What are research, evaluation and audit?

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‘I don’t do research. I don’t have the time. I am too busy with the day-to-day running of the library. I do evaluations of my service to ensure that it meets the needs of my users, and that the journal providers give good value for money. But that’s not research is it?’

‘I’m a practitioner not a researcher.’

‘I run a service, so have nothing to research.’

The existence of a workable definition of research is an important one, as a common barrier for becoming involved in research is a lack of understanding or misunderstanding of what research is.

Research is identified by French, Reynolds and Swain (2001) as the simple process of systematic enquiry and of finding out. Across the board, professional disciplines from industry, business, science and law to the arts and humanities, the definitions of research are essentially the same. For instance, in relation to business studies, Saunders et al. (2003) identify research as the undertaking of processes in a systematic way in order to find things out about business and management. Cameron and Price (2009, 4) define research as ‘any systematic attempt at collecting and interpreting data and evidence in order to inform thinking, decisions and/or actions in relation to an issue of interest to an organization and/or its stakeholders’. Elsewhere, the UK Department of Health (2005) defines research as ‘the attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge by addressing clearly defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods’.

Why is research important?

Research can demonstrate the relevance, value, impact and effectiveness of the day-to-day business of library and information provision. As the above
definitions imply, research provides us with the means of finding answers to questions. Supplementing your professional knowledge and experience, Rycroft-Malone et al. (2004) highlight ‘local’ data (gathered through audit) and customer experience and preferences (gathered through evaluation) as activities that you may use to investigate your day-to-day practice – activities which can count as research.

The output from research, evaluation and audit are all appropriate in the information and library sector and can be carried out by people who would consider themselves to be either practitioners or academic researchers. The skills and methods required for research, evaluation and audit are very much the same and will ultimately provide evidence on which you can ensure your activities are evidence-based (see Figure 1.1). All require a basic understanding of the various research methods and the ability to assess which are applicable to the problems under scrutiny. So, if the skills required are largely the same, why does the terminology matter? The answer is, it only matters if the terms used are barriers to you getting involved.

At this point it is worth noting that ethical requirements vary from sector to sector and country to country. However, being ethically aware is good

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**Figure 1.1** *Four sources of evidence for evidence-based practice (adapted from Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004, 87, Figure 1)*
practice for any researcher and this will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

**Research, evaluation or audit?**

The key similarity between research, evaluation and audit is that all begin with a question. They all expect to inform practice and require data collection using appropriate methods to reach their conclusions. However, there are some key differences to note.

Evaluation has its focus on service effectiveness. Seen as a form of applied research, i.e. it has its application in the workplace, evaluation is practical in nature and seeks:

> to produce information about the implementation, operation and ultimate effectiveness of policies and programmes designed to bring about change.

Clarke and Dawson, 1999, 35

As well as providing practical information about service development, evaluations also require judgements to be made about the value of what is being evaluated. Patton distinguishes evaluation from research when he states that:

> Research is aimed at truth. Evaluation is aimed at action.

Patton, 1986, 14

An audit can be understood in two ways. First, that audit is a review of a process, service, department or organization, carried out to learn more about an issue or issues being studied to enable improvements to be made. Secondly an audit can be the use of a predetermined (audit) tool as a checklist to see if a process or service, or intervention is meeting the required standards. Table 1.1 will help you to quickly determine which approach is most appropriate in answering your question.

The case studies that follow give illustrations of three published projects: a research project; an evaluation project; and an audit project. Whilst some people think that only research is worth publishing and sharing, in reality the results of an evaluation or audit of your library or information service can provide valuable evidence in informing the direction to other service developments. Other people can learn from the results of your work. The following case studies demonstrate this most effectively.
Case studies

Case study 1.1 An example of a project that reports on a research project


**Aims and objectives:** Discusses findings from doctoral research on the information behaviour of home-care workers and their clients. The paper focuses on the findings, which have implications for health library and information services.

**Sample and methods:** The qualitative research methods included participant observation in the homes of clients (*n* = 7), over a period of 18 months, in a city in the UK, complemented by in-depth interviews of home-care staff (*n* = 47).

