

Research, Impact, Value and Library and Information Science (RIVAL): Development, implementation and outcomes of a Scottish network for LIS researchers and practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The research-practice gap in Library and Information Science (LIS) is well documented, especially in respect of the difficulties of translating research into practice, and resultant lost opportunities. While many researchers attempt to *explain* this research-practice gap, few suggest strategies to *address* it. The creation of researcher-practitioner networks, however, is one approach that has been proved empirically to bridge the distance between the two communities. Such a network is currently operating in Scotland, funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Research, Impact, Value and Library and Information Science (RIVAL) is part-way through its implementation based around four knowledge exchange events for a network membership of 32 from a wide variety of LIS sectors. RIVAL's successful delivery depends in part on the project leads' experience of undertaking, and evaluating the impact of, a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded grant: the Developing Research Excellence and Methods (DREaM) project. Already there are indications that RIVAL is delivering value to network members. There is a strong expectation for this to be enhanced, both in the remainder of the funding period and beyond, offering theoretical contributions to the study of social networks, especially in respect of social capital development to support knowledge exchange.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Often characterised as a mutual lack of understanding between practitioners and researchers, the research-practice gap in LIS has been acknowledged for several decades. Nevertheless, almost a century since some of the earliest references to this (e.g., Williamson, 1931), LIS researchers continue to draw attention to the distance between researchers and practitioners, and to the challenges that this poses (e.g., Ardanuy & Urbano, 2019; Bawden, 2008, p. 420; Booth, 2003; Bowler & Large, 2008; Klobas & Clyde, 2010, p. 237; McMenemy, 2010; Ponti, 2008, p. 265; Sonnenwald, Lassi, Olson, Ponti, & Axelsson, 2009, p. 194).

An important concern associated with research-practice gaps is the difficulty of translating research outcomes into practice (Fyfe & Wilson, 2012). In LIS, this results in lost opportunities for improvements in library and information services delivery. Aligned to this, in cases where LIS practitioners pay little attention to LIS research in their services provision plans, the potential value and impact of academic research projects is severely reduced.

Researchers have offered explanations to account for the research-practice gap in LIS, and to underline the reasons why practitioners are unaccustomed to using existing evidence bases. Some

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focus on practitioner perceptions of the nature of academic research, arguing that practitioners consider this irrelevant to their needs as service providers, and that the publication of outputs is not timely enough to be useful (Bowler & Large, 2008; Eve & Schenk, 2006; Ponti, 2008, p.256). Other broader explanations relate to the ways in which research output is disseminated and accessed in the domain. They refer to problems associated with conceiving the process of translating research into practice as a one-directional linear model, where knowledge as a ‘product’ is generated and transferred by one set of actors, then passively consumed and implemented by another (Best & Holmes, 2010, pp. 146-147).

Such views fail to take into account that practitioner ‘consumers’ (and indeed non-consumers) of research can, and may be keen to, play a more active role – provided that the model of dissemination is considered more as a relationship between the parties involved, in which links and exchanges can be exploited in both directions. This is evident in the implementation of one of the two strategies proven empirically to narrow the LIS research-practice gap: the deliberate creation of researcher-practitioner networks (Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2019). (The other strategy is the dissemination of evidence summaries (Kloda et al, 2014).

Such arguments for the value of creating researcher-practitioner networks formed the basis of a funding application submitted in November 2018 to the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) to establish a Scottish network of LIS researchers and practitioners interested in maximising the value and impact of LIS research. Also emphasised in the bid was the appetite amongst LIS researchers and practitioners for such a network to be developed in Scotland, evident in the delivery of a highly successful sell-out conference on the theme of LIS research impact and value held at Edinburgh Napier University on 11th July 2018. A further strength of the application to the RSE was the applicants’ track record in network development – notably the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Developing Research Excellence and Methods (DREaM) project¹ - and their publications on this theme (for example: Cooke & Hall, 2013; Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2018; Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2019).

At the end of 2018, funding was granted for the proposed project Research Impact and Value in LIS (RIVAL). The first of four network events to bring together a range of LIS stakeholders keen to address issues associated with the LIS ‘research-practice gap’ took place in Edinburgh on 11th July 2019. Discussed in this paper is the implementation of RIVAL, its outcomes to date, and its anticipated outcomes to theory and practice.

RIVAL IMPLEMENTATION

The focus of the RIVAL project is the delivery of four events² supported by an open access online presence to extend the reach of the network resources³, including an interactive map of network members and a skill/interests directory⁴. At the time of writing (June 2020), two events have already taken place: 11th July and 7th November 2019. Events 3 and 4 are planned for 19th November 2020

¹ <https://lisresearch.org/dream-project/>

² <https://lisrival.com/rival-events/>

³ <https://lisrival.com>

⁴ <http://socprojects.napier.ac.uk/rival/>

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and early 2021. (Initially Events 3 and 4 were scheduled for 19th March and 9th July 2020. The schedule changed due to the coronavirus pandemic.)

