The 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Academic Library

This video explores some of the key changes impacting academic libraries in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Changing role of the library
The role of the academic library is changing. Libraries have traditionally been seen as providing access to existing knowledge in either print, or increasingly digital form. With the growth of online information and the increase in users’ skill level when it comes to searching for information, libraries have been forced to adapt their service offering. One way for academic libraries to do this is by helping their users to create new knowledge through research.

Research is a major function of a university and it therefore follows that libraries in a university have a significant role to play in supporting their research community. The work we do touches on many areas of the research lifecycle and we can use our existing skills to help the research community to work on their projects in a wide variety of ways. If libraries (and librarians) don’t step up to offer this support then someone else will. We are increasingly seeing publishers and others getting involved in research support in order to sell their services. There are issues with what happens to research outputs if they are owned by commercial companies and many of them also use aggressive tactics in order to pursue their own agendas. If librarians don’t improve their knowledge of this area then we risk libraries being removed from the scholarly communication process altogether.

New job roles
New job roles are also being advertised in academic libraries.

Whilst traditional academic library roles are still advertised there is an increasing expectation that they will feature some component of research support. The level of knowledge needed will depend on the role but as all roles contain some form of customer service component many academic library staff will require at least a basic knowledge of areas of scholarly communication such as Open Access and Research Data Management.

There are also many research support specialist roles being advertised. If library staff do not educate themselves in these areas then they run the risk of losing out. Many of these roles go to those who have been through the research process themselves but have chosen to pursue an academic career. They understand the research experience and are well placed to offer advice. If librarians don’t get some knowledge of this area they risk being pushed out of many emerging roles within academic libraries.

External pressures
There are other pressures coming from outside the library which impact staff and the services they provide. The growing Open Research movement advocates the philosophy that publically funded research should be made accessible to the public without them having to pay. Currently public funds
from taxation fund a large portion of the research that happens in the UK but unless taxpayers are part of the academic system – for example through a university or learned society – they may have difficulty in accessing the results of the research they have helped to pay for. Many often end up paying for access to research outputs but should they really have to?

Many of the bodies which fund research now insist that outputs are made available to all via Open Access. The policy landscape is complicated for both researchers and librarians and although it has many positive impacts it does result in added pressure for all parties.

Open Research will be discussed in more detail throughout this and other modules in the programme.

Changing nature of academic publishing
The nature of academic publishing is also changing, resulting in new services and ways of working.

When it began, academic publishing was a relatively simple procedure which targeted a few specific individuals. The publishing of journals as we know it began when learned societies (who are organisations which exist to promote a particular academic discipline) began publishing as a way of sharing their ideas. As printing was still very expensive these publishers were the only means of distribution and those who needed access could only do this via either a paid subscription or a library. This model continued for a long time and the subsequent rate of change was swift.

After the Second World War there was a period of rapid growth as science in particular became a recognised profession in the modern sense of the word. Commercial companies moved to consolidate their position and became powerful actors in scientific publishing.

From the early 1970s publishers began to strengthen their financial position even further and started to form powerful conglomerates with even greater power. Journals were increasingly published online as well of (an in some cases instead of) the traditional printed format.

At the turn of the century we can see the rise of the serials crisis and the big deals which gave added financial powers to publishers. The serials crisis describes the changing subscription model of journals. Under traditional models the publisher produces a journal and sells the library a subscription for a set number of issues a year. Each time a subscription is cancelled by an institution the publisher has to raise its prices to cover its costs. The more the cost rises the more libraries cancel and the price continues to rise.

This led to the advent of the big deal. When the rate of cancellations meant that publishers would have to increase subscription prices beyond most libraries budgets they had to look for a different model. They started to sell journal subscriptions as part of a bundle meaning that libraries could continue to access the content they needed publishers were able to continue selling subscriptions to smaller titles which may otherwise have become unprofitable. The downside of these deals for libraries is the cost and the variety for material. The cost of these deals has risen hugely and libraries are forced to pay for bundles containing titles they don’t want in order to access the ones they do.
The term Open Access was coined in 2002 and the move towards making information accessible to all has gained momentum in recent years. A vast array of information is available online and anyone can publish their work to people around the world at the touch of a button. This likely means further changes for academic publishing landscape in the 21st century.

**Calls for a change in the reward system**

As well as a change in the publication system there have been calls for a change in the reward system in academia. Although this impact researchers directly there is also an impact on the library. Under the current system researchers and faculty work to produce scholarly works (often as a result of public funding) and then produce outputs for the scholarly press such as articles or books. These are often edited and reviewed by peers within the same discipline to check the research behind them prior to publication. This work is all done for free by members of various academic institutions as a way to give back to the academy and to enhance their own careers. As well as issues of workload for the researcher, the library is then expected to pay to access the research outputs. Is this a fair system when the majority of the content is being produced by their researchers for free?

Researchers and institutions are also starting to question the amount of money that libraries spend on subscriptions each year and whether it would be better spent invested in new research. Libraries have started to respond to these calls for change by looking at alternative means of accessing journal content.

**REF**

Perhaps one of the biggest changes for the 21st century has been the REF or Research Excellence Framework. This national exercise gathers information about the research produced by UK universities and assess its quality and impact. The results of this exercise are then used to determine how much funding universities receive for future research.

You will be able to find out more about the REF on the following pages of the module.

**The perfect storm?**

This combination of events creates is creating a perfect storm of conditions for both the library and the research community they support. Librarians are in an ideal place to use their existing skills and knowledge to help researchers at all points of their project but they need to be aware of the factors which are influencing that support.