# Improving access to Library and Information Science research: maximising its relevance and impact to practitioners

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**Abstract**
Between 2009 and 2012 there was considerable investment in three UK projects related to library and information science (LIS) research: (1) the Library and Information Science Research Coalition; (2) the AHRC-funded Developing Research Excellence and Methods (DREaM) project; and (3) the Research in Librarianship Impact Evaluation Study (RiLIES). This paper presents the main features of each project, and discusses their value with reference to maximising the relevance and impact of research to LIS practitioners. It outlines plans for the support of LIS research in the UK beyond 2012.

**Keywords**
LIS research, research techniques and methods, research support, research network, practitioner engagement, resource curation, research into practice, research skills, impact

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# 1    Introduction

All Library and Information Science (LIS) students are required to engage in Library and Information Science (LIS) research to gain their qualifications. However, once established in the workplace as practitioners, some see research as an academic pursuit of little relevance to the demands of day-to-day service delivery, particularly in fast-paced environments where other priorities are greater. Those who *are* keen to engage with LIS research report difficulties accessing the research findings of others, identifying the techniques and methods appropriate for their own research, and winning support for project work.

Over the past three years the relationship between LIS research and practice has gained prominence within the LIS community thanks to investment in three initiatives. These are the establishment of the Library and Information Science Research Coalition from 2009 to 2012, and two associated projects: Developing Research Excellence and Methods (DREaM) and the Research in Librarianship Impact Evaluation Study (RiLIES), both of which ran in 2011/12. This article considers the communities and resources that have developed from these three projects. It focuses on how the work of the project teams and their associates has improved access to LIS research, and maximised its relevance and impact to practitioners. Promoting the value of research to practitioners, the wealth of resources available to support practitioner engagement in research, and the options for the LIS research community to build on the work completed to date, are also discussed.

## 2    LIS Research Coalition[3]

In 2009 the LIS Research Coalition was established by its five founding members: the British Library, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), JISC, the Museum Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Research Information Network. Over the three years of the project's duration a number of other bodies joined the Coalition as associate members. The Coalition's broad mission was to facilitate a co-ordinated and strategic approach to LIS research across the UK. Its aims were to:

- bring together information about LIS research opportunities and results;
- encourage dialogue between research funders;
- promote LIS practitioner research and the translation of research outcomes into practice;
- articulate a strategic approach to LIS research;
- promote the development of research capacity in LIS.

Through its work the Coalition aimed to strengthen the links between LIS researchers and LIS practitioners, and between research and practice. It had a particular interest in supporting practising librarians and information scientists, both in how they access and exploit available research in their work, and in their own development as practitioner researchers. For researchers and practitioners alike, the Coalition aimed to provide a formal structure to improve access to LIS research, and maximise its relevance and impact in the UK. The implementation was led by Professor Hazel Hall.

On its web site, the Coalition brought together resources that would save researchers and practitioners time in identifying and accessing relevant material to support their engagement with research. The Coalition's advocacy work sought to persuade service managers of the need to support research initiatives and improve the recognition of research knowledge within the LIS

professions. Such work included disseminating news of the Coalition's work and what it stood for (both in published form and by delivering presentations[4] at a number of conferences), providing bursaries to support individuals who wished to attend the *Sixth International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference (EBLIP6)* in 2011, and making an award[5] for LIS practitioner researcher excellence in 2012.

The Coalition played a role in two further projects that focused on specific goals to support LIS research in the UK. First, with Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding awarded to Professor Hazel Hall at Edinburgh Napier University, the Coalition was involved in the development of a formal UK-wide network of LIS researchers in the DREaM project. Professor Charles Oppenheim was co-investigator on DREaM. Second, the RiLIES project comprised two phases. RiLIES1 was conceived to determine the factors that increase or hinder the impact of research project outcomes on practice. The second phase – RiLIES2 – focused on the production of a series of outputs that would support the use and execution of research by librarians and information scientists. Further details are given below.

