

Designing libraries for research collaboration in the network world

By Sheila Corrall, Professor and Chair, Library & Information Science Program, School of Information Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Digital scholarship and the problem of research data offer libraries the chance to shed their “support service” label and become research collaborators.



Sheila Corrall

Yet academics often see the library as “a dispensary of goods,” not project partners.¹ Studies on this issue have surveyed service innovation² and skills renewal³ in research libraries, but not structural designs. In summer 2013, I explored how UK libraries are organizing and presenting their services and expertise to support e-research. My sample was the 24 members of the Russell Group of leading research universities.⁴ The findings confirm that many libraries are gearing up for more active roles in research.

Integrated library and computing services have fallen from favor. A decade ago the combined information service organization was the dominant model in UK universities.⁵ Recently, however, several major players (The University of Nottingham, University of Bristol, King’s College London, London School of Economics) have de-converged. Another high-profile example, the University of Birmingham, re-converged the library into a new academic services division with education-related and student-facing functions, excluding the previously merged computing services.

Reporting lines for library and information services have shifted. University library directors traditionally reported to an institution’s vice chancellor or president or, more recently, to a deputy or another senior academic administrator (e.g., a pro-vice chancellor). Three-quarters of the sample now report directly or indirectly to the chief operating officer, alongside an array of other professional services, ranging from finance and human resources to students and research support. The switch from an academic to an administrative grouping may give libraries the advantage of not aligning them specifically with learning and teaching.

Library structures mix function and market/subject elements. The size and shape of the superstructures vary, with leadership teams of three to eight members. The titles of positions and divisions also vary. Some libraries combine one or more functions, but they consistently use five main groupings:

- Academic services/research and learning support (usually subdivided by subject field)
- Collection development/information resource management
- Special collections and archives/heritage collections
- Customer services/reader services/user support
- E-strategy/digital services/information technologies

New senior positions and titles are signaling strategic priorities. Libraries have created leadership positions or extended and relabeled familiar operational functions to emphasize or focus on critical areas. Research services is just one example of a renamed operational area. Some libraries are renaming former academic liaisons as academic engagement or even relationship management positions. Additional examples of new or renamed positions are directors or heads of archives and information management, assessment, library services development, resource and innovation services, and scholarly communication.

Subject liaison arrangements are being enhanced and remodeled. Despite its critics,⁶ the system of assigning named individuals as subject librarians for academic departments, schools or disciplines remains a vital element of UK research library design. Of the study’s 24 members, 22 used this system, and one other was working toward its introduction. Different labels are used, but titles including “liaison” outnumber those using “subject.” The number of positions ranges from six or eight at the smallest institutions to 32 or even 52, with an average around 14. Many have team structures mirroring the institutional

structure of colleges or faculties. Some have strengthened their models with assistant liaison librarians or liaison assistants.

Digital scholarship and the problem of research data offer libraries the chance to shed their “support service” label and become research collaborators.

Two unusual cases at either end of the spectrum offer possible future models. The University of Southampton senior team includes the librarian, deputy and five heads of faculty services, providing a subject focus at the top table. The University of Manchester has replaced a longstanding model of academic liaisons for faculty teams with three teams (for research services, teaching and learning, and academic engagement), with liaisons part of strategic marketing and communications.⁷

Specialist research positions are emerging as a significant trend. Although subject liaisons have traditionally provided research support, policy shifts and technical complexities in the research environment have prompted rethinking. Many libraries recognize the need for higher-end services (e.g., bibliometrics, research data management) and strategic coordination of specialist activities within and beyond the library.⁸ They have cross-cutting roles with titles such as library liaison manager (research) and research support leader, and new coordinator positions or specialist teams for research skills, systematic reviews, data curation and open access publishing. These new positions at operational, team leader and senior levels are creating matrix/hybrid structures and new career paths. There is a similar trend in the US.⁹

Groups and websites are promoting boundary-spanning services. Beyond the library, many directors and specialist staff are coordinating institution-wide policy

