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## **Extended Abstract:**

### **Exploring the affect of current trends and future expectations on the boundary of the academic librarian using Critical Systems Heuristics**

Steve Williams  
Swansea University  
s.r.williams@swansea.ac.uk

#### **Background**

Professional academic librarians can be found in universities worldwide, curating knowledge and supporting academic users – including students and staff. Their roles have in some ways not changed in hundreds of years – to collect the accumulated wisdom of academia to help new minds and new thinking develop within their institution and across the academic community.

However in other ways the profession has transformed over recent decades, affected as others by the integration of computers and technology into the library and its working practices. Online library catalogues were early manifestations of the impact technology would have and today we see librarians engaged in digital activities including websites, webinars, blogs, app development and social media. The all-pervasive online and mobile world is challenging librarians to provide content and support to users in increasingly complex ways. The sheer number of communication channels opened up through social media and online communities leads to challenges for librarians, many of whom started their careers writing letters, then e-mails and now, they tweet and blog.

If technology was not a challenge in itself, the UK Higher Education community has seen a rapid and radical transformation of policy in recent years, leading to the expansion of higher education, the introduction of fees, funder policies mandating free and open access to research and a range of more minor changes all of which impact upon the role of librarian.

#### **Aims**

The aim of this research was to understand more deeply the affect that these technological and socio-political changes are having on the role of the librarian. If we do not understand these changes, how can we support librarians to see and understand the future role they will be expected to play within the institution and the professional community?

This research did this through considering the *boundary* of the librarian's professional role, and evaluating how it has changed and will be expected to change over time. In this context the *boundary* defines what a librarian considers to be part of their professional, working role. In the past, areas such as acquisition, cataloguing, and user support were clearly part of the role and we might expect them to continue. As we look to more recent developments in academic settings we find open access, research data management, fee plans, mobile content and delivery, community support, educational outreach and other areas becoming more embedded within institutions, as well as a raft of technologies, that might or might not be affecting the boundary of the librarian now, and might or might not affect them tomorrow.

In particular this research asked how we might:

- identify the professional skills required by the librarian now and in the future;
- take into account changes in technological, social and educational contexts;
- understand a librarian's expectations of user needs and expectations;
- understand a librarians knowledge of institutional needs and expectations;
- understand the phenomenon of being a librarian today and in the future; and
- understand whether the approach taken in this research has been beneficial

## **Methodology**

The academic and professional library literature was reviewed and interviews conducted with five librarians of varying role and experience. The interviews used a phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1990) that asked participants what it means to them to be a librarian. The interview transcripts and the literature review were combined and explored using Critical Systems Heuristics, (Ulrich and Reynolds, 2010) allowing a critique of the boundary of the system and a comparison of how participants would ideally like the system to operate against how it operates in reality. The comparison of these *ideal* and *descriptive* mappings allowed a deeper understanding of the librarian, and their environment, and helped surface ways in which improvements might be approached.

## **Results**

Professional academic librarians feel a strong grounding in the ideals of helping, kindness, education and access to information for all. They see the librarian, and library, as the open and welcoming heart of academic life and they aim to be able and willing to help their users.

Technological and socio-political change, such as the growth in UK higher education, the introduction of student fees, and the mandates of funders to make university research publications and research data publicly available are embraced by librarians, though they are not always sure how best to support or provide certain of these advanced, and as yet rather undefined, services. The rapid advances in mobile content and devices are less well understood and embraced, even though students, staff and librarians are using these devices more and more in their daily professional and personal lives.

The profession of academic librarian appears to be in a state of flux. Dealing with the complexity of technological, social and political change is challenging for the profession. The quality of librarian professional development, which in the main is ad-hoc and individual-led, was identified as an issue through this research. The existing structure is unlikely to be a force for fundamental and positive change in the academic librarian profession.

### **Discussion**

It is evident that the skills required by the librarian are changing as new domains such as research data management, open access, and others, enter within the boundary of the professional, academic librarian. Understanding the changes within the profession through this research leads us to the question of how we might best support librarians in facing up to, embracing, or leading this change. The current lack of coherent, post-qualification, professional development routes could be an area in which improvement might be facilitated. Who librarians might expect to lead in this area is another matter that needs some consideration.

It is not simply a matter of training librarians in all the lists of skills they require. What is uncertain is how the academic librarian and library of today will become the academic librarian and library of tomorrow – in the face of substantial evidence that technological change is fundamentally altering the way we live, work and study.

### **References**

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- Ulrich, W., Reynolds, M., 2010. Critical Systems Heuristics, in: Reynolds, M., Holwell, S. (Eds.), *Systems Approaches to Managing Change: A Practical Guide*. Springer London, London, pp. 243–292.