Research support for academics: Case studies of two Vietnamese Universities

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Abstract

Academics in Vietnamese universities are under increasing pressure with regard to improved research outcomes, including publications. This article reports on the findings of a research project which focused on two universities, Vietnam National University of Social Sciences and Humanities (VNU-HCM) in Ho Chi Minh City, and Hanoi University, in order to gain a rich understanding of the current state of play, the role of libraries in providing research support, and the constraints within which the various stakeholders operate. The main findings from the interviews suggest that, although researchers recognise the importance of the libraries in

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Received 09 September 2016
Accepted 15 December 2017
This article reports on the findings of the project Information literacy for research: Vietnam. The project focused on two universities, Vietnam National University of Social Sciences and Humanities (VNU-HCM) in Ho Chi Minh City, and Hanoi University, to gain a rich understanding of the current state of play and the constraints within which the various stakeholders operate.

It aimed, within the context of Vietnamese research practice and organisational culture, to:

- provide in-depth information on researcher needs, skill levels, awareness of resources and trends in scholarly communication;
- provide more in-depth information on librarian skill levels, current and planned programs; and the problems they face in managing research resources and related infrastructure;
- identify ways of facilitating closer cooperation between researchers and library staff.

**Background**

There is a wealth of LIS literature that discusses the progressive roles of librarians in teaching information literacy and educational activities provided to students (see for example, Kay & Ahmadpour, 2015), but recently there has been an increase in studies investigating the research support services provided by libraries to academics in universities worldwide. A recent survey of faculty and academic librarians in the USA found that 84% of faculty considered library support for faculty research (as opposed to support for student research) to be ‘Essential/Very Essential’ making it the top priority for faculty – despite the fact that it was only the 6th-ranked priority for librarians. The form that such research support could take varies. Provision of access to research publications was considered a priority, with other activities
qualifications of librarians, issues related to infrastructure, facilities, resources and budget to support library activities. The following sections review issues that are relevant to this research.

One of the biggest concerns that most authors raise is the lack of institutional support and development strategies for libraries’ involvement in academic activities (Pham, 2008; Murray & Welch, 2009; Thull & Hansen, 2009; Diep, 2011; Wang, 2011; Saunders, 2012; Pham & Tanner, 2015). Diep’s (2011) doctoral study of the information literacy education at four universities in Vietnam argued that the lack of university leadership and understanding of the importance of information literacy in education resulted in a low level of interest and inadequate collaboration among key stakeholders such as heads of faculties or departments, academics and librarians. Consequently, the success of information literacy training in universities has been impeded since it has not been integrated in a systematic way within the curriculum.

Another inherent challenge to libraries’ educational and research support initiatives is the lack of collaboration between librarians and academics. Pham and Tanner (2014) found that this relationship constraint was caused by various factors related to social structures, cultural differences, organisational structures, and personal characteristics. From a socio-cultural perspective, the traditional view of librarianship and long-lasting stereotypes about librarians have influenced the public perceptions of their role in academia (Walter, 2008; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009; Bewick & Corrall, 2010; Bury, 2011; Huynh, Huynh, & Hoang, 2011; Nguyen, 2011; Saunders, 2012). Such inadequate public appreciation creates a lack of awareness of the changing roles of librarians today, thus causing the low appreciation of their capacity in handling intellectual content. In addition, academic and librarian groups expressed certain differences in
that libraries are unable to afford. Robinson (2006) and Hossain (2015) called for an increase in the Vietnamese government's funding for the development of libraries, particularly for acquiring sources of academic materials.

There have been other attempts to improve access to resources. For example, INASP (International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications) an Oxford-based NGO, through PERII (Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information) and its successor SRKS (Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems), is engaged in high-level projects to create an enabling environment for research communication. Such projects focus on a combination of infrastructure development at the national level, e.g. consortia-based access to e-journals. They aim to bring developing world researchers into a mainstream publishing paradigm at a time when the nature of research and IL for research is dramatically shifting (PERII, 2013). INASP has organised workshops in developing countries, including Vietnam, named 'Working together to support research' (INASP, 2011). However, the key challenges of how to transform such knowledge into library practice in Vietnamese contexts with specific social, educational, technological and cultural characteristics remain.

An understanding of the role of traditional journals and access to them remain fundamental to scholarly communication, and is indeed a focus of official policy. However, contemporary researchers work within an increasingly complex information framework, which includes new means of communicating and sharing research results, moves to open access, new measures of research impact, new forms of research output including datasets, and the growth of digital repositories. Given the ongoing transformation of scholarly communication, IL training
available; inadequate research literacy skills on the part of researchers and librarians; and poor levels of faculty-library collaboration.