>> page 4

Sheila Corral << page 3

development and implementation—especially for research data and open access—with academic and professional colleagues in steering committees, project boards, action groups, and implementation teams. Three-quarters of the libraries offer unified support for researchers through websites that try to present useful and meaningful information instead of professional jargon or a list of services. A notable trend is websites bringing relevant library, technology and other support together, irrespective of the provider. A good example is the King’s College London Library website, Support Through the Research Lifecycle.¹⁰

New websites, groups, positions and other structures are enabling libraries to promote their expertise, build relationships, and position themselves as key players in the research arena. **LC**

This article is based on a presentation at the 2013 LIBER Annual Conference in Munich, Germany.

scorral@pitt.edu

References

¹Jahnke, L. M., Asher, A., & Keralis, S. (2012). *The problem of data*. Council on Library and Information Resources & Digital Library Federation. www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub154/pub154.pdf

²Corral, S., Kennan, M. A., & Afzal, W. (2013). Bibliometrics and research data management services: Emerging trends in library support for research. *Library Trends*, 61(3), 636–674. <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/18948/>

³Brewerton, A. (2012). Re-skilling for research: Investigating the needs of researchers and how library staff can best support them. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 18(1), 96–110.

⁴www.russellgroup.ac.uk

⁵Hanson, T. (Ed.) (2005). *Managing academic support services: The convergence experience*. London: Facet.

⁶Cotta-Schønberg, M. (2007). The changing role of the subject specialist. *LIBER Quarterly*, 17(3/4). <http://liber.library.uu.nl/index.php/lq/issue/view/459>

⁷Manchester University Library (2012). News from member libraries. *SCONUL Focus*, 56, 61–62. www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/20_6.pdf

⁸Bradbury, K., & Weightman, A. (2010). Research support at Cardiff University Library. *SCONUL Focus*, 50, 65–70. www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/19_2.pdf

⁹Jaguscewski, J., & Williams, K. (2013). *New roles for new times: Transforming liaison roles in research libraries*. Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries. www.arl.org/focus-areas/planning-visioning/new-roles-for-new-times

¹⁰www.kcl.ac.uk/library/researchsupport/index.aspx

SciTech Connect: Insight into books and events in 20 subject areas



Who can best encapsulate a book, or provide that insider’s knowledge of what prompted its writing? SciTech Connect offers a unique vantage point that only the author can provide. This blog from Elsevier Science & Technology Books is divided into 20 subject areas from Alternative & Renewable Energy to Stem Cell Research. We asked our colleagues to give us a behind-the-scenes look at the blog.

1. Do you just cover new books, or do you ever look at the Science & Technology “classics”?

Since the blog is such a new initiative, the majority of our authors have been writing about current books or those publishing soon. That said, we believe all of our books are equally important, and we will be delving into our Science & Technology classics.

<http://scitechconnect.elsevier.com>

2. How many authors have posted to the blog?

Right now, 50 of our book authors have blog posts on SciTech Connect. Some of these authors have multiple posts, or plan to contribute regularly.

3. Will you expand the subject areas?

The majority of our books fit neatly into these large subject areas. If we find that our communities are interested in subject areas not covered, or would like more focus within a particular area, we will take a close look at our books and authors to expand accordingly. In other words, we are certainly open to growth.

4. How many of these titles are available as eBooks?

The majority of our new titles are available as eBooks through the Elsevier Store (<http://store.elsevier.com>) or ScienceDirect. More than 17,000 Science & Technology eBooks are available through the Elsevier Store, and about 19,000 through ScienceDirect.

5. Where do you get your event listings from?

The events come from the Global Events List (www.globaleventslist.elsevier.com), Elsevier’s resource of the world’s scientific and medical events. This site neatly divides events into the applicable disciplines, and provides key event details, contact information, social media accounts, comments for networking, and the ability to add the event right to your calendar. Event organizers can add their event to the Global Events List for free! **LC**