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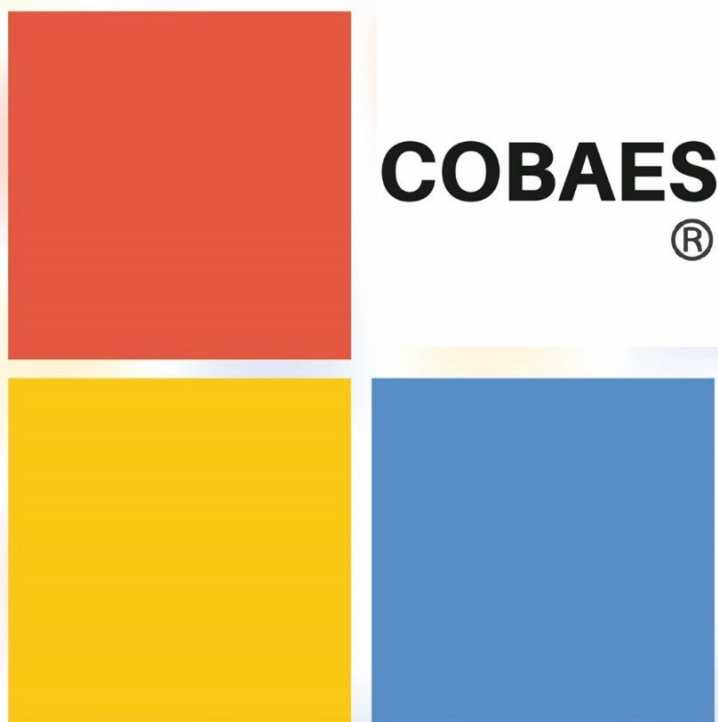
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# **COBAES, tendencias y diálogos: selección de textos**



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# The Resilience of Academic Libraries in the Post-Pandemic 21st Century

Leo Appleton\*

## Abstract

This keynote paper captures key thought leadership around the future and the resilience of academic libraries. It is largely a conceptual paper, which draws upon environmental scanning and trend analysis from before the global Covid-19 pandemic and translates this into a series of modern-day trends for academic libraries in the post-pandemic era. The objective of the paper is to present these trends as a blueprint for where the focus of academic libraries should be moving forwards into the 21st century. The paper is largely informed through observation and scholarship from academic libraries in western, developed nations, but the trends have been presented as being more generalisable, resonating with academic libraries from across the globe. Future resilience of academic libraries is discussed through the main themes of the paper: Digital transformation and digital shift; Open Access, Open Science and Open Higher Education; Data management and curation; Student expectations as connected customers; Diversity and inclusion; Climate change and environmental sustainability. The theme of academic library leadership is also addressed by way of concluding the paper.

*Keywords:* resilience, academic library leadership, academic library trends, future of academic libraries

## Introduction

The 2020 Covid-19 global pandemic meant that libraries had to respond and react quickly, in order to adapt services as best they could. 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, already delivering a range of digital services and resources and using digital by default for many operational and procedural functions (Falt y Das, 2020; Appleton, 2021; Bullington et al., 2021).

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Much has been 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). Even though academic libraries had already responded to the digital revolution, the continued acceleration of the digital shift, as a result of adapting to Covid-19 continues to bring about further rapid changes for academic libraries (Appleton, 2021). Examples include using digital scholarship to transform library learning and instruction (Avon et al., 2021); the impact of costing models on digital content acquisition (Brine y Knight, 2021); and how academic libraries transformed how student engagement methods and strategies as a result of being in lockdown (Matizirofa et al., 2021).

A lot of the above-mentioned scholarship about how academic libraries were already set up to deal with the pandemic and how they subsequently responded to the accelerated digital shift actually demonstrates a preparedness and a resilience which should be harnessed and celebrated as it is this resilience which will futureproof academic libraries as we progress into the 21st century. Part of this is about how academic libraries predict, respond to, manage and lead change. Since the commodification of higher education, universities have become more managerial in their approach to governance and operations, and this has been the case with academic libraries. This has resulted in a more strategic approach to managing and leading libraries, and subsequently change has become something that academic libraries embrace. Therefore, when it is imposed upon us, through a global pandemic for example, we are ready to respond and adapt. This paper will look at how academic libraries position themselves to deal with change, and in doing so how they make themselves resilient to the higher education environment. Current 21st century academic library trends will then be used to illustrate how academic libraries are continuing to develop this resilience.