## 3    The DREaM Project[6]

The purpose of the DREaM project was to develop a formal UK-wide network of LIS researchers. This was achieved through the delivery of five DREaM project events: two conferences[7] and three linked workshops[8]. These took place in Edinburgh and London in 2011 and 2012. The events explored the scope of LIS and related research, and the range of methods appropriate to research in the domain. Researchers from LIS, as well as other subject domains, and expert in a variety of techniques, presented method overviews, covering their strengths and weaknesses. A wide range of techniques were evaluated beyond the standard qualitative and quantitative methods commonly deployed in LIS research.

Delegates from across all LIS sectors, and at different stages of their career, participated in all five DREaM events. Others chose to attend just the workshops (free of charge as a set of three), or the launch conference and/or the concluding conference. Supported by the extensive use of social media and event sponsorship, the reach of the DREaM project was much greater than originally proposed in the research bid made to the AHRC. Thus both the size and nature of the community that grew up around the project exceeded original project expectations.

The DREaM project was launched at a conference entitled *Out of the comfort zone[9]* at the British Library Conference Centre, London on 19th July 2011. With first-hand access to expert speakers and peers on the day, and opportunities for active participation in the programme in the one minute madness and breakout sessions, delegates developed their understanding of how to extend their LIS research practice, for example with reference to: deploying research methods and techniques not traditionally associated with LIS research; exporting LIS research practice into other domains; collaborating with others across subject and geographic boundaries; disseminating research findings beyond local/institutional audiences; seeking inspiration for furthering LIS research by importing ideas from a range of other disciplines.

The second, third and fourth DREaM events comprised three linked DREaM project workshops held in Edinburgh and London. The format allowed for a set of thirty participants to attend all three events to develop their skills together as a "cadre"[10], i.e. a set of individuals committed to LIS research who would form the backbone of a network that would last beyond the duration of the DREaM project. The "cadre" members came from a range of sectors including public, academic, school, healthcare and special libraries. The majority were working as practitioners in 2011/12, or had practitioner experience. In addition, the group included a number of academic researchers and

PhD students. Several workshop participants offered a professional profile that covered more than one "category", for example as a full-time practitioner also registered part-time for a higher degree. Each of the DREaM workshops included sessions that covered: (1) a broad research approach; (2) a specific quantitative research technique; (3) a specific qualitative research technique; and (4) a research "practicality" (e.g. ethics, improving research impact, influencing policy). Themes and speakers at the workshops included: user involvement in research; data mining; discourse analysis; ethnography; horizon scanning; research impact; research ethics and legal issues; repertory grids; research and policy; research techniques from history; social network analysis; and webometrics.

The DREaM project concluding conference took place at the British Library on 9th July 2012. Highlights included Dr Ben Goldacre as the closing keynote speaker, presentation of the LIS Practitioner Researcher Excellence Award, an open panel session, a One Minute Madness session, and a networking drinks reception. Much of the conference discussion focused on value. For example, in her opening keynote speak Professor Carol Tenopir considered techniques for measuring the value and impact of library and information services; Dr Ben Goldacre's closing address questioned the value of processes for disseminating new scientific knowledge that are based on an architecture for publication from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;  Professor Hazel Hall and Dr Louise Cooke each delivered papers that reflected on the value of the DREaM project with particular reference to meeting its aim of developing a UK network of LIS researchers; and the afternoon panel session debated the long-term support of LIS research in the UK.

## 4    The RiLIES Projects[11]

RiLIES1 was completed between February and July 2011. The follow-up project RiLIES2 was completed between February and July 2012. Professor Hazel Hall was Principal Investigator on both RiLIES projects, Peter Cruickshank was a Research Fellow on both, and Christine Irving was a Research Fellow on RiLIES2. Ella Taylor-Smith worked on RiLIES1 when a Senior Research Fellow at Edinburgh Napier University in 2011.

