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Trendspotting - looking to the future in a post-pandemic academic library environment.

In March 2020, the Covid-19 global pandemic meant that libraries had to respond and react quickly in order to adapt services as best they could. It is generally accepted that academic libraries, for the most part, were able to do this very effectively due to having already positioned themselves within a fully functioning digital environment (Falt & Das, 2020; Appleton, 2021; Bullington et al., 2021). Not wishing to speak too soon, but at my university campus, it feels as if we are starting to return to some sort of normality with Covid-19 restrictions being gradually lifted in the United Kingdom and indeed in other parts of the world. This has allowed me to start thinking about what this now means for the future of academic libraries. There has been plenty written about the post pandemic higher education environment and the 'new-normal' for academic libraries, and how some of the changes forced upon academic libraries during the pandemic (e.g. digital-first policies, online teaching, hybrid information environments, etc.) may actually be beneficial in the longer term, as well as being responses to the global Covid-19 outbreak (Appleton, 2020; Blake, 2020; Carlson, 2021; Cox, 2020). The 2021 special issue of *New Review of Academic Librarianship* focused on the acceleration of the digital shift in academic libraries, as a significant outcome from some of the changes that academic libraries had to make. Examples from that particular issue include case studies on the impact of the digital shift on library learning and instruction (Avon et al., 2021), on digital content acquisition (Brine & Knight, 2021) and on student engagement (Matizirofa et al., 2021).

It is likely that some of the experiences we are having now will shape how academic libraries continue to develop in a post-pandemic world, and it would be interesting to see whether there are common trends emerging across geographic boundaries, as we move into a new era for academic libraries. Certainly, before the pandemic academic libraries and their professional associations used environmental scanning techniques in order to spot trends across the sector, which in turn helped to inform strategy and development at local, national and international levels. The last set of top ten trends identified by the Association of College and Research Libraries Research Planning and Review Committee was published early in 2020, just before any Covid restrictions and library closures were enforced (ACRL, 2020). The ACRL top ten trends tend to be used as a barometer for many academic libraries with regard to highlighting the big issues of the day which need to be strategically addressed. SCONUL, in the United Kingdom also periodically commissions research into national academic library issues (for example: Baker & Alden, 2017; Pinfield, Cox & Rutter, 2017) in order to highlight trends and to aid strategic development. The latest example from SCONUL

is a report published in 2021 about trends in the physical usage of academic libraries, and whilst this report has been published as part of their 'Libraries after Lockdown' work, the research was largely carried out before the pandemic (Cox & Benson-Marshall, 2021).

Ten years of trends

However, I thought it would be interesting to begin to consider if the trends being reported during 2020 and 2021 are still relevant and significant, now that we are entering a post-pandemic higher education environment. Similarly, I thought it would be useful to see how far libraries have come during the longer term up to the period prior to the pandemic, through comparing the latest trends with trends from ten years ago. For example, if we look at the ACRL top ten trends from 2012 we find that globalisation of higher education and the increase in online learning environments and experiences are key issues affecting academic libraries (ACRL, 2012). Ten years later, working in a hybrid world (both physical and digital) is also still a key strategic area in SCONUL's 2019 – 2022 strategic plan (SCONUL, 2019). The pandemic has heightened the importance and significance of being able to operate in a hybrid manner and how libraries deliver services in online learning environments. The ability to operate and work and deliver library services in a hybrid environment has been cemented as a result of the pandemic, and we can expect to see further developments and trends in this area in the post-pandemic era. Indeed, the very latest identified trends to come from SCONUL suggest that the value of physical library space is still very important, even beyond the digital shift, and that it is the combination of digital and physical libraries which will shape the future (Cox & Benson-Marshall, 2021).

Content and scholarly communications

Emerging patron driven acquisition models for e-book purchasing and their associated licensing and costing models were noted as a trend to be aware of in the 2012 ACRL trends (ACRL, 2020). Similarly the cost of content in general, particularly e-books (along with e-licensing costs) featured strongly in the 2012-15 SCONUL strategy (SCONUL, 2012), and still remains a challenge, along with the impact that institutional budget constraints have on academic libraries and their capacity to procure digital content. Brine and Knight (2021) actually discuss the continued increasing cost of digital content, and the impact that the pandemic has had on this issue. SCONUL continue to lobby in this area and recently published a position paper calling for a series of actions for libraries and publishers to work together to ensure affordable and sustainable models for providing students with the e-books and e-textbooks that they require (SCONUL, 2021).