### **Academic libraries and change**

“The only constant in the world today is constant change. In this environment, change management strategies are important, in order to smooth the transition of change and, importantly, to initiate and manage the change itself for the strategic advantage of the information service and its parent organization.” (Bryson, 2016, p.165)

There are several reasons why academic libraries are adept at dealing with and responding to change, but firstly is worth addressing why change might not work in a library and information service. In this respect, libraries and academic libraries would be no different to other public sector organisations, in that the main reasons that organisations fail to change effectively is largely due to leadership and organisational culture. But this is easy to claim. In actual fact there are several elements to this: firstly, and predominantly staff fears and anxiety and the ineffective management of this would cause change to fail; and, similarly customer resistance can also be a real barrier to change. Where change is unexpected, by staff or library users, then it can be difficult and stressful. This was briefly the case when libraries across all sectors when libraries had to reinvent themselves due to the international lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and this unexpected change was experienced very differently depending upon how the change was managed and led from within individual organisations. Having said this, however, academic libraries were generally very quick to respond, demonstrating resilience and leading the way for their parent institutions. Academic libraries therefore mitigated those elements that cause change to be seen negatively with their very rapid response.

So, what is it about academic libraries that allow them to be vectors for change and demonstrate this resilience. I would argue that it comes down to effective leadership and management and to organisational culture. Having a shared vision with all stakeholders and a belief in the library strategy and short-term goals becomes all important. This in turn results in stakeholder buy-in, including other departments within the organisation, library users, external partners and library staff. Engaging with stakeholders and working together in planning for change and being responsive is what academic libraries do really well, and in doing so demonstrate that resilience required to embrace the trends that we are seeing in the academic environment.

### **Trendspotting and Environmental Scanning**

One way in which we are in the habit of synthesising large-scale changes in academic libraries is by using environmental scanning techniques in order to spot trends across the sector. This in turn helps to inform strategy and development at local, national and international levels. Through the analysis of several key trends documents published in the years leading up to the pandemic (ACRL, 2012; Baker y Allden, 2017; Pinfield, Cox y Rutter, 2017; SCONUL, 2019; ACRL 2020) the main trends in U.S. and U.K. academic libraries could be identified as falling into three key areas:

Content and scholarly communications: emerging patron driven acquisition models for e-book purchasing and their associated licensing and costing models; the continued increase in cost of electronic and digital content in general; pricing and costing models of journal subscriptions; supporting the evolution of open scholarship and open access; data curation and research data services; machine learning and learning analytics

Students: student experience and student attainment; understanding user needs and behaviours, including non-traditional users; library design and space planning; developments in information and digital literacy education; student engagement; providing value for money education and meeting student and user expectations; student wellbeing and mental health.

Leadership: the changing higher education landscape requiring particular models of leadership in order that academic libraries can collaborate and share services; fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces; investing in the next generation of library leaders; ensuring the workforce has the relevant skills and information needed to take academic libraries into the future.

All the above represent changes that were trending at the time of the pandemic and have indeed either been amplified and accentuated, or in some cases overtaken by new trends. In all cases though effective high-level leadership needs to be a priority for academic libraries in dealing with these trends and changes in the post-covid era.

### **Current trends and what this means for the resilience of academic libraries**

The brief overview of the trends provided above provides some evidence from our professional environment, but similarly, our own personal observations and experiences of living and working within our professional sector can help to scan the environment and spot current trends. The next part of the paper, therefore, is my own understanding of the current and future trends in (U.K. and U.S.) academic libraries, which have been informed in part through my evaluation and synthesis of the previous trends documents, but also through my own recent observations and discussions with academic library leaders. Whilst I mainly write this from a U.K. perspective, much will be applicable for other countries' academic library sectors:

#### **Digital transformation and digital shift**

The global pandemic and subsequent 'lock-downs' meant that most academic libraries needed to pivot to exclusive online/digital service delivery. This was easier for some than others depending upon how far down the digital transformation journey individual libraries had travelled and there were

significant differences in how easy this was, depending upon where in the world the library was located, with an acknowledgement that western and developed countries were further along this path than academic libraries in the developing world and the global south (Temiz y Salelkar, 2020; Shoaib et al., 2021). Indeed, the digital shift continues to accelerate, and the hybrid digital/physical academic library environment will continue to gain speed. It is important that academic libraries continue to demonstrate resilience in this arena and ensue equitable access to digital platforms, resources and services. Academic libraries have a key role now in ensuring that digital divides do not deepen as a result of the accelerated digital shift. The digital shift requires academic libraries to continue to engage with students in order to respond to changing student and user digital behaviours and expectations, including: digital skills and digital literacy; use and support for generative Artificial Intelligence (AI); Multimedia in the classroom; E-learning developments; Collection development.