### 4.1    RiLIES1

RiLIES1 explored the extent to which funded librarianship research projects influence library practice in the UK. Of particular interest were the factors that increase or hinder the impact of project outcomes on practice. The project's findings[12] generated new insights related to the roles of research leadership and sponsorship, and means of involving practitioners in research projects. In particular, they highlighted a preference for face-to-face channels for the dissemination of research results that is greater than had been previously reported, and revealed for the first time in a report on this theme that social media has a key role in raising awareness of research. The final project report cited eleven detailed project recommendations to ensure that: LIS research undertaken has high level support; practitioners can be involved in LIS research; dissemination plans for LIS research take into account practitioner preferences for consuming research output; LIS research output is accessible to the target audience; and practitioners are given support to engage with research by their employers and professional bodies, drawing on good practice within the broad community of librarians and information scientists.

### 4.2    RiLIES2

The aim of RiLIES2 was to develop research resources and training materials (1) to support librarians and information scientists in their use of published library and information science (LIS) research, (2)

to help direct their own research activities, and (3) to ensure that the research that they conduct themselves has impact. The LIS community was consulted to determine its needs for such support and training materials. In response a number of resources were then developed in social media, leaflet and presentation form[13].

Over the course of RiLIES2 two main themes emerged as important. First, ownership and sustainability is a key problem with any materials created as an output of a project such as RiLIES2. In this case, CILIP and – more specifically – its Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) were generally regarded by the wider community as obvious candidates to take long-term responsibility for the materials generated from the project. A number of other possible options also emerged, including their short-term placement on the archived LIS Research Coalition web site. The question of fully-supported continued and coordinated development of materials once project funding ceases was also a concern, particularly given past experience of once-successful tools that have later died due to lack of on-going support.

The problems faced by the LIS practitioner-researcher community in the identification and use of resources to support their research work also emerged as an important theme from RiLIES2. In short, these issues are not well-understood by those who wish to help address them. This signalled the need for community consensus around such problems so that those who seek to provide librarians and information scientists with "solutions" do so in full recognition of the fundamental issues.

## 5    Promoting the value of research to LIS practitioners

Promoting the value of research to LIS practitioners featured in the work of all three projects discussed above. This can be seen across a number of the projects outputs, from the press release[14] that announced the LIS Research Coalition launch on 7th September 2009 to links in the final blog post on the Coalition's web site on 31st July 2012. A major challenge, however, has been to extend the reach of this message, particularly beyond core communities of research-active academic and healthcare librarians. While the feedback on the work of the Coalition and its associated projects - and particularly that on the five DREaM project events – has been extremely enthusiastic, it is not clear that the wider population of UK LIS practitioners has yet been exposed to the work of the three projects and their main message related to the value of research to services provision.

A sense of "preaching to the converted" was evident, for example, in the results of the Coalition review[15] conducted by independent consultants Sandra Ward of Beaworthy Consulting and Ian Wooler of IDW Ltd in spring 2011. This finding prompted a number of actions for the final year of the Coalition. These included raising the Coalition's profile, and what it stood for, through the regular production of Coalition newsletters[16]. These were archived on the Coalition web site, and alerts to the production of each issue disseminated to LIS professionals via JISC e-mail lists, Twitter and key Coalition contacts. The impact of this initiative is evident in web statistics from the Coalition web site. Here the newsletters page is noted as the third most accessed page in 2012 (after the home and DREaM concluding conference pages).