**Results:** Home-care staff perceived requests for information on a variety of
topics as an indivisible part of their caring role. Clients asked for more information than they had in the past, and home-care workers were expected to respond to a wide variety of enquiries about health, welfare, leisure and domestic concerns. Clients trusted their advice as much as they might have trusted members of the family. Home-care workers from an agency used a variety of resources at the agency office to help them, such as leaflets on welfare benefits, and health conditions. Few had used NHS Direct, and library use (by a third of the home-care workers) was generally associated with course work or training. Some family members and home-care staff used self-help groups, but the research found that family members were sometimes reticent to ask advice on sensitive issues in self-help groups. Home-care workers learnt from each other and shared experience.

Conclusions: Libraries and information services need to target provision of formal information carefully, as it is advice and counsel that is required in the home-care setting.

This case illustrates a piece of research carried out by a postgraduate student studying for a PhD. It follows established qualitative research methods, ‘participant observation’ and ‘in-depth interviews’ (see Chapter 7). It deals with home-care staff and their clients and required observing people in their homes and work environments. This is potentially a sensitive situation. The researcher would have to be aware of the participants’ rights, would preferably have to have had some initial training prior to carrying out the study, and would have to have applied for ethics approval to carry out a research project of this nature (see Chapter 5). With qualitative data the samples are often quite small, but a lot of rich data can be gathered (see Chapter 7). The personal safety of the researcher must also be considered when going into people’s homes, and plans must be in place to support the researcher in this situation. These plans might include making others aware of when and where the research is being carried out, and having emergency contact procedure in place.

Case study 1.2 An example of a project that reports on an evaluation of a service.


Background: This case study describes the development, use and impact of a
customer service staff evaluation instrument at the reference desk of a large academic library, the Science and Technology Library at the University of Alberta in Canada. It shows how in the past, the Reference Coordinator evaluated an individual’s reference performance from information gleaned while working alongside the staff member at the desk, from direct interaction with the individual’s supervisor, and through input received informally.

**Approach:** In order to establish more objective and standardized tools, two reference librarians in the SciTech Library were charged with the following mandate: ‘Evaluate the behavioural skills of the Reference staff as they appear to the library patron.’ Only behavioural aspects, not content, would be identified and evaluated. The goal was to develop a type of instrument, in the form of a checklist, for use in future staff evaluations. A literature review was conducted to identify desirable customer service behaviour and methods of assessing customer service behaviour. They also conferred with colleagues and current documentation. From this a preliminary list of desired customer service behaviours was developed and was sent to all reference staff in the Science and Technology Library for their review and comment. Three major areas of behaviour were identified: **Approachability, Interest, and Positive Attitudes.** All identified traits were grouped into one of these three categories to form a scale for evaluating the frequency with which desired customer service behaviours were observed was developed. Staff behavior could be scored against this scale; **Almost always, Occasionally, Almost never.** The list was presented to the reference staff, in one of their regular monthly meetings, for further review and discussion.

**The evaluation process:** The evaluation process involved two steps: self-assessment, and observation by an evaluator. This self-assessment was to be strictly confidential, with no sharing of information. Following the self-assessment, the two librarians used the same evaluation sheets to observe and evaluate each staff member. While staff were made aware that this evaluation would occur, they were not told when. Two evaluations were done, at separate times, for each staff member. Results were then shared with the individual, on a voluntary basis, and discussions took place about what had been learned. An analysis of traits exhibited by group members, both positive and negative, was made, and a report was written to provide recommendations for future activities and goals. The reference staff have been part of the process from the beginning of the pilot to the current integrated model. At the outset of each evaluation period, the Reference Coordinator reminds all staff that the
assessment will be taking place. The Coordinator then randomly selects reference shifts to observe. The observing is not intrusive; if possible, it is done while the staff member is not particularly aware that it is taking place. Once the observing has taken place, each staff member meets with the Coordinator to discuss the results. This is now a regular, expected part of each staff member’s review, and forms part of the assessment in the annual appraisal.