The network membership comprises 32 individuals⁵, based between Dumfries in the south west of Scotland (just 30 miles from the English border) and the island of Orkney (found off the far north east tip of the Scottish mainland). They are:

- 9 academic librarians
- 6 public librarians
- 3 special librarians
- 1 school librarian
- 1 national librarian
- 7 academic researchers
- 2 officials from LIS professional bodies
- 2 independent consultants
- 1 research software engineer

The RIVAL Project Board, the membership of which comprises the two project leads and four network members⁶, determined the programmes for the first three network events. Each includes a keynote presentation from an external expert, case study presentations that link research with practice (in several cases through accounts presented jointly by researchers and users of the research under discussion), structured networking exercises, and unstructured network time, as summarised in Table 1.

	Keynote title and speaker	Case study themes	Member-led activities and networking
Event 1: July 11th 2019⁷	‘Getting research into action: issues, challenges, solutions’ Dr Sarah Morton, Matter of Focus	Scotland’s school library strategy	Kash cups ⁸ ice breaker Unconference half hour preparation and delivery Discussion of RIVAL ambitions
Event 2: November 7th 2019⁹	‘Catalysing research into practice from the ground up’ David Stewart, Health Libraries North (NHS)	CILIP/ARA workforce mapping project Library linked data	RIVAL big business card exercise RIVAL network member news: project updates Discussion of RIVAL Event 4

⁵ <https://lisrival.com/rival-people/rival-network-members/>

⁶ <https://lisrival.com/rival-people/the-team/>

⁷ <https://lisrival.com/rival-events/event-1/>

⁸ https://www.designinformatics.org/research_output/kash-cups/

⁹ <https://lisrival.com/rival-events/event-2/>

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			Tour of St Cecilia's Hall Post-event drinks
Event 3: November 19th 2020¹⁰	'Public library services and citizenship: a longitudinal analysis of roles, impact, and value' Dr Leo Appleton, University of Sheffield	E-legal deposit Information literacy and immigrants	A visit to the Scottish LIS Research Market RIVAL network member news: sharing our skills Planning for RIVAL Event 4

Table 1: overview of events 1-3

The network membership is determining the format of the fourth and final event in November 2020. Thus the network members are also co-producers of the RIVAL project. At the time of writing, the membership has determined that Event 4 will be dedicated to project work to generate tangible research outputs, such as journal/conference papers and research grant proposals. Amongst these – and of key importance to the contribution that RIVAL will make to extend theoretical perspectives on network development, especially in respect of social capital development to support knowledge exchange – is an evaluation of RIVAL itself. This will include a social network analysis that focuses on collaborative interactions that support knowledge exchange activity. A member survey is likely to form the basis of this, with supplementary data collected by interview and/or focus group. The work completed on the outputs will be discussed at a spring 2021 meeting of the network members at a post-RIVAL event, kindly hosted by an organisation that employs one of the network members. There will also be the opportunity here for member checking the preliminary results of the evaluation project.

Lessons learnt from the detailed analysis of long-term community development and network longevity amongst the DREaM network membership, as informed by prior research on social network theory, scholarly networks and impact (Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2018; Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2019), have guided decisions on the management of the RIVAL project. First, prospective network members had to commit to participation at three of the four RIVAL events. The first RIVAL event was a taster for anyone *with an interest* in joining a network focused on the impact and value of LIS research; those who joined Event 2 in November 2019 will also participate in Events 3 and 4 as full network members. This requirement is to ensure that network connections are built within a specific cohort over the course of (at least) three meetings to such an extent that lasting network links will be forged and maintained beyond RIVAL's funded period. A second strategy replicated from DREaM is the online capture of event content before, during, and after its delivery:

- All presentation slides are made available online prior to the date of the event in question.
- Each event is previewed with links to the content available in advance¹¹.

¹⁰ <https://lisrival.com/rival-events/event-3/>

¹¹ See for example <https://hazelhall.org/2019/11/07/rival-returns-follow-lisrival-today-follow-to-hear-the-latest-from-the-rival-network-on-research-impact-value-and-lis/>

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- Event activity is live-tweeted.
- All presentations are videoed and posted online as soon as possible post-event; events are reviewed with links to associated resources¹².
- The event web pages on the project web site serve as a repository for all outputs from the day's activities¹³.