Despite such initiatives to encourage greater interest amongst LIS practitioners in discovering the value of research, as well as considerable marketing effort across a range of platforms, the participation levels of the wider population in the project work discussed in this paper was not overwhelming. For example, it was possible to grant a place to everyone who applied for the DREaM project workshops, and many more people could have been accommodated at the two DREaM

conferences had they wished to attend. Equally the RiLIES2 project team was disappointed with the low response rate to a poll conducted in April 2012, and the free RiLIES2 briefing workshop[17] in July 2012 (designed as a dissemination event for the project) was not oversubscribed. If these levels of participation are considered as "voting with their feet", then it would appear that the LIS practitioner community at large does not exhibit a high level of interest in participating at events where the value of research is openly debated. This conclusion should, however, be seen in the light of the practical restrictions that LIS practitioners face in leaving their service desks to attend external events. Added to this is that the growing use of online resources created by the Coalition between 2009-2012, and extensive event amplification of the Coalition Conference in 2010 and the five DREaM events, made it possible for practitioners to engage remotely. If this can be classed as "voting with their keystrokes", then efforts at promoting the value of research to LIS practitioners clearly reached beyond those who could be identified simply from attendance at events.

This question of the value of linking research and practice, and how this might be achieved, was further explored in an exercise[18] undertaken by the DREaM project cadre at the final workshop in April 2012. The first part required participants to work in six groups to consider a series of questions. Half the groups comprised practitioners, and the other half researchers (research staff, academics, and PhD students).  In the second part of the exercise each practitioner group was paired up with a researcher group to make recommendations that would help strengthen the links between research and practice. The recommendations[19] focused on creating close working relationships between researchers and practitioners (for example encouraging collaborative grant proposal writing, facilitating the joint ownership of projects, ensuring that project scope is relevant to stakeholder interests), and effective dissemination of project output, particularly in terms of its timeliness and the channels adopted. These recommendations are broadly similar to those of the RiLIES1 project report[20].

If further work should promote the value of research to practitioners, there is the question of where the responsibility now lies for this. Had further funding been available, then the extension of the projects discussed in this article would have focused on this issue. It would now appear that of the possible candidates for the role – including the former Coalition partners, publishers, the universities that offer LIS courses, and professional associations - the most obvious candidate to undertake this role is CILIP as the main UK professional body for librarians, and – in particular - its special interest group dedicated to research, LIRG. LIRG's published aims[21] match neatly with the goal of promoting the value of research to practitioners, as do the activities that it offers to its membership. For example, LIRG runs workshops on topics such as how to get started in research or evaluation activities, how to write research proposals, and how to write for publication, and provides a number of small research awards designed to encourage practitioners to engage in research. LIRG is also working with CILIP on the research skills strand of CILIP's Professional Knowledge and Skills Base, drawing on the outcomes of the projects discussed in this article, and LIRG's own projects and other activities. The expectation is that the work on the Professional Knowledge and Skills Base will give LIRG and the LIS research community a stronger platform and mandate to provide events and resources to help LIS practitioners (and academics) develop and maintain their research skills and access to disseminated information about research projects as part of their continuing professional development. A major drawback of LIRG responsibility for continuing this work, however, is its reliance on volunteer committee members. This question is elaborated below with reference to the "working solution" proposed by the Coalition member bodies in July 2012.


## 6    The wealth of LIS research resources available

The three projects discussed here have developed a wealth of resources to support those interested in LIS research. For example, the Links page on the Coalition web site points to a large number of

navigational tools[22] to include: substantive LIS research resources such as databases, link directories and journal or article-based repositories; other guides that are relevant to LIS researchers in general, and to researchers in specific sectors (for example on the Research Excellence Framework[23]); research centres and networks; research funding sources; and LIS events listing services. This content fed into the development of training, good practice, and community support materials on themes such as how to access relevant resources[24], and how to increase research impact[25] as part of the RiLIES2 project. Much of the value of this work derives from the identification and bringing together of scattered resources, and then raising the awareness of the materials amongst the wider community. The long-term value of these resources is evident in their continued use beyond the lifetime of the projects themselves. At the time of writing (November 2012) the average daily hit-rate to the Coalition web site is just under the daily average of 2011, and this is without any active promotion of the resources it offers.

