The Association of Commonwealth Universities

Commonwealth libraries: changing roles and new opportunities

Jonathan Harle

This paper presents initial findings from a survey conducted during 2008 by the ACU Libraries and Information Network. It demonstrates how libraries across the membership are changing, in response to a need for new services and an increasingly diverse client group. A transformed higher education environment, which depends increasingly on the internet to deliver programmes and to access and disseminate scholarly information, has presented libraries with many challenges. This paper argues that libraries are well placed to assist — and in many instances to lead — their institutions as they navigate these changing HE landscapes. But to do so effectively they also need to be supported and enabled by their institutions.

The very earliest universities were built around their libraries — and the very newest will continue to need a library at their heart. Libraries are far from static, however, and are adapting as the needs of students and scholars and the modes of teaching and research are transformed. The 2008 ACU Conference of Executive Heads will investigate the 'dazzling technologies' which are coming to play a central role in higher education around the world. University libraries are at the forefront of this technological wave, making use of electronic and web-based tools to provide new routes to information, and to develop new services for learning, teaching and research. Libraries and their librarians are also leading the way in trying to bridge the so-called 'digital divide' — the gulf which unequal access to technology and information can all too easily create.

In 2008, the Libraries and Information Network conducted a substantial survey of ACU members. 132 members (and a further 14 non-members) replied from 32 Commonwealth countries. A full report, discussing the findings of the survey, will be published in the coming months. This paper presents some of the key issues arising from the survey. The central message to emerge is an important one: libraries are delivering many new and innovative services, are embracing changes in their role and responsibilities, and are securing greater support from within their institutions. They are doing this despite increasing pressures (both internal and external), growing demand from their clients and, in many countries, serious budgetary constraints. Libraries can and want to do much more, but in many instances they lack the support and recognition, both financial and strategic, to do this. At the same time, they also need to get better at explaining what they do and can do, and at understanding what their clients need.

More than just a library: innovative services for diverse users

In the face of financial pressure, and expecting the internet to deliver in their place, some in the HE community are tempted to reduced costs by downsizing and de-professionalising their libraries. Across universities, understandings and expectations of libraries vary widely, and the temptation to reduce their functions is largely a result of this. Libraries have always been more than just repositories for books, and librarians have always been much more than just their gatekeepers. But it is evident that modern university libraries are providing a greater range of services than ever before, while librarians for their part are applying their traditional expertise in exciting new ways.

The migration of resources to online platforms and increasingly sophisticated cataloguing and referencing technology have the potential to free up both librarians' time and library space to be devoted to new initiatives. The internet is therefore growing rather than reducing the potential of – and the need for – libraries. The purpose of this paper, and the subsequent report, is not simply to list the many types of services that libraries provide. However, sketching these briefly helps to understand the challenges they face, the expertise they have, and the skills they need.

■ Navigation in a complex world Although the internet – in some parts of the world – makes accessing information much easier than in the past, finding the *right* information has arguably got more difficult. While students were previously exposed to only a limited range of quality-assured and peer-reviewed material, they will now encounter information from a wide range of sources, many of which are far removed from serious scholarship. Understanding how to navigate to reputable sources is vital if students are to avoid confusing information with knowledge.

■ Improving the learning experience Librarians have responded by developing 'information literacy' modules to help students improve their critical and analytical abilities – and in doing so are working in partnership with academics to make substantial contributions to the quality of education. Where internet access is more limited and time and connectivity are constrained, the skills to find the right information are arguably even more critical. Libraries in Africa and Asia have made ambitious attempts, but often lack wider support for these initiatives. Despite considerable involvement in undergraduate skill development, however, libraries are relatively less involved in the delivery of research training, and there is undoubtedly considerable potential for them to play a much greater role here.

■ Digital solutions for students and scholars Entry points to library resources are often electronic and dispersed, through libraries' own websites or those of major publishers and content providers. Finding the right ways in can be a challenge. Websites and online portals developed by librarians provide entry points to resources in particular subjects, and reference services are often offered electronically and remotely. Libraries are leading collaborative projects to build digital libraries and are working with others to develop virtual learning environments.

■ Rethinking library spaces Even if electronic resources mean that less space is needed for books, libraries are still needed as places in which students and researchers can gather and work. The physical library space is accordingly changing to accommodate alternative learning and study spaces. 'Information commons' integrate library resources with ICT facilities, information advice and training, and areas for individual and group study.

■ Supporting research New technologies mean that libraries can serve research in powerful new ways. Communicating and disseminating research is an ever-greater concern for academics. While libraries have typically focused on sourcing material from outside the institution, many are now finding new ways to make their own scholars' research more prominent. Many libraries are using electronic publishing tools to build institutional repositories which both showcase and centrally archive their own material more effectively and, in the case of theses and dissertations, preserve valuable work that might typically have remained unpublished. By making repositories freely available online, researchers' work is more readily discovered through mainstream search engines.

