

Librarians as Researchers: Reflections on the RLUK Research Catalyst Cohort

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One of the many phrases I like to quote is that librarians don't have to know all the information, but we usually know how to find the information, or at least are able to work out how to find it. We are researchers. But, for many of us, the area of research we are involved in is a niche one, to do with the provision of research tools and resources, and educating researchers and students on the best use of these resources.

Librarians as researchers

As an Academic Liaison Librarian for business, I have some expertise in literature searching and secondary data collection, and in teaching others about these, but I'm aware that there are many other research areas that I don't have as much knowledge of as I'd like – primary data collection (surveys, interviews, focus groups), qualitative and quantitative data analysis, different types of literature review... I also know that there are areas where I, and other staff working in academic and research libraries, could use our experience and expertise to play more of a part in academic research, including funded research as co-investigators on projects led by other people, and even leading our own projects.

I've been developing my knowledge and confidence as an emerging researcher due to being one of the 18 members of the [Research Catalyst Cohort](#). This is a new programme, organised by [RLUK](#) (Research Libraries UK) and run by [ARMA](#) (the Association of Research Managers and Administrators), with funding provided by the [AHRC](#) (Arts and Humanities Research Council) – one of the many funders of academic research that we've been learning about. The Research

Catalyst Cohort was set up following an [RLUK scoping study](#) on ‘The role of academic and research libraries as active participants and leaders in the production of scholarly research’ and is part of a wider series of initiatives within the [Research Engagement Programme](#).

The Basics of the Research Catalyst Cohort

Practically, the Research Catalyst Cohort is a series of workshops and other events, running online over about 10 months in 2021 and 2022, with the intention of attendees – who are librarians, archivists and others working in UK academic or research libraries) becoming confident to apply for research funding. In addition to the workshops, and spotlight seminars, we have all been allocated a mentor to support us in developing our research plans, through meetings and other communications.

Events we’ve had so far include:

- Learning about the Research Funding Landscape
It’s much more than the REF (Research Excellence Framework), which is a type of block funding – there are all sorts of competitive funding bids you can apply for, including fellowships which, in part, focus on the development of the researcher)
- Developing as a Researcher
Learning about the Researcher Development Framework, and planning for my future as a researcher, has been particularly useful for me;
- Developing Competitive Funding Applications
Important as opportunities to get funding are often very competitive
- Developing Successful Partnerships for Collaboration

There is so much to be gained through working together, and planning for this early on in a research project. This is one of the reasons behind the Research Catalyst Cohort

- Impact and Knowledge Exchange
This isn’t about Impact Factors (which we know quite a bit about in libraries) but, in part, about ensuring that research has an impact on people and society, beyond universities. It’s also about open access of course – another area of importance in libraries
- Research Culture
Considering how to create a healthy research culture, and learning a little about different elements – Research integrity, Research Governance and Research Ethics

We’ve also had one Spotlight Seminar, on Interdisciplinarity, and a Development Sprint to provide time for making progress with our research ideas

Events coming up include workshops on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Financial Management of Research; Project Management as Principle Investigator (I’m really looking forward to this one as I’ve recently found myself unexpectedly kind of managing an internal project); and Developing a Research Strategy. We will also have further Spotlight Seminars on Decolonisation and Internationalisation, and some Good Practice Exchange Sessions.

My experience in the Research Catalyst Cohort

We are now over halfway through the programme of events and the experience for me has been transformative. I applied to be part of the cohort early in 2022, which involved discussing my research interests, what opportunities I'd taken up in the past to explore my interests, and how I would share my learning if I were selected. I was lucky enough to get a place and, since blog posts were one of the suggestions for dissemination and advocacy, decided to start a professional development blog recording my experience and learning <https://researcherlibrarian.wordpress.com/>. I've been writing about my thoughts and expectations before each workshop, and writing up my notes and reflections following each event, and well as writing about other related experiences.

One of these experiences was attending and submitting a poster and poster presentation to the recent ARMA conference – remember this is the Association of Research Managers and Administrators, members of which are organising and delivering our workshops. I wasn't aware of this association until recently, or even particularly aware of the wide range of professions there are in research management; I know from communicating with academics and research managers at Research Catalyst Cohort events and at the ARMA conference, that many of them aren't aware of the range of things that we librarians do. There is so much value in us learning about each other and working together.

My research idea

As I said earlier, one of the intentions of the Research Catalyst Cohort is for us to feel confident to apply for research funding. I started the programme with an idea (one of many) I've been wanting to research for years – the use of systematic reviews in the social sciences: what students and researchers understand about different types of literature review, and what librarians and academics can do to support them in the use of systematic review methodology.

A key value of my involvement in the programme is that I now see myself as a researcher, and have given myself permission to spend time on research. This includes reading books and journal articles, creating structures for note-taking and keeping track of my research, including actually using bibliographic management software properly, in addition to teaching people about it.

I have been developing my research idea, in part through discussing it with my expanding network, including when I presented about the Research Catalyst Cohort at the Business Librarians Association conference in the summer. I haven't made as much use of my mentor as I should have, and as I still hope to, but he has provided me with extremely useful feedback, and suggestions for further reading, some of which have created lightbulb moments for me, connecting up my multiple interests.

My intention now is to apply to do a Professional Practice Fellowship. This is an opportunity facilitated by RLUK, with the funding provided by the AHRC. This is the second year of the fellowship opportunity – there are already [10 academic library staff](#) working on fellowships at the moment. I have lots of work to do prepare, developing my research idea, getting an experienced researcher on board to be my mentor if I am selected, and working with my Research Support and Development Office to plan the financial logistics around the use of my

time, if I get the funding. A fellowship won't be the right funding mechanism for all cohort members, but there are many other opportunities we can consider, which we've been learning about through the great workshops we've been attending.

There isn't any definitive news yet about a Research Catalyst Cohort for next year, but if and when it happens, I encourage anyone interested to consider applying. You can get in touch with me or with other current [Research Catalyst Cohort members](#), who you might know, to ask more.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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