As well as exploiting existing provision, the DREaM project created a new set of training materials to support LIS researchers, most significantly through the methods classes in the workshops. Here twelve distinct research topics were covered[26]. The DREaM workshop cadre members have reported how this programme has already had an impact on their work[27]. As well as accessing these new resources and sharing them with colleagues, there is evidence that engagement in the workshops has influenced choices in research design; increased knowledge and (research) confidence; provided cadre members with an ability to demonstrate research knowledge in the workplace. While evidence of DREaM's impact to date is largely tied to an increase in knowledge and capabilities of the workshop cadre, it is anticipated that the widened network and research relationships will generate a greater long-term return on the investment in the project. This will derive from the relationships between the cadre members themselves, as well as with their own contacts as they spread their learning in the wider community. Thus the relationships of those involved in DREaM are resources in their own right.

## 7 Building on the work of 2009-2012

The projects discussed here can be regarded as generally successful in meeting their broad aims:

- The LIS Research Coalition brought together information about LIS research opportunities and results; encouraged dialogue between research funders; promoted LIS practitioner research and the translation of research outcomes into practice; articulated a strategic approach to LIS research; and promoted the development of research capacity in LIS.
- DREaM developed a network of UK LIS researchers.
- RiLIES1 identified the main factors that increase or hinder the impact of research findings on those who deliver library and information services.
- RiLIES2 developed research resources and training materials (1) to support librarians and information scientists in their use of published library and information science (LIS) research, (2) to help direct their own research activities, and (3) to ensure that the research that they conduct themselves has impact.

Of course, the degree of success against each of the projects' aims differs, and success at this stage should ideally translate into impact in the future. For example, the social network analysis[28] of the DREaM workshop cadre reported on at the DREaM concluding conference illustrated the successful development of a network of UK LIS researchers. The extent to which this core network encourages the members of the wider practitioner community to share their interests in LIS research in the future will be what determines DREaM's long-term value and impact. Equally the materials produced

for RiLIES2 have limited value per se because it is their exploitation in the future that is of greater importance, and while RiLIES2 clarified the support and training needs of the LIS researcher and researcher-practitioner community, its scope focused on meeting just a subset of these needs.

Much of the debate at the final DREaM event considered the future coordination of activities to support LIS research in the UK. A key question was whether DREaM, its sister RILIES projects, alongside the work of the LIS Research Coalition partners, had built a solid enough foundation for the future. The conference panel session[29] members discussed these themes, with contributions from the audience. Whilst a 45-minute slot was clearly not long enough to discuss such questions in detail, some key issues emerged. These included the need for:

- the success of the DREaM project to date to extend to a greater population and include more involvement of those from sectors under-represented at the concluding conference – notably public librarians, but also those working in specialist information units in the corporate sector;
- professional bodies to assess their role in promoting research, for example in embedding research training into professional skills sets and serving as a hub for research activities in the domain;
- further face-to-face meetings between researchers and practitioners to strengthen relationships and narrow the gaps between different LIS communities.

Those debating these issues demonstrated a clear appetite for work to support LIS research to continue. This echoed feedback[30] from the DREaM workshop cadre gathered three months earlier at the last of the workshops, and anticipated comments to the same effect in the DREaM concluding conference feedback[31]. A key question is how the UK LIS community organises itself in the future to drive the LIS research agenda forward.

The LIS Research Coalition partners' response was articulated by Dr Michael Jubb as Chair of the Board of Directors at the end of July 2012. In a blog post entitled "Building on three years of achievement: the next steps for the UK LIS Research Coalition community[32]" Jubb explained how the British Library would take over the curation of the online resources that had been developed over the course of the previous three years. He also made an appeal to the community as a whole to "make sure that what the Coalition has created continues as an active community for the future". The identification of a permanent home for the resources with staff time allocated to their care is important. An alternative might have been to invite volunteers to give time and expertise to maintain the resources. However, when resources rely on such volunteer labour they are often vulnerable to changes in the circumstances of the individuals involved. In recent years, for example, once-valuable LIRG resources have disappeared when key individuals have resigned their committee roles. This is not to say that volunteer labour is not welcomed. Indeed one of the most positive outcomes of the work of the past three years has been LIRG's emergence as a key player in the future of LIS research in the UK, and without the individual efforts of all those who have engaged in the three projects discussed in this article it would not be possible to highlight the success to date of the three projects in maximising the relevance and impact of LIS research to practitioners

