What do Academics Want?

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Background

At this year's Rare Books and Special Collections Group Conference in Oxford, I was invited to speak about what academics want from Special Collections. Having spent the first part of my career (1993-2008) as a librarian working mostly in small special libraries before becoming a full-time academic in 2009, I have some experience of both parties in the academic:librarian relationship, and continue to value special collections teams for their support and camaraderie.

The perspective I presented at the conference and the report here should be taken with at least the following *caveats*: (1) I was asked to give a practitioner paper. (2) Although I am working on a literature review for an academic paper I am co-authoring with former student Laure Bukh, what follows here of the research of others is no more than a snapshot.

That said, I am a full-time academic at an RLUK university, and I do use Special Collections, mostly at Senate House Library, on a regular basis that varies from monthly during my busy teaching term (September – December) to daily outside term times. Some of you have been kind enough to report that you found the presentation useful, and I offer what follows in the hope that you will find this report of equal use.

What is / Who are "academics"?

As Mary Auckland points out in her significant report *Re-skilling for Research* (2012), "What is clear from the literature is that researchers are not a homogenous group. Their activities, discourse, approaches to research, and their information needs differ, in particular in relation to their discipline and / or subject and its culture and the stage of their career." (Section 2.1).

Moira Bent, Pat Gannon-Leary and Jo Webb (2007) identify characteristics that a cross-section of researchers attributed to themselves:

- Questioning
- Reflective
- Active
- Ready to be challenged
- Trying to extend boundaries, work within and between disciplines
- Making connections
- Keen to 'share what they find – out knowledge into the public domain' (p. 83).

Verbs used by researchers in their study to describe their activities were:

- Investigate
- Purposefully enquire
- Gather evidence / data
- Confirm or refute theories
- Interpret
- Synthesise [*sic*]
- Disseminate (p. 84).

Finally, Bent and her colleagues identify 'Seven Ages of Research' which they argue can be used as a model "to study learning and information needs throughout a researchers [*sic*] life" (p. 85):

1. Masters student
2. Doctoral student
3. Contract research staff (CRS)
4. Early career researchers
5. Established academic staff
6. Senior researchers
7. Experts (p. 85).

Although each stage in the model has its own distinctive characteristics, it is possible to group the needs of some of the groups together – so Masters and Doctoral students may or may not aspire to become full-time academics, but may be focused on their research project as an end in itself; Contract research staff (CRS) and Early career researchers (ECR) may not yet have a firm foothold on the academic ladder; may be focused on research projects with finite goals (or time-schedules) and may have heavy teaching commitments that limit their time for research yet further. Established academic staff and senior researchers, on the other hand, may have more time free from teaching, but they may have a larger administrative burden and are certainly expected to bring in large-scale funded projects. The need to find funding for research can and often does shape the nature and scope of the research of academics working at this level (heads of research centres, for example). In the final stage, the experts with international reputations have more scope for creativity and to follow their own research agenda, but may be tasked with high-level administration within the university, perhaps working at a very senior level to obtain funding from industry. (Bent *et al*, 2007, pp. 85-88).

It has been impossible to summarise this *research* model without referring to the two other commitments academics have: teaching and administration (often referred to now as 'enabling activities' because they do not exist for their own ends, but to facilitate teaching or research). UCL is typical of UK universities in its conditions of service for academic staff, available on the public-facing institutional website at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/salary_scales/academic_tcs.php The first section of the conditions offers a working definition of "academic staff" that, again, is typical of universities in the UK: "These terms and conditions apply to Professors, Readers, Senior Lecturers, Senior Clinical Lecturers, Lecturers and Clinical Lecturers" (section 1). The document continues to set out expected duties:

> Academic staff are expected to undertake teaching, research and administrative / enabling duties as agreed with their Head of Department.
>
> Members of staff are permitted to accept External Examinerships and may, with the Head of Department's approval, accept other professional appointments provided that they do not interfere with the duties of the appointment …
>
> Attendance at meetings, for example Boards of Study, Faculty and Committee meetings, contribution to corporate roles and collaboration across faculties and disciplines is considered an important part of academic life. (section 7)

Here, in a nutshell, we have the requirements made of academics in order to fulfill their contract of employment.

At surface level, then, we could state that academics are likely to look to special collections librarians in support of their teaching and research activities. Some enabling activities such as bidding for funds may also be supported by librarians, especially where the academic plans to use university resources (e.g. institutional archives) and / or where a good working relationship already exists. For most projects, writing applications for funding represents the first stage of the research process.

Special Collections Supporting Teaching and Outreach

Plenty of Special Collections activities have been documented since Schmiesing and Hollis (2002) highlighted a lack of published research on teaching within special collections departments. Rare books librarians and archivists are involved in literacy instruction not only at postgraduate but also at undergraduate level (*cf*. Krause, 2010 and Archer *et al*, 2009); they impact on students' use of archival and other rare materials (*cf.* Duff and Cherry, 2008) and, in some cases it is claimed they are "shaping the learning experience in higher education" (*cf.* Torre, 2008 in the light of Traister, 2000). Teaching is engaged in disciplines that have traditionally depended on archival research, such as History and Literature and, increasingly in newer areas, such as creative writing (*cf.* Pavelich, 2010).

This dovetails neatly with outreach and public engagement activities. At UCL the Public Engagement Unit awarded Beacon Bursary funding to Special Collections for a series of workshops in 2011 that brought the community outside UCL into the university and took parts of the university collections to a local college and a family research centre (UCL Department of Information Studies, 2011). As well as bringing collections to new audiences, the experience of running the workshops built on existing relationships between special collections and academic staff and strengthened them.

