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# Challenging times: some thoughts on the professional identity of the academic librarian



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## INTRODUCTION

*'The most enduring and flexible learning institution is the Library, organised for well over two millennia – predating the first universities by well over one millennium – to provide self paced and self selected transmission of knowledge.'*<sup>1</sup>

This article reviews the professional identity of the academic librarian within higher education in the 21st century. It considers the challenges that libraries and library staff face in supporting learning. Massification and technological advancements are two key changes that have significantly impacted on library users and library usage. This article will review these developments and will focus in particular on how they have transformed the professional identity of the librarian working in higher education. 'Librarians function in a series of larger environments'<sup>2</sup> and these environments are dealing with a growing number of contexts for information. This article suggests that the concept of librarian as teacher is increasingly strengthening in library discourse and that this role will shape the future professional identity of the librarian working in higher education.

## TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Technological changes are impacting on all professions within higher education and we should not underestimate the radical changes they bring to the way all those involved in higher educa-

tion carry out information seeking, retrieval and delivery.

The research opportunities now available for both interdisciplinary and cross-country collaboration were unimaginable in higher education 30 years ago. Instant communication allows researchers across the world to work in real time on real projects. Never before has so much information been available. Researchers now have access to thousands of electronic journals and can cross-search databases of library journals in their library building but also from their offices, labs or homes. Library users have increasing functionality when engaging with material and these functions, such as printing, saving, e-mailing and receiving alerts via newsfeeds and blogs and so on, make the nature of reading and finding information a more dynamic experience than before. A trip to the library is no longer a necessity for getting information because thousands of library resources can now be accessed with the click of a button from any computer.

These technological changes have implications for teaching and learning, and therefore naturally for the place of libraries within these practices. New tools such as virtual learning environments (VLEs) are heavily used for teaching purposes, allowing higher education providers to offer courses to students off site and even in other countries. Face-to-face contact, while desirable, is no longer a necessity. Librarians need to ensure that they can support learning wherever it is taking place, regardless of whether it is in a classroom or in a VLE.

All of these changes are impacting on the work of the professional librarian. As it becomes less necessary for library users to come to the library building to gather their required information it becomes more necessary for library staff to go outside their library building to provide the help and support needed.

## MASSIFICATION

*'Massification, the shift from elite to mass education, brings ensuing issues such as greater diversity of student background, higher staff/student ratios, more entry pathways, more credit transfers, higher use of technology in teaching and more flexibility of enrolment and delivery.'*<sup>3</sup>

The development of mass higher education after World War 2 encouraged students from middle-class and then from working-class backgrounds

to enter and stay on in secondary school. Growing numbers of these students qualified for entry to higher education and this growth in the numbers of students seeking and entering university-type education had a number of consequences for higher education systems in terms of the growth of the old elite universities and the creation of new universities.<sup>4</sup> Massification has changed the nature of the student body and its relationship with the university. The 'student body' is constantly evolving and libraries need to find ways to support learning for all our users.

#### **PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY – WHAT IS CHANGING?**

While these changes are affecting all sectors in higher education, they have significant implications for libraries. The emergence of hybrid libraries – where traditional library material such as books and journals co-exist with newer, more emergent forms of information – is seen as one of the great changes in recent times to libraries and the profession. The functions and operations of the traditional library have changed and these have impacted greatly on professional identity. Increasingly there is more collaboration between libraries and computer centres/information technology departments and this offers new possibilities where both parties are involved in providing training and there is a joint use of information technology skills. Collaboration between libraries and teaching and learning centres is also a new development in recent years and has the potential to be a powerful partnership.

#### **NATIONAL POLICIES**

National policies such as lifelong learning, fourth level learning and the expansion of the higher education sector and the numbers within it are major drivers of change in the LIS (Library and Information Science) sector.<sup>5</sup> Large and rapid increases in student numbers and the resulting staff–student ratio imbalance have had a significant impact upon teaching and learning, as have modularisation of degree courses and shorter timeframes between the submission of assignments and examination timetables.

