

Scenarios for beyond 2020:

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES
OF THE FUTURE

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Walled Garden

The issue facing academic and research libraries today is what should their role be in the changing academic and technological landscape. Scenario planning is a way of addressing such challenges. It is a way of systematically dealing with uncertainty to inform long-term strategic decisions.

The Academic Libraries of the Future project has developed three scenarios which describe possible futures for teaching and research libraries in the UK. They take the economic, social and other pressures faced by the world today and create futures in which Higher Education (HE) and libraries have evolved in different directions. They describe a world some distance away in the future, beyond 2020. The scenarios will help HE institutions and other organisations look at the challenges faced from a fresh focus and help them formulate strategies to ensure the sector continues to be a leading global force. The scenarios are based on the contributions from a wide range of stakeholders at workshops during 2010 and 2011 – librarians, institutional managers, funders, service providers, publishers and government. This flyer describes the 'library' services and organisation elements of one particular scenario. The full scenarios¹ provide additional material including common assumptions across all scenarios, the global environment and UK HE context. It is not intended to be a 'preferred' scenario; it just describes one possible future world.

This flyer is for information only and should not be used to replace the full scenario as a basis for strategic planning.

The Walled Garden World

HEIs in this scenario are 'Walled Gardens'. They are insular and inward-looking, isolated from other institutions by competing value systems. Provision of information services in this world is as much concerned with protecting their own materials for others as it is in enabling access.

In this fragmented, competitive world, 'libraries' are aligned to individual institutions, or networks of value systems; library services are available at a sector level only for the publicly-funded minority of institutions. Just as institutions choose to work only with those that share their values, they also rigorously enforce who has access to their academic output. Nearly all institutions, therefore, have in-house services run out of the library that fulfil this role.

Teaching and learning

In keeping with the focused nature of HEIs, libraries also find themselves becoming increasingly specialised around specific disciplines and services (eg specialist STEM libraries serving students, researchers, NHS and business). Some institutions that have become highly specialised have sold or otherwise divested themselves of their 'non-relevant' holdings and physical special collections, or now house them off-site.

Libraries serve the goals of their sponsor institution, and are fiercely protective of their IP. This holds for both research outputs, for which they often act as publisher, and for teaching materials. Procurement, dissemination and restriction of knowledge all present special challenges in this future.

The rise of libraries for specific value/ geographical groups has meant that the importance of the British Library has declined; it is now called the National Library of England. Another example is the establishment in Truro of a Celtic institute to research and preserve language, history and culture.



The majority of libraries, and librarians, also exhibit a defensive mentality mirroring that of individual HEIs jealously guarding 'their' content for the benefit of approved users. However, against the background of insularity and retrenchment, an underground movement of librarians continues to attempt to provide access to resources across value systems. This is despite their contractual obligations to their employers to maintain confidentiality.

Librarians commonly have strong technical skills as the majority of their work is in the digital realm. This includes technical abilities in the area of information security in order to be able to safeguard their institution's proprietary information.

The physical space traditionally associated with information services and the old-fashioned 'library' continues to be valued in 2050 and in some cases has increased in importance as a social learning space. However, in 2050 these learning spaces are not always provided by the library. In particular, the more vocational and business oriented institutions are more creative in their attitude to the provision of physical working environments.

The learning materials created by educators employed by the institution are that institution's property. The library has responsibility for ensuring materials are deposited with them, enforcing corporate standards on format and style, and for distributing and making the material available for approved users. Given that students are usually given the learning materials they need, the student support role of the library is largely in directing students towards the approved resources. Information literacy training is especially focused on information security.

Research

A very important part of the role of library services in the research sector procuring external content, which usually involves complex negotiations with external publishers and other HEIs in order to secure access to their content. These negotiations are handled by a team that includes support from specialist subject librarians or information professionals.

Since most researchers usually work to contract, as directed by the HEI or its sponsors, they often work in teams that include an information professional. At the start of a new research activity, the 'personal librarian' researches and assembles relevant background material into briefing packs for the research team and also has responsibility for group communications and ensuring IP and commercial secrets are protected. Their less well-known function is to keep up to date with developments in other institutions through more nefarious means.

Librarians and librarianship

In 2050, a 'librarian' describes a variety of information-focused roles, which are not tied to a physical building – they are embedded within different areas of an institution. The roles for information professionals in this scenario include working closely with course providers to present, publish and sell their content; as 'intelligence gatherers' for the institution; as security and IP enforcers; and as part of research teams helping researchers find, use and manage information.

Further information

Further information on LotF, or help on using the scenarios can be found at www.futurelibraries.info

1 www.futurelibraries.info