Supporting researchers – back to the future!

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Introduction. Traditionally, the academic librarian has served as an information specialist working in close professional contact with researchers to provide support in the process of scientific investigation. When the Internet entered the academic world, the belief emerged that researchers could handle information on their own. Thus, the value of personal professional interaction between the academic librarian and the researcher diminished and was no longer prioritized in the library organization. The support provided by academic librarians shifted to represent a more service-oriented relationship. Concomitantly, the researchers regarded lack of time as the predominant factor interfering with their ability to improve their information retrieval skills in order to stay updated in their field. By looking back on the value of having a professional role as information specialists interacting closely with researchers, we can recreate, develop, and expand the support we offer in the future.

Background. The Lund University Libraries network completed a project in 2013. The aim of that work was to identify areas that needed to be strengthened and developed to support researchers. We analyzed the results related to the Faculty of Medicine, focusing specifically on the local setting and the researchers’ need for support within the health sciences and medicine which led to initiation of the present in-depth study.

Aim. The aim of our current project is to gain a better understanding of the researchers’ needs of tailored support in their scientific process. Further, we want to identify what expertise and knowledge are needed in the organization in order to provide and develop professional support. The study also aims at an understanding of how the organization should carry out continued professional development and strategic planning for future recruitments.

Method. We are conducting individual semi-structured interviews with selected researchers working in the areas of health sciences and medicine.

Preliminary results. The researchers at the Faculty of Medicine are heterogeneous with respect to their publishing practices, information retrieval behavior, use of scientific methods, and approaches for evaluating research. Our results thus far show that there is uncertainty among the researchers with regard to the individual skills of the librarians and the concrete ways in which the library can provide support. A continued professional development program for the librarians is a necessity.