#### **INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY**

Changes in methods of communication have also impacted on libraries. The unimagined growth in information and communication technology, coupled with the increasing use of information technology in teaching and learning, has changed the way users view their libraries. When they

come to an information desk users expect to get answers on how to use email and VLEs as well as how to find a journal article. Within higher education library staff have found themselves dealing more and more with computing and learning support enquiries.

#### **INFORMATION LITERACY**

We are also seeing the strengthening of the concept of information literacy, and this is very significant for the professional identity of librarians. Much has been written about information literacy<sup>6</sup> and the definition most used is the one coined by the American Library Association (ALA): that information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyse and use information. While librarians have always supported users in finding information, now more than ever this is seen not just as a skill for higher education but also as something needed for full participation in a democracy. An information-literate person is able to think critically, evaluate information and make informed decisions. It has become increasingly clear that students cannot learn everything they need to know in their field of study in a few years at college. Information literacy equips them with the critical skills needed to become independent lifelong learners.

#### **SHAPING INTO THE ROLE REQUIRED FOR THE FUTURE?**

The librarianship profession has much to offer and should be leading in these changing times in higher education. 'Librarianship should be the empowering partner of all professions in the age of information and knowledge'.<sup>7</sup> However, in reality it must be asked whether the professional identity of the librarian is shaping into the role required for the future. On the ground, professional staff are adapting to these changes and job advertisements reflect this.<sup>8</sup> The need to promote library resources and to teach users how to seek and retrieve information effectively is now a central skill in the library profession and it is reflected frequently in job advertisements. It is a key new part of the professional identity. However, it would appear that traditional identifiable library skills are being subsumed by more generic, transferable skills that are not specifically related to library qualifications. Libraries are looking for staff with qualifications in areas other than librarianship in order to respond to the growing demands on the profession. These are reflected in more generic roles and more generic job titles and descriptions within the library profession. In adapting this way, the profession is taking on

and developing new skills. However, as Kennan argues, 'there is growing lack of clarity about the skills, competencies and qualifications required for professional librarians and the jurisdiction of librarianship'.<sup>9</sup> Library and information science qualifications need to continually update their curricula to ensure that the profession can acquire key necessary skills. There are more changes ahead, the beginnings of which we can see now in terms of the heightened functionality of electronic information and tighter management of library resources. It is likely that over the coming years change will remain a consistent feature of library work.

## CONCLUSION

More research needs to take place on these issues. For now, it appears that libraries need staff who can promote, market and teach library users how to make the best use of library resources. This support needs to take place at the point of learning. The evidence from literature and job advertisements indicates that learning support and teaching are featuring within the professional discourse and professional identity. Despite all the changes outlined above, it is still difficult to imagine a university without a library. The sense of a 'library space' is more important than ever, no matter what forms this space will take. Supporting our learners regardless of whether they are in the library building or using our resources off campus is a challenge. It is this challenge that will shape our professional identity in the coming years.

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- 3 Bundy, 'A window', p 394
- 4 Michael Gibbons, 'Higher education relevance in the 21st century', World Bank report, 1998, p 11. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/teia/HE%20Relevance%20Gibbons.pdf#search=%22Higher%20Education%20Relevance%20in%2021st%20Century%2C%20%22> (accessed 18.08.2006)
- 5 See Kerry Wilson et al., 'Convergence and professional identity in the academic library', *Journal of librarianship and information science*, 38 (2), 2006, pp 79–91
- 6 See Bundy, 'A window'
- 7 Bundy, 'A window', p 398
- 8 See John Cullen, (2002) 'The employment market for library and information management workers in Ireland', *Library and information research news*, 26 (83), 2002, pp 17–26 (also at <http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00003365/01/article83a.pdf#search=%22The%20employment%20market%20for%20Library%20and%20Information%20Management%20workers%20in%20Ireland%22> (accessed 20.04.2007)), and Mary Ann Kennan et al., 'Changing work place demands: what job ads tell us', *Aslib proceedings: new information perspectives*, 58 (3), 2006, pp 179–96
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## FURTHER READING

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