Research, impact, value and the library and information sector in Scotland

RIVAL is a collaborative network of 32 Scotland-based Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers and practising library and information professionals interested in maximising the impact and value of LIS research. Here **Jeanette Castle** et al discuss the research and consider what happens next.

THE network members were initially funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh to meet at four knowledge-exchange network events and Professor Hazel Hall and Dr Bruce Ryan of Edinburgh Napier University led the project.

The project has had various workstreams including guest speakers, knowledge exchanges, taking place in some varied and interesting venues, including Microsoft Teams (of course) in the past few months! Towards the end of the project eight members of the RIVAL network met in pairs to discuss some of the key considerations during the past two years such as the challenge of both implementing ideas from research into practice and to the dissemination of research evidence and promoting its relevance to practitioners, the value of diversity (of sectors represented) in the RIVAL network and research evaluation and its links to professionalism.

These discussions were then distilled into some key strands that form this article – what are the challenges when trying to maximise the impact and value of research, where are opportunities for engagement, how do we implement research in practice and what are the next steps.

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The challenges

Practitioners don't need to be told how busy they are. When focusing on providing a service to users, in whatever sector, engaging with research can be difficult. Using research to inform practice is frequently ad-hoc and can be somewhat serendipitous. Time is a factor but there are other barriers too. Dense academic language paired with the length and complexity of a lot of research outputs can make them

Engagement

LIS professionals are continuously finding new knowledge and adjusting the ways in which we deliver our services. By the very nature of our roles and though our own self-reflective CPD practice, we are continuously uncovering new learning and knowledge which through its use in our professional practice, changes our core epistemological knowledge as defined in the CILIP Professional Knowledge and Skills Base. The is a framework that outlines the broad spectrum of knowledge and skills that are required across the profession and it can be used as a self-assessment tool for professionals to think about their personal and professional development.

A key feature of this is a section on research and this sets out a clear context for some of the areas a professional should consider. Not all areas need to be met but the categories set out are the ability to understand and evaluate research, analyse statistics, understand research contexts, present reports, and reflect on the ethics of research. These areas are comprehensive and provide an excellent

RIVAL presentation.

set of skills that ensures we, as professionals, are meeting a high standard of research evaluation. As part of becoming chartered, professionals evaluate their ability against these various categories. In doing so this creates a clear link between evaluating and using research and the very core of being a library and information professional.

Practitioners, as mentioned earlier, have varying levels of engagement with research, but as we uncover new methodologies to assist in our planning and evaluation of service delivery, we should find ways of sharing our learning and methodologies uncovered with our profession. For example, several networks such as the information literacy community of practice and sector specific special interest groups provide platforms where this already happens.

One of the strengths of the RIVAL network is the diversity of roles represented including strategic management, academic, knowledge management, centralised services, lone librarians, open access and research data management.

Discussions have highlighted barriers

RIVAL breakout group.

RIVAL group on tour.

> **"Connections are key to opening up opportunities for innovation. RIVAL has brought together different professional groups, establishing a model that could have wider and long-standing benefits across the library and information community."**

feel at times impenetrable, especially when there is limited time available for finding and reading relevant research. Despite being information professionals not all practitioners know where to look for research that would be most beneficial to their practice, and if not affiliated with a large institution may encounter publisher paywalls, preventing access to valuable resources. Factor in the often-slow academic publishing timeline, and practice can easily have moved on before outputs are available. All these factors combined create an inhospitable information environment which many practitioners may choose to simply not explore.

When working as a practitioner, particularly in frontline, user-facing roles, implementing research findings can be challenging. There's not always time to step back and look at the big picture, and this lack of time combined with tight and shrinking budgets is not conducive to introducing new practices or initiatives. In turn, this can create fatigue in staff who were previously enthusiastic at the prospect of implementing change. Despite this landscape, we've witnessed through RIVAL and other networks that innovation and change does happen.

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we face in identifying collaborators where interdisciplinary working would be advantageous and in measuring impact effectively. The network provides an extensive range of experience to draw upon and resources to help identify potential collaborators on any research project. If you are starting a project but are unsure about research design, evaluation and whether the research may be worthy of publication you can reach out to a member.

Our diversity represents lots of different drivers and points of view. These may help us deepen our understanding of research impact and sustainability on several levels. Staff delivering a project are not always best placed to measure impact in part due to their emotional investment. External support may help us to better ascertain whether we are doing the right things, are those things having the impact that we desire and if not, what can we do to improve?

Implementation

The RIVAL project has enabled cross-sector discussion of the challenges identified above. Crucially, the ringfencing of time to discuss shared interests and common goals has proven invaluable. This active network provides an avenue to explore the structural barriers between research and practice which are less easily resolved. Sometimes, the barriers to implementing ideas from research are logistical. Organisational and legal policy does not always dovetail with the realities of practice, and overreliance on due diligence can delay what could be simple, low-effort changes. These small-scale proposals get lost in red tape and discourage staff from trying again.