With regard to academic libraries being able to manage and meet students' and academics' ever-increasing expectations regarding digital collections, in order to remain resilient, academic libraries now need to ensure that budgets are spent, and collections are developed, in keeping with these expectations. As the shift towards 'digital first' or 'digital-only' initiatives, patron driven acquisition and on-demand access to information resources continues, academic libraries need to ensure that decisions around budgets and collections are well-informed. There is also crossover with the impact that the digital shift is having on Open Access and digital scholarly communications, along with supporting digital skills development, so strategies around collections must not be made in isolation (Ohler y Pitts, 2021). It could be argued that, in order to remain resilient, academic libraries now need to deliver a digital strategy encompassing all these elements of the digital shift.

### **Open Access, Open Science and 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. Again, from a western U.S. and U.K perspective, the Open Access movement had quite some momentum prior to the global pandemic, but elsewhere in the world (and indeed in North America and Europe) the pace of this movement varied, with no real collective vision within academic libraries as to the future path for the strategy and development of Open Access (Cox et al., 2019). However, prior to the pandemic, Open Access planning had certainly received a boost in the form of Plan S (Brainard, 2021), but the subsequent

acceleration of the digital shift, as outlined above, meant that the progress and impact of Plan S was further heightened. As a result, there is now more imperative for academic libraries to take advantage of current transitional and transformative agreements enabled through Plan S (JISC, 2020).

The pandemic impacted on scholarly communications in general, forcing significant and immediate changes to the practice of open science (Waltman et al., 2021). This largely took the form of Wellcome and the World Health Organisation (WHO) committing to enabling rapid access to emerging scientific knowledge and findings which could affect the global response to the pandemic (Wellcome, 2020). In addition, key collaborations between publishers and scholarly communications organisations resulted in the formation of the COVID-19 Rapid Review Collaboration Initiative (Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association, 2020), which sought to accelerate the peer review process in order to meet the demands of efficient research and development associated with COVID-19.

This resulted in a shift in outlook from many publishers, who “tacitly agreed that open access is beneficial to scientific advancement and necessary to move science forward to combat disease.” (Tavernier, 2020, p. 226).

In order to be resilient in the future world of Open Access, academic libraries need to embrace the increased momentum and position themselves, again at the centre of the debate, which will in turn allow for continued leadership in the fields of Open Science, and indeed Open Higher Education. Academic libraries need to ensure that they are key leaders, influencers and strategists in these developments.

### **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.

Therefore, the resilient academic library needs to embrace this ‘data era’ and continue to develop new academic library roles focusing on: Research Data Management; Data mining and data harvesting; Bibliometrics; Learner analytics, etc. The roles will rely on academic library and information

professionals becoming more involved in data science and data analysis within their roles. However, not only is there a requirement for such skills development, but our future generations of learners and students will become more data focused, and it will be the role of the academic librarian to provide that support. Therefore, in this instance, resilience will come in the form of digital and data literacy instruction, as an extension of the academic library's information literacy provision.

### **Student expectations beyond the digital – 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 for students. Our users and students 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. This is the Google generation, who are immersed in social media and are now also discovering generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). This digital personalisation needs to be factored into the development of academic libraries' digital strategies (as discussed above) and overlaps with digital skills instruction and support. This also extends into how academic libraries deal with and optimise physical and digital spaces in response to student expectations.

As well as digitally shifting collections, the pandemic also saw a huge increase in academic libraries using online learning platforms in order to teach and provide other academic services. Inevitably the success of this varied with issues of connectivity and a lack of equipment creating barriers for engagement with material by some students around the world (Kashelkar et al., 2021). However, the move to online learning was often seen as an opportunity for academic libraries to recognise the wider, longer-term benefits of its reach and flexibility, and much of this has been sustained in our post pandemic environment. Academic libraries now offer a hybrid approach to teaching and learning activity. Using online learning platforms and social media to promote and actually deliver services is common-place, and are lasting outcomes of the changes enforced during lockdowns. Again, the resilient academic library will embrace this and ensure that they meet the students in spaces they want to be.

But what does this mean for physical library space? Whilst the lockdowns experienced during the pandemic forced academic libraries towards delivering services digitally, now that we have moved into a post-pandemic era it is becoming clear that physical spaces still have a rightful place in the heart of academic institutions, as students come back in large numbers to make use of study spaces as well as social spaces. However, even with this being the case,

we cannot ignore that as a sector, we were very much able to pivot to digital only services when we needed to, therefore the resilience will only manifest itself if academic libraries work collaboratively with stakeholders in order to ensure that physical spaces are designed and developed to meet future needs and this will require an innovative and open-minded approach by academic libraries and their parent organisations. Indeed, Ohler and Pitts (2021) suggest that academic libraries should be refocusing on,

[...] new ways of thinking about virtual and physical library spaces, we must think beyond the library as a repository of collections and toward a concept of library as incubator, think tank, or institute. ‘Library as institute’ means repositioning and reframing our spaces as hubs for new learning and research, where open science and publishing are the focus, the starting point for data services, curation, and management.” (Ohler y Pitts, 2021, p. 42).