This is primarily to extend the reach of the network beyond the core membership. It also has the potential to enhance the impact and value of the RIVAL activities and outputs. A further finding from the analysis of the DREaM network was the importance of social ties to underpin enduring relationships (Hall, Cruickshank & Ryan, 2018). It is for this reason that the project leads have made efforts to ensure that network members mix well with one another at RIVAL events, and are prevented from accidentally slipping into clustering within 'natural' professional groups. Thus network members are pre-assigned to groups for breakout activities. At Event 2, which was held in a Georgian concert hall and museum in Edinburgh city centre, two further (optional) networking activities were added to the programme: a tour of the hall and its collection of historic musical instruments, and post-event drinks at a nearby pub.

Experience from the DREaM project of priorities in the allocation of network funding has also been important to RIVAL. Normally funding for UK networking grants is for booking event venues, paying for catering, and covering participant costs (e.g. travel and accommodation for network members and guest presenters). On the basis of the large amount of (unpaid) effort that went into the success of DREaM for activities beyond recouping these costs - such as identifying expert speakers, running board meetings, marketing the network, building and maintaining online resources, evaluating events, financial reporting – the bid for RIVAL included specific provision for labour costs.

RIVAL OUTCOMES TO DATE

The two RIVAL events delivered to date have attracted overwhelmingly positive feedback¹⁴. The practitioner network members are gaining insight into research findings that can be applied to decision-making in the development of services for end-users, as well as being offered the opportunity to influence the future research agenda through the generation of new, relevant, research ideas in collaboration with the researcher network members and event contributors. Thus the ground has been laid for the exploitation of the existing knowledge base for service improvement, and the enhancement of the value of prior work through reuse, capitalising on earlier investment in research. Similarly, researcher engagement with practitioners within the network is providing potential to increase the impact and value of academic research. It also gives researchers an appreciation of practitioner priorities for future research initiatives. Furthermore, the researcher members of the network are strengthening their relationships with peers in other Scottish universities and starting to identify possible partnerships for future research projects. For example, there has been discussion of a bid to the AHRC to develop a programme to support the use of novel quantitative research methods amongst LIS and digital humanities researchers, particularly for the exploitation of big data sets. This group is also able to benefit from exposure to 'research-aware' practitioners willing to collaborate as research participants in future efforts to generate new

¹² See for example <https://hazelhall.org/2019/12/10/rival-event-2-review-and-resources/>

¹³ See for example <https://lisrival.com/rival-events/event-1/>

¹⁴ <https://hazelhall.org/2019/12/10/rival-event-2-review-and-resources/>

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knowledge, for example as partners offering their library services for case studies, or provide routes to otherwise hard-to-access data sets.

The project leads have also been spreading the word of RIVAL at other events (e.g. Hall, 2019a; Hall, 2019b; Hall, 2020). It is hoped that others from beyond the network will be encouraged to take advantage of the project resources, and also be able to replicate the good practice established around the management and delivery of network grants.

ANTICIPATED FUTURE OUTCOMES OF RIVAL

By the end of the project, it is anticipated that a number of positive outcomes will have resulted from the collaborative efforts at knowledge exchange undertaken by the RIVAL network members. These include:

- New, and strengthened, relationships between LIS researchers and practitioners who work across a range of contexts.
- New, and strengthened, relationships between LIS researchers within Scottish universities.
- Increased confidence and self-efficacy amongst the practitioner participants as research users and partners.
- Evidence of efforts amongst practitioner members to integrate learning from the network into services provision.
- Evidence amongst LIS researchers to incorporate research ideas inspired by the needs expressed by the practitioner community into future research bids.
- A model of network development for researcher-practitioner communities that can be applied in other domains that experience a research-practice gap.

Possible future outcomes, which are more likely to become evident after the funded period, may include:

- Improvements in LIS service delivery traceable to knowledge exchange activities undertaken at RIVAL events.
- Initiation of new projects that include collaboration between the researchers and practitioners who participated in RIVAL.
- Active collaborations between RIVAL network members e.g. joint project funding bids, co-authored publications, and other initiatives undertaken by network members on the basis of relationships developed over the course of the project, e.g. service on committees and event organisation.

CONCLUSION

RIVAL is a work-in-progress to reduce the research-practice gap in Scotland through an implementation that draws on good practice in network grant delivery. This includes a strong element of co-production with a network membership that has ambitions to generate tangible outputs from the project, and continue meeting beyond the funded period. Already RIVAL is delivering practical value to the network members. There are strong hopes for this to be enhanced through RIVAL's theoretical contributions, notably on social network theory, both in the remainder

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of the funding period and beyond, and for these to be valuable in the creation of a model for network development that can be applied beyond LIS settings.

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