**Outcomes:** The process is being modified slightly to allow staff to provide their own evaluation, as they did at the beginning of the pilot project. This project has been successful in identifying appropriate customer service behaviours to the reference staff, and in having these specific observable behaviours linked to their performance appraisals and expectations. A more consistent evaluation process has been developed, and the unit has generally achieved a greater consistency of service. The process will continue to be reviewed, modified and changed as reference services change and grow. The process is considered to be a useful addition to the performance appraisal system.

This study has clearly been carried out to evaluate an aspect of the service delivery. This study is classed as evaluation, not research, yet it shares many processes with more formal research projects, e.g. exploring the evidence through a thorough review of the literature (see Chapter 6) that informed the development of the scale. Measurement scales such as these are often used in research projects. Other issues are evident, such as the importance of confidentiality (of the individual’s performance – see Chapter 5), reliability (using two assessors and self-evaluation – see Chapters 7, 8 and 9), and objectivity (having a standardized scale, so that all staff are assessed against the same criteria – see Chapter 7). The results illustrate how application of the new evaluation tool has benefited the service with the changes bringing improvements.

**Case study 1.3** An example of a project that reports on an audit of a service


**Abstract:** The current need for performance measurement and quality targets for services to users requires suitable performance indicators for libraries to use. This paper looks at the self-assessment audit tool for catalogue quality developed by UKOLN in collaboration with Essex libraries. For the tool a
checklist of errors was drawn up, which can then be used to assess the quality of records within a catalogue using a sample of library stock. The tool can be used to assess the quality of catalogue records for monographs and non-book materials (but not serials), for complete collections or parts of collections and for records created at different periods. This paper describes the tool and the process of making the assessment and reports on the results of the pilot study carried out at the University of Bath library in 2000.

This study developed a ‘checklist’ or audit tool to assess the quality of the library catalogue. The tool provided a predetermined checklist to assess the quality of the catalogue (see Table 1.1). This audit will not have required ethics approval (see Chapter 5). The results have been published in the literature, as they will be useful to other practitioners. With this type of paper it is common to include the tool used so that others can benefit from replicating the audit or adapting the tool for their own use.

Ten practical steps
Having identified the purpose of your project and determined whether you need to adopt a research, evaluation or audit approach, it’s time to get down to the practicalities of how to plan and execute it. Figure 1.2 guides you through the ten steps of a project, from turning your idea into a research question, designing your study, writing and funding your proposal, collecting, analysing and interpreting data through to reporting and disseminating your findings.

Each of these discrete areas is covered in the coming chapters and will guide you through the research process. Although not all projects will need to incorporate all ten steps, it is important to be aware of each step and to know when they are relevant to your own project.

Summary
This chapter has provided an overview of the research process within the library and information sector. It has introduced the concepts of research, evaluation and audit and highlighted the decisive factor in selecting the approach to adopt in your project.

The HEALER research toolkit demonstrates the ten steps in undertaking a research project and will guide the structure of the rest of this book. Not all ten steps will be applicable within all projects.
The case studies given in this chapter illustrate the value of research, evaluation and audit in contributing to the evidence base for library and information services. All these differing types of ‘research’ are worthy of dissemination through library and information networks, conferences and the published literature.

Points for reflection

- Think about an aspect of your work that could be explored or developed through research-based activities, then identify a question that reflects the area you have chosen to investigate. Referring to Table 1.1, consider whether your question is research, evaluation or audit.
- Bearing in mind the research toolkit in Figure 1.2, do you have the skills and resources to carry out the project successfully?
- If not, do you need to read more? Engage in further training? Discuss the project with others? Where can you look for good sources of material that will help? What training might you need? Who might be able to help?

Figure 1.2 HEALER Research Toolkit

Modified from the RDInfo research toolkit for supporting researchers in health and social care (National Institute for Health Research), the HEALER research toolkit (HEALER, 2010a) has been specifically designed for use across library and information sectors. HEALER is a UK-based network aimed at ensuring a co-ordinated approach to increasing the production of good quality research, primarily within the health information management sector (HEALER 2010b.)
References


Recommended further reading