As part of developing 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 brings rise to greater challenges for academic institutions and academic libraries in the post-pandemic era. Situating this notion within the context of physical space, as discussed in this section, the physicality of academic library buildings brings with it associated benefits for users creating a social environment for human interaction which should not be underestimated with regard to mental health benefits. Increasingly academic libraries are looking at ways in which they can contribute to student wellbeing, and this has been heightened in the post pandemic era (Cox y Brewster, 2022). Academic libraries can now see themselves as having a distinct role in supporting students pastorally, from a wellbeing perspective as well as through the traditional academic support provided. Socialisation through physical, shared, library space becomes all the more important in providing services to students and any future planning around the physical space of academic libraries must ensure that the benefits of social interaction in the learning environment are recognised.

### **Diversity and inclusion**

In the western world, academic libraries are working to address the historic legacies of colonialism, through decolonising the curriculum and the university as a whole. This extends to libraries and much recent work and awareness raising around many areas of diversity and inclusion have exposed many inequalities in librarianship in general and in academic libraries (Crilly y Everitt, 2022). Academic libraries continue to lead the way in decolonisation

and liberation work and initiatives within their institutions, but more needs to be done to continue 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 an important 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. Resilience in this arena means continuing to strive for equality through the diversification and decolonisation of curricula and collections. This can be applied across the globe as social mobility and the internationalisation of higher education starts to increase speed again. If academic libraries commit to enabling personalised services and treating all students as connected customers, then international students need to be very much included in this approach.

### **Climate change and environmental sustainability**

My final thoughts, with regard to what makes for a resilient academic library are around climate change and environmental sustainability. Whilst this has been a global issue and concern for many years, moving forwards into the 21st century, academic institutions have begun to become more engaged in addressing it. 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. Universities themselves need to become carbon neutral and libraries, as large physical infrastructures (often open, accessible, heated and lit twenty-four hours a day) need to make a significant contribution to this. In taking this on board, it must be remembered that 'digital' does not necessarily mean 'greener'. Perhaps one of the key areas that academic libraries could contribute to, with regard to the climate crisis, is around education for sustainability. Academic libraries, through embracing their most traditional epistemic role should be the place and space where climate change and sustainable development research and knowledge is harvested and disseminated. This would include informational work on climate resilience and climate change adaptation, as we continue, as a global community to adapt to and mitigate climate change. It could be argued that this is what academic libraries have always done, but perhaps just with a different subject and disciplinary focus. But with the continued development of Open Science and international collaborations between universities, academic libraries again, have the opportunity to be at the centre of this global issue, to demonstrate resilience and to have a significant impact.

## Conclusion - Bold Leadership

As with the key trends identified for academic libraries before the pandemic, strong, impactful and bold leadership of academic libraries is also very much required going forwards. This means that for academic libraries to continue to thrive and develop in the post pandemic era, and to demonstrate resilience, their leadership also needs to continue to develop. The future requires bold leadership, which responds to the changes in the sector, and the new demands constantly being put upon it. Academic library leaders need to become more critical of themselves and the position of their library services within their institutions and their sectors. Academic library leaders should also look at how they position their libraries internationally and harness the power of international collaboration. These values around critical library management and partnership require strong and focused leadership. Through working together both internally and externally, nationally and internationally, academic library leaders can make change happen. The future resilient academic library will be one that: takes the lead within the institution and the sector; that is aware of how it can influence and make a difference; that innovates and takes initiatives; that brings people together in order to improve and develop the world around us; and one that looks to the future in a sustainable and ethical manner.

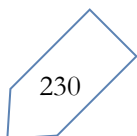
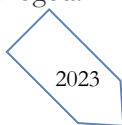
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La divulgación de conocimiento tiene diversos matices, es una práctica esencial en las agremiaciones profesionales, pero sobretodo es una responsabilidad social; el compartir el conocimiento genera doble impacto cuando podemos dejar registro y memoria de estas, por ende, este libro presenta una selección de voces que han acompañado las tres ediciones de COBAES (2017, 2019, 2023). Deseamos sea una herramienta útil en los escenarios cotidianos, además, de inspirar otros proyectos.

LF Editora