Special Collections Supporting Research

It terms of maximizing strategies for survival, it is important for special collections managers to look to as wide a range of users as possible. As in the UCL example, money is available for engagement activities, and, in an environment in which all members of the higher education community are regularly reminded that the bulk of our financial existence is dependent on the tax-payer, it is tempting to throw oneself energetically into outreach activities.

Outreach is also immediately rewarding for the members of staff involved in it. It is a social activity, and seeing the expressions of joy and awe on the faces of groups who may have had no access to rare materials before is a real boost to morale. However, Stanley Katz's pleas of 2005 still hold true: "Please continue to think of scholars and teachers as your primary user audience and think only secondarily of 'everybody in the world,'" (Katz, 2005; p. 116).

The Impact of Digital Collections

Katz was writing in the context of a drive at the start of the new century to increase digital access to materials and thereby reveal collections that had previously been hidden as a result of cataloguing backlogs or minimal representation via the Internet. Not only the creation of

metadata but, perhaps more significantly, of digitized versions of materials has been funded at national and international level. Initiatives such as Europeanna (http://www.europeana.eu, funded from 2009) and the World Digital Library (http://www.wdl.org, begun in 2006) have not only provided materials that can be used from the computer desk-top but have also brought research libraries together to enhance the display of their collections.

It seems obvious that increased online access is a good thing: in terms of preservation, original items need only be consulted by a handful of scholars post-digitisation while everyone else uses the online version; libraries taking part in digitization projects report a correspondence physical usage of their libraries as potential readers become aware of their collections (*cf.* Hirtle, 2002); and, of course, it is possible to compare multiple editions and impressions of rare materials digitally – and with enhanced powers of magnification.

Donghee Sinn has recently published an interesting citation analysis for digital archival collections' use in historical research (Sinn, 2012). Examining the *American Historical Review* 2001-2010, it was revealed that secondary materials remain the most frequent citations in papers, with citations of physical archives also used substantially. In comparison, "Digital archival collections were not used very intensively, as they were used only about 0.39% among all references in citations. However, they appear in citations of 16.83% of the total articles." (Sinn, 2012; p. 1535). It was also noticed that web materials in general "shows a considerable increase, especially in the last few years." (Sinn, 2012; p. 1535).

Of course, scholars may well be using digital archives for their initial research and then examining and using the original physical version, which is then the item they cite. A complex matrix of scholarly behavior underpins citation practice, after all. Nonetheless, the figures in Sinn's research are worthy of the attention of strategic managers when planning special collections development activities. Certainly they seem to indicate that Katz may have been right to assert the more traditional means by which scholars access special collections departments.

Katz concludes his article with two important points

> Don't forget the scholars. Don't forget the teachers. We are your primary users. We are not, but we should be, your primary advocates. You have some hard work to do in order to make us your advocates and collaborators (Katz, 2005: p. 122).

Herein lies the fundamental challenge. In seeking to work with academics, what is the balance between teaching, research and other activities (administration and public engagement)?

REF2014

Although academics are employed by individual institutions, in the UK we are all assessed according to national criteria. The last cycle of activity ended in 2008, when the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) took place. Since then, we have been working towards the next national assessment, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. Work completed before November 2013 can be counted towards the REF.

The presence of the word "Research" (and the absence of the word "Teaching") should provide a clue, but the website (http://www.ref.ac.uk/) provides plenty of detail in how the

evaluation will work. The assessment criteria are set out in paragraph 25 of the key document *Assessment framework and guidance on submissions* (REF2014, 2011):

a. **Outputs:** The sub-panels will assess the quality of submitted research outputs in terms of their 'originality, significance and rigour', with reference to international research quality standards. This element will carry a weighting of **65 per cent** in the overall outcome awarded to each submission.
b. **Impact:** The sub-panels will assess the 'reach and significance' of impacts on the economy, society and / or culture that were underpinned by excellent research conducted in the submitted unit, as well as the submitted unit's approach to enabling impact from its research. This element will carry a weighting of **20 per cent**.
c. **Environment:** The sub-panels will assess the research environment in terms of its 'vitality and sustainability', including its contribution to the vitality and sustainability of the wider discipline or research base. This element will carry a weighting of **15 per cent.** (p. 6)

From this it should be clear that however invested academics are in their teaching portfolio, a major pre-occupation of all of us in terms of maintaining and advancing our careers is our research and its dissemination.

This is both bad and good news for special collections staff. On the one hand, the lack of homogeneity apparent across our different research interests and needs may be daunting; it can be difficult to predict how best to cater strategically for a group of people who are deeply involved in individual pursuits. Further, while it is possible to argue a special collections presence in all subject *teaching*, it is simply not the case that all researchers have need of rare books and archives.

The solution, it would seem, is to continue to make strides in embedding special collections within teaching, offering academics the opportunity to use object-based learning in their curriculum, and, where appropriate (according to the individual academic's time, interests and stage of career), perhaps even in public engagement. These activities afford an opportunity for academics, librarians and archivists to work alongside each other and form bonds of professional respect which can illuminate the working relationship of individual academic researchers and special collections staff.

Special Collections can *facilitate* interesting teaching and they can *enable* deeper scholarship experience for the academic. It is in these twin roles of facilitation and enabling that we can find opportunities for engagement with academics in which the value of the service can be witnessed, experience and, ultimately, advocated.

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