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[1] See http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/contributors-to-dream-project-events/
[2] See http://lisresearch.org/membership/
[3] LIS Research Coalition - http://lisresearch.org/

[4] Seethe LIS Research Coalition publications page at http://lisresearch.org/publications-and-presentations/
[5] Details of the winners are given at http://lisresearch.org/news/media-releases/#clinical

[6] DREaM project - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/

[7] DREaM launch conference - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-1-launch-conference-tuesday-19-july-2011/, DREaM concluding conference - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-5-conference-monday-9-july-2012/

[8] DREaM workshops - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-workshops/

[9] DREaM project launch conference *Out of the comfort zone* - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-1-launch-conference-tuesday-19-july-2011/

[10] DREaM workshop "cadre" - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-workshops/dream-workshop-cadre/

[11] Research in Librarianship – Impact Evaluation Study - http://lisresearch.org/rilies-project/

[12] The RiLIES1 report can be found at http://lisresearchcoalition.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rilies1_report.pdf

[13] These were launched at a CILIP LIRG sponsored event *Research into practice: LIS research resources briefing* held in London on 10th July 2012. This is reviewed at http://lisresearch.org/2012/07/17/lis-research-resources-briefing-workshop-evaluation/

[14] Press release to launch the LIS Research Coalition - http://lisresearch.org/news/media-releases/#Coalition_launch

[15] Coalition review - http://lisresearch.org/2011/08/06/coalition-review-2011-and-priorities-for-201112/

[16] Coalition newsletters - http://lisresearch.org/news/coalition-newsletters/

[17] These were launched at a CILIP LIRG sponsored event *Research into practice: LIS research resources briefing* held in London on 10th July 2012. This is reviewed at http://lisresearch.org/2012/07/17/lis-research-resources-briefing-workshop-evaluation/

[18] Impact snakes and ladder exercise - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-4-workshop-wednesday-25-april-2012/dream-event-4-impact-snakes-and-ladders/

[19] Video of recommendations - http://vimeo.com/41349625

[20] Cruickshank P., Hall H., Taylor-Smith E. *Enhancing the impact of LIS Research. RiLIES project report* (2011) http://www.researchinfonet.org/libraries/rilies/ [accessed 26.7.12]

[21] See the LIRG web pages at https://sites.google.com/site/lirgweb/home/aboutus

[22] See the Links page on the Coalition web site at http://lisresearch.org/links/

[23] http://www.ref.ac.uk/

[24] See the pdf leaflet at http://lisresearchcoalition.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/leaflet-lis-resources.pdf

[25] See the Research impact page at http://lisresearch.org/research-impact/

[26] These are listed with links to relevant materials at http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-workshops/

[27] See also: Brettle, A., Hall, H., & Oppenheim, C. (2012). We have a DREaM: the Developing Research Excellence and Methods network. Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries, Limerick, Ireland, 22-25 May 2012. Sides available at http://www.slideshare.net/LISResearch/we-have-a-dream-the-developing-research-excellence-methods-network

[28] http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-5-conference-monday-9-july-2012/dream-event-5-invited-paper/

[29] "…and so the DREaM goes on: means of sustaining the UK network of LIS researchers" - http://lisresearch.org/dream-project/dream-event-5-conference-monday-9-july-2012/dream-event-5-panel-discussion/

[30] See http://lisresearch.org/2012/04/26/dream-workshop-3-lis_dream4-review-and-thanks/

[31] See http://lisresearch.org/2012/07/18/dream-concluding-conference-review-thanks-and-resources/

[32] See http://lisresearch.org/2012/07/30/building-on-three-years-of-achievement-the-next-stages-for-the-lis-research-coalition-community/