

Shaking it up: a research project to determine why our information skills training sessions are so popular

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Abstract

The Bodleian Health Care Libraries (BHCL) deliver ten different workshops as part of the wider University of Oxford (UK) Bodleian Libraries information skills training programme. Before the Bodleian Libraries launch an information literacy skills framework for the University in 2025, we set out to discover why our training sessions are popular with postgraduate students. We used two qualitative data collection methods: interviews, and focus groups. The data indicated a strong need for training in literature searching, evidence synthesis, critical appraisal, science communication (translating research for a non-specialist audience), and writing skills. Our training sessions fill some of those needs, and while the sessions are popular for that reason, we must promote them more widely.

Key words: libraries, medical; education, medical, continuing; qualitative research; focus groups.

Background

The Bodleian Health Care Libraries (BHCL) provide the medical library services for the Medical Sciences Division (MSD) at the University of Oxford and for the local NHS hospital Trust in Oxford, in the United Kingdom (UK). Eight librarians from the BHCL Outreach Team offer ten different workshops as part of the wider information skills ("iSkills") training programme for the Bodleian Libraries, which is the name for the libraries which serve the University of Oxford, United Kingdom (UK) (1). The BHCL iSkills for Medicine sessions are attended by postgraduate students, post-doctoral researchers, University staff, and hospital staff. We deliver three or four iSkills sessions per week during the three eight-week University terms each year, one or two per week during the vacations, and most classes are held online via MS Teams. As of 2024-5, we deliver both an introductory workshop about literature searching, and an advanced search skills class; we hold an introductory workshop about systematic reviews and other evidence reviews, along with a classroom-based Advanced Searching Clinic for reviews; there are introductory workshops about three different reference

management programmes (EndNote, Zotero, and Refworks); we have an Introduction to Science Communication lecture; and we have an online Introduction to Designing a Conference poster class, as well as an in-person Poster Clinic. The resources for these sessions are all available online (2).

The overall iSkills programme has seen the number of participants almost double from 1720 in 2021-2, and 1777 in 2022-3, to 3077 in total in 2023-4, of which over a third (1097) were staff and students from MSD. This increase coincides with a new approach to promotion, with targeted emails clustering workshops together under a theme, such as data, or literature searching, in addition to a weekly email listing all workshops coming up the following week. It also coincides with the expansion of our iSkills programme in 2023-4 to include the advanced search skills workshop, in addition to the Science Communication and Posters sessions.

It is significant that over a third of university-wide iSkills participants in 2023-4 were from medicine and health care, demonstrating that sessions are popular with our library users. The quantitative data for August

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to December 2024 reinforces this, as the BHCL team delivered 42 sessions to between 1 and 47 attendees (47 for Systematic Reviews: getting started session in October 2024). There were 579 attendees in total, and the average number of attendees was 14. We also receive positive qualitative feedback from participants, such as two comments about a Literature Searching: getting started session in November 2024 was “very helpful”, and “I loved this workshop”. Could we improve the programme? Could we shake it up by conducting qualitative research by talking to postgraduate students to find out more their information and training needs?

Funding was available in 2024 for an overall review of the iSkills programme, which will inform the launch of an information literacy skills framework produced by our colleagues from the Bodleian Libraries for the University in September 2025. The BHCL team were allocated a budget from this funding to purchase pizza and provide vouchers to recruit subjects for qualitative research.

Our research aims were to find out how well the existing BHCL iSkills training provision met service users' needs, whether we were providing sessions in the right locations, and how best to promote the sessions.

Method

We used two qualitative data collection methods. Two colleagues held interviews with two PhD students in June 2024, and two focus groups were held with a total of 15 PhD students in November 2024.

Interviews

The aim was to recruit PhD students to ask them questions from a structured interview schedule over one hour about their research, the challenges they experience when carrying out research, how they work with data, how they use the library services, what research training they have received, and to ask about future directions for their research.

Focus Groups

We aimed to recruit 16 MSD graduate students. To encourage attendance, each student who participated was offered a gift voucher for £25. As further enticement, the focus groups were given a pizza lunch. We endeavoured to recruit participants to ensure a cross-section

of students from different departments. Every student consented to participate in the focus groups.

Each session lasted for one hour, beginning with a five minute introduction about the research project, before a five minute exercise in which participants placed stickers on a sheet of paper to indicate which iSkills for Medicine sessions they had already attended and which sessions they would be interested in (including the current options and ideas from competitor medical libraries in the UK, which include critical appraisal for qualitative and quantitative research, grey literature searching, dark web searching, and writing skills). 45 minutes were spent asking unstructured questions about their responses to the stickers exercise, leading into a question about the best training session that they had ever attended, what training had been useful for them, the optimal times in the day for training, the best location or method of delivery, and how they find out about training (promotion methods). The remaining time was spent wrapping up the session and organising email addresses for the gift vouchers. Three members of library staff attended each session, with one to lead, and two to take notes.

Results

Where do postgraduate students look for support with information literacy skills?

The participants from the interviews and the focus groups reported that they ask their supervisors and other students or researchers in their group, laboratory, or department for help in the first instance, including help with literature searching, often getting suggestions for further training from these local contacts. None come first to the library for help.

Do our sessions meet the information needs of postgraduate students from the Medical Sciences Division?

