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Barbara M. Wildemuth

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[See table of contents](#)

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Evidence Summary

Libraries' Contributions to the Quality of UK University Research Environments Were Not Acknowledged in REF 2014, but Could Be Made More Visible in REF 2021

A Review of:

Walker, D. (2020). Libraries and the REF: How do librarians contribute to research excellence? *Insights*, 33(1), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.497>

Reviewed by:

Barbara M. Wildemuth
Professor Emeritus
School of Information & Library Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States of America
Email: wildemuth@unc.edu

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Abstract

Objective – To measure the extent to which libraries' contributions to United Kingdom (UK) university research excellence were referenced in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 unit-level research environment statements, and to make recommendations to libraries for increasing their visibility in the research setting.

Design – Content analysis of an existing corpus.

Setting – Evaluation of research environments conducted as part of the UK REF 2014 assessment.

Subjects – 1,891 unit-level research environment statements submitted for REF 2014.

Methods – Each unit-level research environment statement was categorized in terms of how extensively it referenced library or librarian contributions: no mention, brief mention, or substantive mention. The

frequency and percentage of each level of mention are reported overall and by disciplinary panel.

Main Results – Across all panels, only 25.8% of the statements included substantive references to the library or librarians; most of these were lists of electronic and physical collections, but they also included discussions of the research support services offered by librarians. There were disciplinary differences in the extent of the references to libraries, from 7.2% containing substantive references in a panel examining science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) units to 44.0% containing substantive references in the panel examining arts and humanities units.

Conclusion – In REF 2014, libraries and librarians were rarely discussed in unit-level research environment statements. While this lack of representation may be due to shortcomings of the library's relationship with the university's research office, librarians could use a number of approaches to becoming more visible in the REF 2021 research environment statements. Specifically, they could highlight their roles in: ensuring discoverability and accessibility of information resources to researchers; improving research practices through teaching informational and organizational skills, providing direct support to research students and staff, and providing research data management services; managing the research information systems that capture and make discoverable the university's non-article research outputs; providing support in relation to the responsible use of bibliometrics and other measures of article quality and impact; further developing article impact by training researchers to use social media to their advantage; developing open research initiatives; and assisting with the REF submission process.

Commentary

Walker's study is relatively straightforward and well conducted (Glynn, 2006). The study sample included the complete population of research environment statements submitted for REF 2014, so no inferences about the

generalizability of the results need to be made. There is some ambiguity in the research methods description: The criteria for a "mention" of a library are not provided. Also, there is no report of inter-rater reliability in the categorization, so it is assumed that Walker conducted the analysis on his own. Neither of these methodological issues is likely to cast much doubt on the overall conclusions of the study, since the categorization scheme was relatively simple and relatively objective. The results of the study are clearly presented and the examination of disciplinary differences is appropriate. The primary way in which the study might have been improved is through a more detailed qualitative examination of the substantive references to the library's role that consisted of more than a list of resources in the collection. Such an examination may have yielded data that would more strongly support Walker's recommendations.

About half of Walker's paper reports on the analysis of the research environment statements, and the other half focuses on ways that libraries and librarians can improve their visibility within their own institutions and in the REF 2021 process. These recommendations are consistent with, but provide more specificity than, previously published recommendations related to positioning academic libraries within their institutions (Boyce et al., 2019; Cox, 2018). In addition, the recommendations are useful because they are discussed at a level of detail that is directly applicable to individual institutions. Academic librarians in the UK will be able to identify specific ideas that most closely fit their own settings and work with their university research offices to incorporate those ideas in the REF 2021 research environment statements.

The publication of Walker's paper was timely, since the REF 2021 submissions were being completed as it was published. Thus, the results of the REF 2014 analysis and the recommendations that came from it could be directly applied by academic libraries in the UK. The results and recommendations would also be directly applicable in other countries that employ some form of performance-based university research funding system, as

outlined by Hicks (2012), that includes the evaluation of the research environment in addition to research outputs. Beyond the context of a national research assessment exercise, Walker's recommendations will be useful to academic librarians in their own strategic planning. For example, most academic libraries would benefit by developing and marketing research data management services; these services could be directly aligned with and linked to the university's research strategy, making the library's critical role more visible to university administrators. Acting on some of Walker's recommendations may help academic libraries deliver on the maxim that the library is the heart of the university.

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