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## **Editorial : the role of academic libraries in climate action**

### **Introduction**

This editorial has been written to serve as a stimulus for discussion and as a call to action for our profession, academic and practitioner, to take stock and reflect if we are doing everything we can in response to the 21<sup>st</sup> century climate emergency and the wider opportunity and challenge to embed environmental sustainability in our practice of academic librarianship. During our discussion we argue that academic libraries can and should exercise their fundamental professional values through taking and empowering climate action and sustainability initiatives. This includes our collective mission and drive to provide access to knowledge, and our alignment with our organisational missions, visions and strategies around education and delivering research which contributes to solving world problems. In taking this stance we are not suggesting a lack of thinking or action to date, but instead, we are championing a yet to be realised pan-institution strategic and leadership potential that could make a significant difference to humanity's response to arguably the greatest existential threat we have faced in modern times.

A further reason for wishing to stimulate discussion and debate on this topic is that the themed issue of *New Review of Academic Librarianship* for 2024 is to be 'the role of academic libraries in climate action' and we hope that this editorial will get academic librarians from across the globe thinking about the impact and role they currently have in affecting organisational initiatives and change in this area.

### **The climate emergency**

It is acknowledged that one of the primary roles of the academic library is to support learning, teaching and research by facilitating access to information resources and services for students and staff, so it may be pertinent to ask where any role in addressing the climate crisis sits. However, a secondary role of the academic library would be to support the wider scholarly community by sharing resources. In both instances there is an epistemic function, at least, which crosses over into generating, providing and disseminating research, knowledge and information, which could and should be extended to a global crisis such as our current climate change situation.

There is consensus on the need for action from most credible local, national and international agencies. Global bodies such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have been coming together for years to discuss the crisis, setting targets and actions, but so far to no avail. Governments and (in the UK) Local Authorities have also declared a state of crisis, but often it appears that response to such declarations is slow and often unsupported. Often the message back is that we are running out of time. Indeed, the recent IPCC report, synthesising years of human knowledge about the climate crisis comes down to just one simple message: 'act now or it will be too late' (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). Unfortunately, this is the message we have been receiving for many years, but with such slow response and action, globally we acknowledge the Anthropocene (the age of humans) in which we have missed the opportunity to prevent climate change and now need to think about how we mitigate and adapt to climate change. This still paints a bleak picture, and one in which many continue to feel helpless, even though we may be trying in our own local and small ways to try to

contribute to the resolution of the problems through our environmental and biodiversity activities. The [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) enable citizens, the world over, to think about how they engage with sustainable development allowing individuals and communities to think and act upon how they mitigate and adapt to climate change. Chapter 18 of the IPCC 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report brings together the knowledge that we have on climate change and its interdependence on sustainable development and sets out climate resilience development pathways for us all to adhere to (Schipper et al., 2022). There is an outstanding need for us to take a comprehensive and holistic approach in this way and an imperative for all communities, professions, and sectors in all different geographic and socio-economic setting to fully engage and identify what their contribution to climate change resilience and sustainability. So what exactly can academic libraries do?

### **Understanding the holistic library context**

Much of the recent scholarship and literature of libraries and sustainable development explores sustainable library practice with regard to leadership, physical and network infrastructure, and social impact. Indeed, the American Library Association's Special Task Force on Sustainability champions the adoption of sustainability as a core value of librarianship with the aim "to promote [all] libraries as catalysts, connectors, and convenors to promote sustainability, resilience, and regeneration" (Tanner et al., 2019, p. 365). A structured literature review conducted by Meschede and Henkel (2019) maps library and information publications which directly deal with sustainability and sustainable development across all library sectors. More recently Mathiasson and Jochumsen (2022) published a literature review dealing with libraries and sustainable development. These works are useful in establishing a pan library sector awareness of sustainability and sustainable libraries and whilst much of the focus has remained on physical and technical infrastructure, there also starts to emerge examples of how libraries can be leaders and catalysts for change, particularly where the educational role of libraries is discussed. This focus is certainly more apparent in the most recent literature review dealing with the landscape of sustainable library and information science (Kaminska, Opalinski & Wycislik, 2022).

### **Finding a role and focus**

Academic libraries naturally look to their parent institutions and sector policy makers for the strategic lead and direction relating to external political, economic and social drivers, and we could argue that we have done the same in terms of seeking leadership on environmental concerns. At a local institutional level, an area of focus for sustainability and climate action has been around measuring and reducing carbon emissions. Academic libraries have rightly been able to contribute to this through the development of more sustainable physical spaces and operations. Whilst this type of action is vital, it is also now quite generic, and although challenging does little to realise the professional contribution we could make as an academic library sector.

More recently, HE has started to turn its climate change attention to matters of quality. In the United Kingdom, our own regulatory and higher education policy bodies the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Advance HE have developed 'guidance for universities for Education for Sustainable Development in which they define 'Education for Sustainable Development' as "the process of creating curriculum structures and subject-

relevant content to support sustainable development” (Advance HE & QAA, 2021, p.8). These guidelines focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and champion them with a goal to embed sustainable development into HE programmes and curricula. It is now of the utmost importance for academic libraries to harness this educational context and focus on education for sustainable development, which in turn will allow us to realise the powerful contribution we can make to the climate emergency.