Thus, elucidating information concerning skills levels of librarians and identifying the challenges faced in providing research support services to academics is an urgent need. This research project is an attempt to provide a picture of the current situation in the context of two Vietnamese universities, and to identify the gaps between library services and researchers' needs. Its findings should be useful for university offices and libraries when developing strategies to improve research skills for both librarians and researchers, and in increasing the relevance of library research support services.

Methodology

The research was a qualitative study based on interviews with academics, librarians and management staff at two universities: Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM), and Hanoi University (Vietnam). The two universities are among the top multidisciplinary universities in Vietnam.

VNU-HCM is the largest higher education institution in Vietnam with more than 51,000 students. It consists of six member universities, a number of schools, centres and a research institute. The university's mission is to become Vietnam's premier institution, to provide human resources with high quality professional knowledge and skills, to promote research and technology transfer and application, and to create important research outcomes. The universities are administered, managed and supervised based on the higher education system model with high
been working in different collaborative teaching and research initiatives. The university library has built strong partnerships with some faculties through co-teaching information literacy education programs to all full-time students and by running skills development workshops for staff to enhance their digital literacy skills. Although there have been significant changes in the library structure in recent years, aimed at improving library performance and collaboration with all faculties of the university, the library has faced challenges related to the lack of budget for purchasing course materials and electronic resources to support teaching and research activities. The limited availability of resource materials has had a negative impact on the role of the library in supporting faculties, and consequently limited opportunities for improved collaboration.

Interviews with librarians and academic staff at VNU-HCM and Hanoi University were conducted between October and December 2015. Those interviewed fell into three categories: librarians, lecturers and senior university staff. Each was asked a slightly different set of questions focusing on the type of support that is currently provided for researchers and the ways in which the libraries might be able to support research.

Altogether, 37 people were interviewed, including:

- VNU-HCM: 12 academics from 7 faculties, 3 university library managers from the three member universities and 1 senior member of the University staff.
- Hanoi University: 9 academics from 4 faculties, 4 librarians and 1 senior member of the University staff.

Two sets of questions were developed to act as the basis for the interviews (see Appendix), with the interviews being transcribed and translated for further analysis.
prefer to acquire such skills by teaching themselves, when studying overseas, or through sharing ideas with their colleagues.

Similar results were reported at Hanoi University, where a wide range of courses are offered either by the university or the library. These include sessions on SPSS, questionnaire design, Endnote, and quantitative data analysis. Zopim and a Facebook page, Hanulib, are both used to allow people who have participated in training to provide feedback on the training or to ask questions relating to the training after a course has finished. Staff at Hanoi University Library have also identified a need for NVivo classes and would like to be able to offer sessions in copyright, email, use of online resources, the backing up online materials, and using online survey tools such as Google Forms and Survey Monkey. Although courses are based on need and they are organised on an ad hoc basis with no systematic attempt to reach all types of users, training sessions on how to use Endnote and SPSS gained high appreciation from academics and opened new opportunities for collaboration. As a result, in recent years, there have been a number of collaborative research projects between librarians and academics. For example, library staff collaborated with academics from the IT faculty to develop library software for managing research outputs and digitised collections for the whole university. The outcome of this project was an institutional repository managing and disseminating materials in digital forms such as research projects, theses, or publications. Another research project involved library staff and two academics from the English faculty in the outcomes of information literacy programs for first year students. This research aimed to assess the quality of the current library training programs and identified gaps between students' skills and information needs and the current
In general, however, it appears that researchers underestimate the library's information resources, services, staff research skills and knowledge, and library activities, with many commenting that the library services are at too basic a level, being more suited for students. One researcher questioned the role of the library in providing research support:

*Providing research skills’ courses does not seem to be a part of the library mandate.*

Researchers tend to rely on the other sources to find information and gaining or improving their research skills. However, academics who have studied abroad were found to have a different understanding of the role of the library and its staff, acknowledging that they could usefully get involved in a wider range of activities if they had the resources.

*Library/academic liaison strategies*

The results were similar at both universities. Some libraries assigned or are planning to assign staff to liaise with specific faculties; however, they seem to deal mostly with the selection of resources for teaching and, to a lesser extent, research.