Strengthening the skills base

A strong skills base only stays strong though continued training and development. Most librarians feel that their institutions are making good use of their current skills base – South Asian and Asia Pacific librarians were particularly positive – but the skills needed to be effective in modern environments are changing fast and librarians are already taking on responsibilities outside their traditional training, from IT to project management. Only half of librarians feel that their current skills base is sufficient to serve the new functions of the library, and a quarter feel that they lack the skills that current services demand.

■ Advanced ICT skills will be particularly critical to enable librarians to translate their expertise into online environments and to adapt the latest technologies for library services. Realising large-scale initiatives requires a range of skills for effective project management, including the ability to build and lead cross-departmental collaborative teams.

■ Librarians have not traditionally been teachers in the formal sense, but information and research skills demand that they develop their role in this direction too.

Priorities for the Library

Legend: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Americas, UK, South Asia
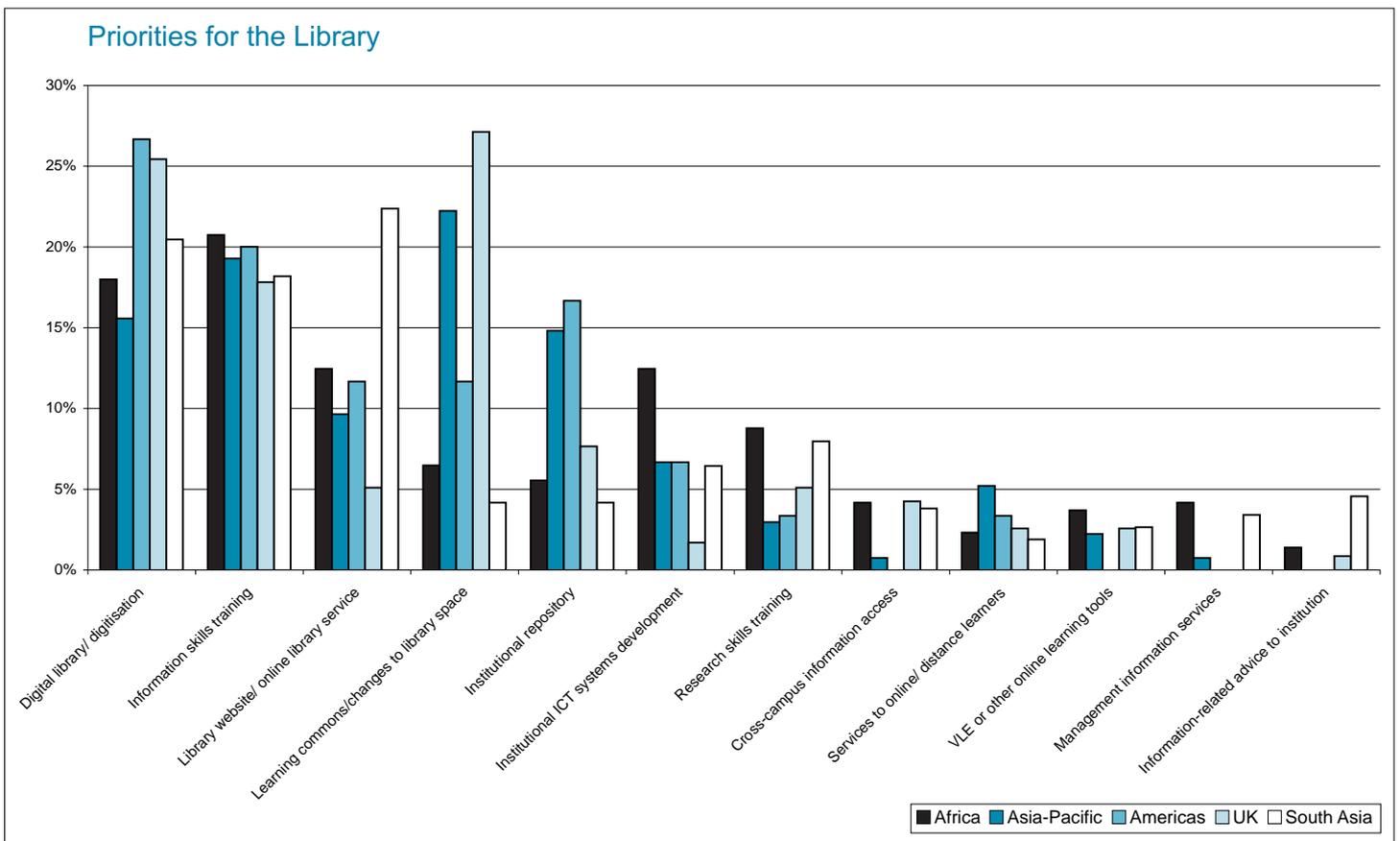
Investigating and applying new pedagogical methods is now firmly within the remit of the librarian.