### **The climate emergency as an information and education issue – what can we do now as a sector?**

The IFLA Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development (International Federation of Library Associations, 2014), which is now almost ten years old, identified the crucial role of access to information in supporting sustainable development. In doing so, the international library sector declared how sustainable development must take place in a human-rights based framework which addresses inequalities, and enables equitable and increased access to information and knowledge, underpinned by information and universal literacy. Information intermediaries, such as libraries, archives, civil society organisations, community leaders and the media were all identified as having the skills and resources to help governments, institutions and individuals communicate, organise, structure, and understand information and knowledge pertaining to sustainability and sustainable development. In other words, this was a declaration for a clear role in sustainable education and it is now (and perhaps always was) the role and responsibility of academic libraries to translate these high-level assertions and principles into meaningful and impactful actions and practice.

### **Power as a community and platform**

As a community, academic libraries are in a position to operate as a cross-disciplinary platform for discourse and understanding of sustainable development and the climate crisis. Equally we are in a position to provide learning opportunities, skills and literacy development, build trust and connections, and to influence the future citizens, leaders, technologists, educators, scientists, etc. who need to be and will be ‘steering the climate crisis ship’ on a global scale in the years to come.

### **Fighting the information war, challenging science denialism, and finding hope**

The history of humanity’s development of understanding of the earth’s climate and what action society should take is one characterised by an information war and the denial of science and reason. In this context, providing access to knowledge and supporting our communities to develop critical skills and literacies to evaluate, understand and make sense of what is happening to the world and in the world has never been more important. We argue that we can do this in a number of ways:

#### *Play our role in embedding sustainability in the curriculum.*

Academic libraries can have a major role in education for sustainability, in that we can work with curriculum areas and develop and deliver environmental and carbon literacy courses and training alongside and embedded within our information and digital literacies education programmes. On campus we are one of few locations where shared co and extra-curricular activity can be effectively delivered.

### *Act as prolific and inclusive public spheres on campus.*

Academic libraries, through their centrality are ideally placed to be the place and platform where discussion, debate and knowledge exchange around sustainability takes place. We already have the information and knowledge infrastructure, and given the growing focus and commitment on place and civic role of universities, this can be extended beyond our university communities where we already may have significant membership. Academic libraries are well placed to function as multi- and inter-disciplinary platforms for climate discourse, understanding, and academic freedom.

### *Develop critical thinking*

In addition to embedding our established skills and literacies in the education for sustainable development curriculum, academic libraries can play a role in developing critical thinking, inspiring curiosity, open inquiry, and authentic sensemaking to combat disinformation, misinformation, and science denialism. Providing space for positive engagement with the climate emergency and acknowledging risks to wellbeing, such as climate anxiety, and support our institutions education and research to discover and realise solutions.

### *As a trusted and proactive source of information*

Collections, curation, selection, promotion are all areas in which we need to continue to be sustainable. The climate emergency is a social justice issue in which the global majority and disadvantaged suffer most, despite causing the least. Academic libraries need to be mindful of this and maintain social justice as a core value underpinning everything that we do. Similarly, our role in advancing Open Science already enables more rapid and accessible scholarly communication of knowledge. Given the profound social injustice of the climate emergency, our collective effort to free knowledge from paywalls must continue to be a priority to ensure global access.

### *Understanding our digital footprint*

We need to continue to work on fully understanding the impact of digital technologies and electronic information, and be especially wary of any assumption that digital is greener than analog. We have the networks and opportunities to work with the wider education, information and knowledge communities, including publishers, education technology, and analytics technology companies. For our contribution to achieving net-zero, understanding where our Scope 3 emissions start will also be critical.

### *Prepare and plan adaption for future impact*

The far horizon of an average library or institutional plan is five to ten years. To effectively prepare and adapt for future risks, such as the many physical risks, we believe that planning up to the end of the century must not be overlooked. This is of particular importance for the preservation of knowledge and how physical risks brought by the climate emergency will threaten print collections and associated infrastructure.

## **In conclusion**

This editorial has been an opportunity for us to try to articulate and synthesise why and how academic libraries can take more of a proactive role in addressing sustainability and the climate change crisis. As a sector we are renowned and acknowledged as having strong and bold leadership. It's time to put that to the test and see if collectively we can influence the sector, through our informational and epistemic roles. As trusted and reliable institutions within our parent organisations we have a global network of innovators, scientists and thought leaders within our reach, and it has never been more important to act together to create a more positive future. We are keen to continue this discussion and look forward to further collective positive action with our planned 2024 themed issue of *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, in which academic libraries and the climate action will be the focus. A call for abstracts will appear soon, but in the meantime, please direct any queries, questions or ideas to the editor.

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