Challenges around pricing and costing models obviously extends to journal subscriptions as well, which again feature in the SCONUL 2019-22 strategy (SCONUL, 2019). The academic library community being a key influencer in this arena stands out in the latest trends and can be linked back to SCONUL's 2012 position around contributing to a "healthy scholarly communications ecosystem... support[ing] the evolution of open scholarship, open access and new models of publishing and information provision." (SCONUL, 2012, p.3). Similarly, the 2012 ACRL trends also identify the ever-developing scholarly communications and publishing models as having significant impact on how academic libraries operate (ACRL, 2012). Unsurprisingly, in the 2020 ACRL trends scholarly communications still features, but with an acknowledgement of the major developments being achieved through the work of cOAlition S and the introduction of transformative agreements (ACRL, 2020). The 'open' agenda has evolved beyond that of solely Open Access in recent years, which in itself has been an environment totally transformed through the work and commitment of academic libraries. However the expansion of the open landscape and open science means that academic libraries, having positioned themselves at the centre of it, will continue to work and develop in this space in the post-pandemic environment.

In relation to the open landscape, in the 2012 ACRL top ten trends we find trends around the work and the roles that academic libraries had begun to develop around 'data curation' as a result of large numbers of research repositories emerging (ACRL, 2012). Developments have obviously moved on since then and more nuanced ethical issues around managing research data services had emerged as a trend by 2020 (ACRL, 2020). The emerging roles and responsibilities of academic librarians was noted in the 2012 ACRL trends with regard to these data-oriented responsibilities and indeed other new demands being placed in traditional academic librarian roles (ACRL, 2012). In the ACRL 2020 trends the professional environmental impact on staff roles and responsibilities remains prevalent, but with a greater focus on the open agenda, machine learning and learning analytics (ACRL, 2020).

Students

Supporting our students manifests itself in several different ways in these trends documents. In their 2012-15 strategy SCONUL suggests that a key strategic driver is about demonstrating the contribution of the academic library to the overall student experience and student attainment (SCONUL, 2012). Their strategic aims from 2012 included further understanding user needs and behaviours, including non-traditional users, and how such understanding could contribute to library design and space planning and also developments in information and digital literacy education. I would argue that this has all been very apparent during the last decade with student engagement and input into all such

developments now considered essential in academic libraries. Similarly, in the ACRL trends of 2012, 'just-in-time' user expectations were cited as a significant trend along with providing value for money education and meeting student and user expectations (ACRL, 2012). By 2020, the ACRL trends around students has become more about 'student wellbeing and mental health, illustrating that whilst the focus may have changed, the importance of understanding and supporting students has never diminished. In the 2021 document *Drivers for the usage of SCOUNL member libraries* student behaviours in an around their campus and library environments really stand out as an area where academic libraries need to be involved with regard to understanding students' needs and requirements. This includes pedagogical engagement, health and wellbeing, decolonisation initiatives and UX methods for space design (Cox & Benson-Marshall, 2021), all of which could well be considered current trends with regard to student expectations of academic libraries.

Leadership

The final area of trends that I would like to comment on is that of leadership. In their 2012-15 strategy SCOUNL (2012) suggests that the changing higher education landscape requires particular models of leadership in order that academic libraries can collaborate and share services. The strategy establishes the complexity of the higher education library environment including user expectations, content acquisition and scholarly communications developments. In their 2019-22 strategy 'Leadership in complex environments' has become one of the main challenges faced by academic libraries (SCOUNL, 2019). The strategy suggests that 'library leaders are riding a wave of permanent revolution that requires resourcefulness, agility, stamina and vision' and that 'Library leaders their leadership role seriously in relation to the workforce; for fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces; investing in the next generation of library leaders and ensuring their workforce has the skills and information needed to meet institutional needs' (SCOUNL, 2019, p.7). This illustrates the strategic importance of leadership and leadership development in academic libraries and how investment in this area can and should contribute to greater advancement and resolution to some of the main challenges and issues faced by UK academic libraries. Meanwhile in ACRL's top trends of 2020, 'change management' features as one of the key priority trends, suggesting how academic library leaders need to develop new skills in order to manage change in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (ACRL, 2020). The focus for American academic libraries is on how to move academic libraries into the future quickly and effectively, through change management strategies. It is interesting to note that leadership features strongly in both sets of trends and I would suggest that effective high level leadership needs to be a priority for academic libraries in the post-covid era.

