The librarians also showed a high level of satisfaction with the notification service and the marketing material to hand out. Displaying what is expected from the librarians makes it easier to create realistic expectations from the PhD candidates.

Making a systematic approach to research support also means to take a systematic approach to expectations and competencies. A skills upgrading programme must be built on realistic needs for competencies. A mapping of the library users’ needs will be a good basis for choosing where to focus when it comes to skills upgrading.

As research is becoming more interdisciplinary, the need for regular updates and courses in different databases is becoming increasingly important. “Information literate individuals understand and know the context of their information environments and the ways in which information is organized into information caches” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 89). This has traditionally been a key competency for librarians, but as the information caches change, new challenges arise, requiring more training. If this training is not given, chances are that confidence in the librarians’ own expertise will decrease.

## 7. Conclusion

This study shows that librarians who have gone through training in the use of reference management programs, databases and other library relevant subjects, show a higher confidence in their own skills after the training.

Although librarians are information literate, information literacy is an ever-changing field, and new expectations are emerging every day. As research is becoming more and more interdisciplinary, librarians need to be oriented in more and more subjects, databases and software.

The results of the surveys show that a systematic programme for skills upgrading has a positive effect on the librarians' estimate of their own level of competence. Through a socio-cultural setting, a common goal, defined by the professional setting, is achieved by working together.

Making it easier to establish contact with new researchers through a notification system and a bullet-point checklist of research support services to present, has also had a positive effect on how research support is conducted. The ability to "adopt and adapt, create and recreate, contextualize and recontextualize" (Lloyd, 2003, p. 88) is important when working with skills upgrading and also with research support. Librarians need to take a look at what their users need, what competencies they do possess and also what they need to work on to upgrade their competencies where needed. By working systematically towards an articulated competence goal, grounded in user needs, the socio-cultural approach will help increase both skills and confidence in one's own expertise.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Henry Langseth who has contributed to this article's questionnaire design and to the follow-through of the survey.

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