There are difficulties in making staff and students aware of library capabilities. In part this relates to some of the teaching methods used, particularly where there is no emphasis on finding additional resources. At Hanoi University, more postgraduate students than academics approach librarians for research support services. Some suggested that librarians need a better strategy for promoting what they can do, and that lecturers do not see the role of the library as being to support them. There needs to be support and encouragement at the university level for better collaboration.
libraries do not have enough financial support to subscribe to databases, or they have to cancel the subscriptions, following which researchers or lecturers complain that they do not have quality information resources for reference and doing research. On the other hand, there is too little usage of the databases that have been subscribed to, and so there is insufficient justification to persuade the university management to commit the necessary funds. For example, Hanoi University had a subscription to Proquest, but had to discontinue the service. The library now uses its funds to subscribe to more journals including science journals in English and other languages, as requested by faculties. However, there are still few academics using these resources.

Researchers prefer to search for scholarly articles on the Internet (Google Scholar was mentioned frequently), and then to ask overseas friends and colleagues for help in obtaining articles they want to access, or sometimes the library, particularly with regard to open access sources.

As one researcher commented:

*I use the databases of the Central Library, National University to find materials for my researches. They are able to provide good amount of material in Vietnamese as well in foreign language. In cases where I need more materials that the current library materials are not enough, I could ask my colleague from overseas to help. They would find and provide them to me. This is also very important channel for me.*
The researchers interviewed were experienced researchers, who stated that they had publishing strategies in place and that they did not need library assistance. While the effectiveness of those strategies were not queried, the question remains as to whether the library could usefully assist new researchers in developing their strategies.

When asked how to identify a good journal in their area of specialisation, one researcher said that they looked for a journal with an ISSN as a measure of quality. Another said that the best strategy is to select an English language journal indexed by ISI or SCI (for IT), then international conferences and reputable workshops.

There was also strong interest in publishing in Open Access journals, but a number of problems were mentioned, including there being a limited number in each field, the low profile or quality of many of these journals, the fact that in some journals the author has to pay fees, and that some publishers abuse the process.

**Research Data Archives**

Both VNU-HCM and Hanoi University have systems in place to manage databases of research outputs at the respective universities; however, while VNU-HCM can handle full text material, at Hanoi University access to the full text is not yet available.

There are currently no systems at the institutional level at either university for the management of research data. VNU-HCM has a strategy to establish a shared data centre which will apply informatics management technology to manage data and help managers making decisions. The Science- Technology Division has a software to manage research data and output, but in terms of bibliographic information.
offered by the libraries, and library staff skills and knowledge. In general they look elsewhere for support and resources.

In addition to the need to address the issues described above, the research also identified a number of specific suggestions for the types of research activities that would prove useful.

Some of the specific needs mentioned were:

- Providing help with developing research topics, undertaking needs assessments or market research.
- Joining or establishing research teams or groups.
- Seeking grants or funding.
- Improving skills in searching and accessing research databases.
- Selecting journals or publishers for publishing research outputs.
- Gaining knowledge about publishing practices.
- Providing help with English for publishing research on international journals or publications.
- Identifying other ways of sharing research.
- Providing access to improved storage facilities.
- Improving research standards, including citation and reference standards, and publications’ standards.

Not all of these tasks can or should be provided by the library. Many are more suited to centralised provision through the Universities and Research and Project management offices, for example, organising workshops or training on academic writing in English, and providing training in research methods, design and management.

Activities suitable for libraries are those that require a detailed knowledge of how the scholarly record is organised – including how to contribute to it and to access it - rather than advanced discipline-specific knowledge. From that perspective, suitable activities for libraries include:

Tom Denison, Hue Thi Pham, Thoa Ninh Thi Kim
Bury, S. (2011). Faculty attitudes, perceptions and experiences of information literacy: A study across multiple disciplines at York University, Canada. *Journal of Information Literacy, 5*(1), 45-64.


• How do you think about the library role in supporting researchers in terms of providing information resources, research and information skills?
• What are difficulties in conducting research in Vietnam?
• Can you tell me about research requirements with lecturers/ researchers at your university/ and from the Ministry of Education and Training?
• How does the university support researchers/ lecturers to conduct research and publish their works, and improve their research skills?
• What are difficulties in conducting research in Vietnam?
• How do you think about the library role in supporting researchers in terms of providing information resources, research and information skills?
• How does the university support the library to obtain quality resources and improve its facilities and equipment to support research development as well as to manage research data?
• What are your university strategies/ policies to manage and share research data?

Questions for librarians / library managers

• Can you please tell me about the library policies/ strategies to support university research development programs and researchers?
• What are resources, programs and services the library has developed to support research development programs/ researchers?
• Does the library (do library staff) collaborate with researchers effectively to support research development? And how?
• What are difficulties in building collaborative relationships between library staff and researchers/ liaise with researchers?
• Which are factors which influence the library/ library staff to support and collaborate with researchers?