Table 1 has the results from the stickers exercise from the two focus groups about useful training sessions offered by libraries, with participants indicating whether they had already attended the session or whether they would like to attend a session about that topic. Ten of the 15 focus group participants indicated that they would like to attend the Advanced Searching Clinic for Systematic Reviews, Scoping Reviews and Evidence Syntheses, nine would like to attend the Introduction to Science Communication class, eight

Training	Have attended	Would like to attend
Advanced Searching Clinic for Systematic Reviews, Scoping Reviews and Evidence Syntheses		10
Critical appraisal for qualitative and quantitative research		7
Grey literature searching		5
Introduction to Designing a Conference Poster	1	4
Introduction to EndNote (Reference Management Software)	3	4
Introduction to RefWorks (Reference Management Software)		
Introduction to science communication: Translating your research for a non-specialist audience		9
Introduction to Zotero (Reference Management Software)	2	4
Literature Searching – Getting Started	2	5
Conference Poster Clinic		5
Searching Systematically		8
Searching the dark web		5
Systematic Reviews, Scoping Reviews and Evidence Syntheses - Getting Started	2	8
Writing skills workshop		7

Table 1. *Useful training sessions.*

wanted to attend the introductory session about Systematic Reviews, eight wanted to attend the Searching Systematically session, and seven each indicated an interest in Critical Appraisal, and in Writing Skills.

The discussion after the exercise revealed that while most participants want training about literature searching, none had sought it out. The students taught themselves, were taught by peers, or they relied on YouTube videos. Bioinformatics was also mentioned as a training need, along with critical appraisal, writing skills and communicating to different audiences, coding and statistics, and “guidance on the use/misuse of AI”. Participants wanted to know how to organise their information, which was described as “keeping track of notes made while reading papers”. The data from the focus groups indicated a strong need for training in literature

searching, evidence synthesis, critical appraisal, science communication (translating research for a non-specialist audience), and writing skills.

Are the training sessions provided in the right locations?

This was a question about both the timing of sessions, and location in the sense of online or in-person. The students interviewed and who participated in the focus groups all reported that the beginning or end of the day, or lunch time, were the best times of the day to offer training sessions, working around lab experiments and other meetings.

The focus group participants recommended interactive workshops online or in person, either on a 1-1 or small group basis, with practical examples to allow theory to be applied to research questions immediately (“apply the learning in the moment”). One participant com-

mented, “I don’t like lectures, powerpoints, which last 1-2 hours”. Participants liked to be asked at the start of a session why they were attending it, about what they needed to know from the session, and they liked to be asked at the end if their questions had been answered (“You feel heard if your question is answered”). E-learning or YouTube videos (asynchronous training) were also mentioned by both groups. Short videos are popular, especially if accompanied by exercises or an interactive task.

Promotion methods

The two interviewees mentioned finding it difficult to find out what training is available. They receive large numbers of emails with lists of training and this can be overwhelming. One commented that they had missed out on useful training in the past because of only seeing it in an email after it had taken place. Ideally, they would like a menu of all training available across the University and to be able to browse by what they were looking for.

The focus group participants recommended that we promote training sessions via brief emails, and they requested a personalised email in the first year of a PhD to indicate the courses that teach the skills they need to learn. They also suggested a website be created with a timetable to make it easy to quickly see which sessions are being held and which are available to attend.

Discussion and conclusion

The interviews and focus groups contributed constructive ideas that the BHCL team can use to improve the promotion methods for our existing training programme, especially to publicise our sessions about literature searching skills, evidence synthesis, and science communications.

We have the following actions for our team for 2025-6 to build on the results from this qualitative research:

1. construct a YouTube playlist with recommended videos about literature searching topics;
2. work towards replacing the playlist with short videos that we produce with content from our iSkills sessions, especially about literature searching, with exercises and interactive quizzes;
3. promote our brief guide about journal clubs (critical appraisal skills);

4. promote our literature searching sessions directly to PhD students via short emails sent to all departments, graduate studies coordinators, and lab managers;
5. review the timings for our iSkills sessions to hold them first thing (9am), last thing (3.30 or 4pm), or at lunchtime (12-2pm).

We recommend that other skills training centres in the University meet students’ needs by organising workshops about coding, statistics, and writing for publication, as well as journal clubs for critical appraisal skills. Our sessions can be mapped onto the information literacy skills framework for the Bodleian Libraries when it is launched later in 2025, which will then be used to signpost the sessions which meet the needs of students at different stages of Masters and PhD programmes.

A limitation of this research is that few of the students from the two focus groups and the two interviews had attended our iSkills training sessions, and they had limited awareness about the programme. We could not address whether participants preferred in person or online sessions with this research, as they wanted both. As the focus groups were held in the same locations that we use to deliver training, we could not ascertain what they thought about the locations in our libraries which are available for in person training. A limitation overall for library staff has been that we could not provide training in some high-security University buildings in the past. We intend to overcome this by recruiting champions from these departments to organise access for library staff for bespoke sessions.

We conclude that our sessions are popular because they meet the information and training needs of our postgraduate students and staff members from the MSD and the local hospital Trust. We will continue to monitor the number of attendees at each session. The recommendation from our research for EAHIL members is to “shake it up” by conducting qualitative research, allowing for a budget for gift vouchers, and being generous with food and beverages to encourage the recruitment of participants.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to Louise Clarke and Donald Mackay for initiating this project. We also

extend thanks to Kat Steiner for her interview notes, and to Owen Coxall, Susan Read, and Melanie Smith for their assistance with the focus groups. The lead author of this paper received the award for best oral presentation overall at the EAHIL 2025 Workshop, “Imagine”, Łódź, Poland 11-13 June 2025.

*Submitted on invitation.
Accepted on 12 September 2025.*

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