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**Article:**

Appleton, L. [orcid.org/0000-0003-3564-3447](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3564-3447) (2021) Accelerating the digital shift : how a global pandemic has created an environment for rapid change in academic libraries. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 27 (3). pp. 257-258. ISSN 1361-4533

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2021.1994184>

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *New Review of Academic Librarianship* on 8th November 2021, available online:  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13614533.2021.1994184>.

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## **Accelerating the digital shift: how a global pandemic has created an environment for rapid change in academic libraries**

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**Editor, New Review of Academic Librarianship**

At the time of writing, Autumn 2021, the United Kingdom, and indeed many other areas of the world appear to be getting back to some sort of normality after eighteen months of living and working through the global Covid-19 pandemic. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, as an academic librarian and director of library services at a London university, I along with many of my contemporaries in the United Kingdom closed the doors on our libraries for the first time in years, even decades, due to the national requirement and demand to remain at home and not travel unless essential. This was otherwise known as a 'lockdown'. The events of March 2020 and beyond are well documented and universities all over the world found that they needed to pivot from largely in-person teaching and learning to entirely remote delivery. There were a handful of exceptions, but for the most part the remainder of 2020 was spent working out how to achieve this digital shift, in many cases with very little advance planning. This change has continued into 2021, and whilst many of those working in universities have found the experience to be very frustrating and challenging, the actual scale of the change that the pandemic and its consequent lockdowns has afforded is incredibly significant. When the editorial board of the New Review of Academic Librarianship met online (for the first time) in September 2020, a discussion ensued about potentially theming an issue of the journal on the accelerated digital shift that the board members felt they, as practitioners and academics, were experiencing some six months into the pandemic, having experienced the rapid digital changes occurring in the world, in higher education, and of course in academic libraries. Of course, the concept of the 'digital shift' is not new and the recent work of Research Libraries UK (RLUK) is evidence of this. Indeed, it is RLUK's *Digital Shift Manifesto* (RLUK, 2020) which triggered the editorial board discussion and set the context and lens through which we thought we might look at the impact of the pandemic.

This issue of the New Review of Academic Librarianship has therefore been commissioned and collated as the themed issue for 2021, in which we have invited senior library practitioners from different parts of the world to consider, research and reflect on the major changes that they have led, observed, or influenced during the last eighteen months and to share their experiences of what we will term 'the accelerated digital shift'. The premise for this is that academic libraries, whilst already well placed to switch and pivot to online delivery of library services and support before the pandemic, found themselves, along with their academic colleagues in a 'digital or nothing' environment for the first time. During the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic libraries and librarians have led the way in developing and delivering digital library services but for the most part this has been supplementary to the physical library services that we have been responsible for and that certainly academic library users have demanded.

Temporarily losing the physical spaces and resources that academic librarians were the custodians of, has meant that many aspects of library provision have had to be reinvented. This includes reference services, e-book acquisitions models and vendor relationships, liaison services and delivery of teaching, access to learning spaces, etc. Because academic libraries in many parts of the world, were already adept at delivering their services digitally and remotely, much of this was able to take place quite quickly. Back in April 2020, I reflected upon the first three- to four-weeks' experience of

library directors in the UK, as a means of capturing and documenting some of the immediate issues, reactions, and responses as they were still reasonably fresh. I talked about the initial 'frenzy' when academic libraries in the UK began to close, before moving onto 'adapting' working practices and services and then 'improving' them (Appleton, 2020). A further eighteen months have passed and my observations are that academic library services have continued to improve, because of the resilience and versatility of academic librarians themselves and a collective effort at making the 'digital shift' work for academic libraries and their users. Blake (2020) discusses how academic libraries have not only survived the pandemic, but in some instances have 'thrived' as they have led the way in their respective institutions in terms of delivering digital. There was, and still is, talk of a 'new normal' when we realised that some of the things resulting from the accelerated digital shift were beneficial and advantageous, and could potentially become permanent features. This does not just apply to academic libraries, but to entire ways of working and organisational cultures. In his article *Changed, changed utterly* Cox (2020) summarises the key changes emerging for the new normal for academic libraries, and suggests that these occurrences and trends are here to stay. They include the impact on collections and publishing, the impact on library study spaces, increased open content, focus on embedded librarianship, emerging importance of employee safety, increased support for online teaching and research, and heightened librarian activism, amongst others.

It is interesting to look at how the pandemic and experiences of 2020-21 have impacted on academic libraries and this themed issue will do just that by considering some of the big themes which have stood out over the course of the last year. All the papers were commissioned especially for the themed issue and they comprise a variety of formats, including case studies, a literature review and observational/discussion articles. Generally, literature about the Covid19 pandemic and the impact and effect it has had on academic library practice is still emerging, but we wanted the New Review of Academic Librarianship to make a significant and timely contribution to this, and we hope that the 2021 themed issue achieves just that.

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