■ Likewise, research has in the past been the preserve of academic researchers but, with large-scale collaborative investigations and multi-disciplinary teams spanning institutions and in some cases countries, **research teams will involve information specialists** too. Based in specialist research libraries, they will be needed to manage complex datasets, to navigate and advise on existing literature, and to facilitate shared working. Disciplinary specialism is likely to be important.

■ As information, its access, delivery and management, and the technologies to do this, underpin more and more aspects of higher education, librarians find themselves occupying critical roles. Librarians therefore need to **become leaders and managers**, and this will require new sets of skills and abilities, and the confidence to assert these.

While over 80% of professionally qualified staff are still trained as librarians, the fact that 17% hold qualifications in other aspects of ICT and information indicates an emerging trend. Library schools will need to adapt their curricula to these ends, to ensure that new generation librarians are trained with the requisite skills. Universities will need to ensure that library needs are properly acknowledged in staff development plans and that existing staff have the opportunity to update their professional knowledge.

Recognising the professional

Librarians' skills and expertise will be universities' greatest asset as they rise to meet the challenges of new information environments. University libraries have always had at their core skilled professional librarians – on average almost 30 professionals were reported per institution and 15% of library staff hold postgraduate qualifications. Librarians must of course get better at helping colleagues and students to understand this expertise and to show how it can be and is being adapted to contemporary scholarship, but universities also need to acknowledge that librarians are as critical as their academics to good teaching and research and should be recognised accordingly. Some misunderstand the internet and search engines as the modern equivalents of the library and librarian, and envisage the demise of the latter as they become more sophisticated. This is far from reality.

The potential of libraries – and the skills that librarians need to realise this – are clear. The extent to which this will be achieved will rely on the relationships libraries forge across their institutions, and this in part depends on due recognition for libraries and librarians. That 80% of libraries are core academic services is a positive indication of status, but to what extent is this translated into other aspects of intra-university relationships? In some institutions, notably in Canada, Asia Pacific and the UK, strategic importance is reflected in new titles – 22% of head librarians are 'directors' whose remit often extends to cover academic and computing

services in addition to the library. Directors of 'knowledge management' and 'learning resources' in two institutions suggest a recognition of the library's importance and a wider embrace of what it can and should do. The story is not always positive, however. A significant number of librarians feel their professional status is not recognised, which thwarts their attempts to develop libraries to serve their institutions better, and dampens morale.

Convergence and collaboration

Libraries, ICT departments and student services find that they have overlapping responsibilities and interests, and need to coordinate their activities in support of this. In the UK, this has in a number of cases led to a move towards converged services where libraries and ICT or other services are brought together under joint management, and in some instances are functionally merged. While actual change to organisational structures is less evident in other regions, it is clear that, to meet institutional needs and to better articulate their roles, libraries are necessarily undergoing a degree of cultural convergence.

Building relationships

Libraries are on the whole well connected to major decision-making forums and to other departments; other departments are also well connected to the library. Nearly all African, South Asian and Canadian institutions have a committee focussing specifically on library matters, and librarians are commonly involved in Senate, management, finance and academic committees. Many also sit on groups tasked with educational planning, research and postgraduate study, distance education, widening access, staff develop-ment and quality assurance – African librarians have particularly wide-ranging involvements. Rapid growth in student numbers means that librarians must now serve a larger and more varied undergraduate base, and have recognised the need to understand their users better through consultative committees and focus groups. Where these structures are in place, a good foundation exists for libraries to improve relationships across their institution.

Challenges for the future

The future for university libraries is an exciting one, and in their librarians universities possess a pool of talented and professional staff. There are considerable challenges to realising this potential, and this is particularly true of countries where internet bandwidth and connectivity are still limited and funding constrained – major issues which could not be explored in the confines of this paper. However, for all libraries, there are common challenges of presenting themselves better and strengthening relationships with other colleagues and departments. Much of what libraries do is invisible to the average user, who accesses much of their information remotely and electronically. Libraries therefore need to present and explain their services better, and to listen to their users and continue to learn about their changing information needs. For institutions, academics and university leaders, the challenge is to recognise the critical and necessary role that libraries play, to support them in achieving their aims, and to work together to define future strategies which strengthen teaching and research. Quality higher education and research will only be achieved through strong partnerships between libraries and academics.

To request a copy of the final report, please contact:

Jonathan Harle
Programme Officer
libraries@acu.ac.uk

The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HF
Tel: +44 (0) 207 380 6700
Fax: +44 (0) 207 387 2655
www.acu.ac.uk