

RAILS Conference Paper Submission 2006

Practitioners Researching Researchers: a Deakin University Study

Joan Moncrieff, email Joan.Moncrieff@deakin.edu.au and
Dr Peter Macauley¹, email Peter.Macauley@deakin.edu.au Deakin University Library

Most commonly libraries use surveys to gather information regarding users' experience of the library. This is the most economic method of information gathering, but frequently raises tantalising issues with no opportunity to engage those responding to the surveys. In 2004, a project team of senior librarians at Deakin University was established to survey research staff at the University. Originally, the survey was envisaged as a universal web survey, and similar surveys used elsewhere were investigated as models. However, after consideration it was agreed that a small team would undertake a series of interviews with research staff across the University. It was hoped that by using interviews rather than a web survey, the quality of the information gathered would be greater and more detailed.

The survey team attempted to interview a broadly representative group, with researchers from a range of disciplines, at all stages of a research career, and different ages and academic levels. The aim was to gather information regarding the Library's performance in support of research, and make recommendations regarding improvements and changes that could be made to the Library's services. In particular, the objectives were:

1. Identify inadequacies in current holdings and services provided by the Library
2. Identify future strategic and developmental needs in relation to research within the University
3. Identify improvements and changes that could be made to support research in the University

The interviews were extremely successful, and the data acquired were greatly beneficial to the Library; consequently, more interviews are being undertaken with additional researchers and librarians in 2006

As well as leading to increased knowledge of researcher behaviour and use of the Library, the process had some interesting benefits for the staff involved. The Library research team included an experienced researcher plus other senior staff who had not been exposed to practitioner research, let alone the challenges of 'researching researchers'. The survey proved to be a valuable professional development exercise, and demonstrates the enlightening nature of undertaking practitioner-instigated qualitative research. The researchers interviewed were also, without exception, positive about the method of investigation. Of the twenty-five researchers initially approached for interviews only one declined, with lack of time being given as the reason. One other scheduled interview was cancelled by mutual arrangement, because of time constraints. Almost all of those interviewed stated (normally when the tape

¹ Corresponding author, Deakin University Library, Waterfront Campus, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, 3217 Phone: 03 52278246 Facsimile: 03 52278000

was switched off) they would not have responded to an online questionnaire, reinforcing that the approach taken had most likely yielded more useful results than a web survey. A number of academics mentioned how impressed they were that library staff had got out into the schools and faculties, wanting to learn more about their research and how to improve services and support to them. All twenty-three researchers interviewed were sent a note of thanks via email. Interestingly, nearly half (eleven) responded to those emails, mentioning how positive the exercise was.

This paper describes the methodology used, some of the surprising findings (at least for the library staff involved), and demonstrates the benefits of using qualitative research methods rather than the quantitative questionnaire-centric methods traditionally used in library research and evaluation.

The conclusion discusses the continued research process in the Library, including findings from thirteen interviews conducted so far in 2006, and the ways in which the findings are being used to assist in improving services for the future.