Personal insight – bringing it all together

Looking back over the trends and strategies of UK and US academic libraries and comparing them with their latest iterations has been interesting, not least to see which have become embedded or become 'business as usual', and which have further developed into new trends and challenges. It often seems obvious to us as practitioners with regard to what the current trends and challenges are within our sector but stepping back and scanning the environment a little more deeply can help to contextualise some of this and learn from others experiencing the same challenges.

These trends provide some evidence from our professional environment, but equally as important, and often more difficult to justify, are our own personal observations and experiences of living and working within our professional sector. For this reason and by way of a conclusion to this editorial I am going to share my own personal suggestions of the current and future trends in academic libraries. These have been informed in part through my evaluation and synthesis of the SCONUL strategies and ACRL trends documents, but also through my own recent observations and discussions with academic library leaders. Whilst I mainly write this from a UK perspective, much will be applicable for other countries' academic library sectors:

1. **Digital transformation and digital shift.** The digital shift will continue to accelerate. The hybrid environment in which academic libraries have had to operate in during the global Covid-19 pandemic has massively accelerated the digital shift, and this will continue to gain speed, and it is important that academic libraries keep up with this, and take all their users along. Academic libraries have a key role now in ensuring that digital divides do not deepen as a result of this, and student and user behaviours and expectations need to feed into this.
2. **Open Higher Education.** Academic libraries have been at the centre of the Open Access debate and movement since its inception. What academic libraries have achieved in respect of open access mandates and policies is a major achievement and has now influenced open data initiatives and general developments in open science. As the demand for 'open' continues to accelerate academic libraries need to ensure that they are key leaders, influencers and strategists as this area continues to develop at pace.
3. **Data management and curation.** The concept of 'data' and its management is now well established within academic librarianship, but interest and demand in this area

continues to increase and accelerate with both the digital shift and with the 'open' movement. Academic librarians in all roles will need to manage and curate data more and more, and consequently will need to become more 'data literate'. Data management is no longer just about 'research data' and academic librarians will need to harvest and make use of data from all areas of service delivery (including usage data, social media data, bibliometric data, feedback and evaluation data, etc.) in order to make decisions and to develop and deliver services.

4. **User expectations – the connected customer.** At the heart of all academic library service development and delivery is the user. Academic libraries need to continue to focus on the end user, especially with regard to personalisation of services. Our customers are used to having services customised and personalised and 'delivered straight to their in-box' in many other aspects of personal and professional life and the same needs to apply for academic library services and resources.
5. **Student support and wellbeing.** As well as more personalised services, academic libraries are becoming more aware and involved in ensuring student wellbeing. This trend has been the case for some time, but the recent Covid-19 pandemic has also affected students (and staff) mental health and wellbeing and will bring rise to greater challenges for academic institutions and academic libraries in the post-pandemic era.
6. **Diversity and inclusion.** Recent work and awareness raising around many areas of diversity and inclusion have exposed many inequalities in librarianship in general and in academic libraries (certainly in the UK). Academic libraries continue to lead the way in decolonisation and liberation work and initiatives within their institutions, but much still needs to be done to address the unbalanced nature of the academic library workforce and how this reflects on the support and services provided for the users of those libraries. Academic library leaders have a vital role to play in ensuring that library management and leadership is critical of itself in order that the sector, its workplaces and its services can become more inclusive.
7. **Climate change and environmental sustainability.** Whilst climate change and environmental sustainability have long been a global issue and concern, moving forwards into the 21st century, academic institutions have begun to become more engaged in addressing this. It could be argued that this has not always been the case, and also that academic libraries have tended to follow rather than lead in this area. Now is the time for that to change and for academic libraries to take more of a

lead in how they and their institutions make significant contributions in dealing with environmental issues.

8. **Leadership development.** For academic libraries to continue to thrive and develop in the post pandemic era, their leadership also needs to develop. The future requires bold leadership, which responds to the changes to the sector, and new demands constantly being put upon it. Library leaders need to become more critical of themselves and the position of their library services and this move to more critical library management requires strong and focused leadership development initiatives

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