We switch our attention to ask, how we can set about implementing ideas from

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research into practice? Financial concerns dictate organisational strategic planning, with resources such as time and money operating as powerful means for enabling or restraining space to innovate. Central to building the foundations for creative space and innovate practices to prosper, is the fostering of an agile leadership approach across all management structures. This may require a revision of long held views from principal decision makers and others involved in strategic planning to shift towards endorsing the capabilities of innovative growth. This will assist in overcoming bureaucratic challenges in order to further engage in shaping a customer-led service from the ground up, enabling community empowerment. Librarians are a direct link to what a community's needs entail.

In the meantime, we have some additional suggestions that might help:

Start small: Don't try to implement everything at once. Instead, work incrementally. A piece of research might not necessarily apply perfectly to your situation, but you can pick and choose the bits you need.

Measure the impact: Practitioners are not always accustomed to waiting to see impact. The frontline, high-intensity nature of our work means that results are sometimes only valued or even noticed if they are immediate. But if we can adjust our outlook to take into account the long-term impact of changes (even small changes) we will be able to build a bank of evidence to advocate for later, larger changes. If there are no benchmarks existing to measure the impact of your changes, create your own benchmarks. Keep notes of what you change, when you change it, what you predict will happen according to the research the changes are based on, and how you will measure it.

Various methods are being used for gathering evidence by practitioners in different LIS sectors with some focusing on quantitative data and others using qualitative. Funding applications and peer review exercises require qualitative data and some projects would benefit from qualitative analysis. The use of evaluative frameworks such as "How Good Is Our School Library" or "How Good Is Our Public Library Service" is common and they have been a positive influence in management of public libraries. Currently peer review of similar services within the same sector happens, but the diversity in the network could be used to set up a more ambitious peer review of organisations from different sectors.

Implementing ideas from research into practice requires effort and initiative, no matter how much support you are receiving or resources you are lacking. Whether the research in question is a large-scale external piece of scholarship or a small internal project, there could

be some serious improvements to be made by utilising it in your practice. Don't miss out on the chance, or the satisfaction that comes with successful implementation.

What's next?

The shift to digital delivery amidst the backdrop of the pandemic, although challenging for the RIVAL board members, presents a positive route for the continuation – and, indeed, development – of the network moving forward. A continuing digital platform for information sharing would be useful and could be expanded to incorporate a regular schedule of virtual networking sessions.

A successful network needs structure and coordination, which has been provided for the duration of the project by the team at Edinburgh Napier University. In future, a strategic partnership of the library bodies could take this forward beyond the project term. Key organisations such as CILIPS, the National Library of Scotland and the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL) are already represented in the RIVAL group and could be instrumental in the continuation of this important activity beyond February 2021.

There are some good examples of groups with a similar remit internationally. In Canada, for example, the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) has a dedicated community of practice for Research and Writing (https://bit.ly/3plnKbX). This group provides a structure for sharing and discussing emerging research but also encourages and supports members to write papers based on their own work and present at conferences. Increasing practitioner-led output has been identified as a desirable target throughout RIVAL discussions so this would be a further positive outcome for the project, and the sector as a whole would benefit from shared experiences and the improved profile of this body of published work.

RIVAL has created a pathway for us to improve our approach towards implementing aspects of research. We hope that development and promotion of the network to further expand its diversity will enable all LIS practitioners to access the support they need to engage with and embed evidence-based practice.

LIS practitioners will be able to improve projects as a result of being able to contact more parts of the community through the network partnership. This should result in better measurement and reporting of impact which will provide evidence needed to continue funding for longer term projects and increase the sustainable impact.

Libraries in each sector will consider certain priorities regardless of how collaborative they intend being. Individuals can offer only so much, so RIVAL must consider limitations when planning new work. Given the economy, it is unlikely the same level of service provision and staffing will continue in 2021. Staff on the ground will have to create a workable structure to encourage a sustainable model of support, motivation, mentoring and CPD opportunities. Now that the basic network is established, in-depth conversations will be required to allow the network to continue longer term.

Recently, CILIP Scotland have started a process of gathering links and creating a research hub on their website to inform practice and hopefully this can support members in this area as the ability to evaluate research as a daily part of professional practice is key.

We belong to a profession, which enables the delivery of the right Information, at the right level, at the right time to our users and using channels available to us, we can support each other. **IP**

Jeanette's research journey

Jeanette recently embarked upon a research journey to look at the evaluation of the impact of library health and wellbeing projects, as part of a PhD she is currently indertaking. She found a gateway to a wide range of research and impact methodologies, which they wished they had known about much earlier. These include the discovery of the Critical Realism thinking explained in the literature from Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley. It did take several readings of this article to get used to the academic writing utilised, and this may be a barrier to busy professionals who do not have the time to set aside to understanding the concepts. As mentioned earlier in this article, if there was a way that those who find useful methodologies and ways of thinking could translate this and share it for wider use, this might help us all. Another new discovery uncovered through this journey, has been Foucault's Trident model which could be a dynamic tool for service planning as it leads a professional to step back from their unconscious bias and analyse scepticism, critique and problematisation.