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Developing research support services - Focus group interviews as a method for librarians to understand the everyday life of researchers

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The development of research support services is a topic that at the moment gains much attention in research libraries. Especially since questions of open access and publishing support over the last decade have increased as a part of research libraries' assignments. However, according to Wiklund (2012) there is a lack of research on how libraries support research or researchers, not least perspectives based in the everyday practices of the researchers. Often the literature adopts a library perspective and describes specific projects in a particular library or focuses on particular aspects of offered support, e.g. related to publishing issues. There is a need for more researcher-centered approaches. In this poster we discuss focus groups as a method for librarians to understand the everyday life of researchers. It is based on the results from a project at Lund University Libraries in 2012 (Voog et al, 2013; Wiklund & Voog, 2013¹). The main purpose of the project was to identify areas where the research support services could be developed both on a faculty level and in collaboration between the libraries at the university. The starting point was to look at the problem as a strategic one and grasp various aspects of support, not only specific parts.

For this purpose it was important to tune in on the researchers' way of talking about how they perform research. That makes it possible for librarians to develop a deeper understanding of the researchers' needs as well as key obstacles in the research process and to highlight parts in which library services can make a difference. In order to do so focus group interviews with researchers were chosen as the main method (Wibeck, 2011). A schematic model of the research process, from starting a project to communicating the results, was used and in each of the seven focus groups from different faculties, the researchers were asked to discuss how they work in each phase and what obstacles that they experience. In order to avoid an evaluation of current support services at the different libraries, the researchers were asked to reflect on all aspects and problems they might experience in their research process, regardless of the current relation to the library. The work processes and obstacles were then analyzed and possible support services suggested.

The results show how focus groups interviews can be used as a tool for librarians' to learn more about a specific user. A major advantage was the shift of focus from the libraries' point of view to the researchers' perspective. Not only where the researchers' asked for their opinion but the free form of the focus group interviews allow for the researchers to focus on whatever aspects they find most relevant. The moderator introduced themes and saw to it that the conversation kept going and that everyone had a saying, but apart from that the researchers could discuss in whatever direction they

¹ For a summary of the project in English, see: Wiklund, G., & Voog, H. (2013).

want, which gives a signal of their perceptions of the themes. Another important ingredient that makes focus group interviews valuable is the interaction between the researchers. One thought led to another and the negotiation around the themes helped to capture and to understand their everyday life as researchers.

However, these advantages do also hold challenges. Since the method is based on the discussion between peers and not on an outsider asking specific questions, all the questions that the investigator is interested in may not be discussed. In the analysis the investigator then has to interpret what it means that certain aspects were not discussed. The method also offers limited possibilities to interact with the participants and for the moderating librarian one challenge was not to interfere in the discussion and yet to see to it that the discussion kept going. Sometimes the researchers expressed e.g. a wish for support services that already exist or they were uncertain of aspects of a theme. The moderator found it difficult not to interrupt the discussion to straighten out these things since that would have disrupted the rhythm of the interaction.

The method with its emphasis on the participants' perspectives, does not give clear-cut answers to what is needed. Therefore, in order to be able to tell what kind of support that would help in certain situations, in the analysis, the interviews have to be understood in relation to the librarians' knowledge of information handling and already existing support services. The focus on how the researchers perform research gives a broad perspective on possible research support services and opens up for ideas of what other units at a university can offer, perhaps in collaboration with libraries.

A suggestion for further development is to continue using focus group interviews as a way of understanding the researchers' perspectives, but to modify its forms after a while. After some initial "free form" interviews with researchers and the subsequent analysis, existing support services are modified or new ones developed. The focus groups are then expanded with librarians for a dialogue, and negotiations around obstacles and support services can take place but still with the researchers' perspectives as a central idea. The analysis of the focus group interviews is thus used as a starting point for feedback and then shapes a continuous conversation built into the way research librarians' work with researchers. We propose such focus group conversations as an approach to work research based in library and information practice. We argue that by doing so the shift to take the researchers' perspectives as the way forward in developing research support services is maintained.

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