Openness in Libraries

Position Paper of the Commission for Research-Related Services of the VDB[1]

Shaping access to knowledge is a central task of modern libraries. In the last century, the question of openness focused on material things only, such as opening hours or access to books. Today, in the context of digital transformation, the term openness also refers to immaterial goods and calls for an open access to information that is hindered by as few financial, technical and legal hurdles as possible.

The topic of openness is also becoming increasingly important in scientific research. Digital working environments have fundamentally changed methods and procedures. Research is increasingly being conducted across disciplines, using digitised or digital objects. The transition to digital publications is in principle seamless.

Based on Open Access, i.e. the free and open access to scientific publications, the term Open Science[2] refers to the opening up of further partial aspects of the research cycle. For example, research data are published as digital objects at different stages of a project, research methods are documented openly, and quality control is becoming increasingly transparent. Opening up the research cycle promotes the traceability and reliability of research results as well as the development of interdisciplinary approaches to solving global problems.

Libraries are indeed central players in the digital transformation towards an open information society, but they are not solely responsible for the success of this transformation. A cultural shift towards openness can increasingly be observed among all involved: Researchers are striving for openness in the research and publication process, university administrations are formulating policies to promote openness and are creating corresponding infrastructures, and third-party funders expect disclosure of research processes and data when awarding funding. Political support in the creation of financial, legal and technical frameworks is also necessary.

At the same time, there are also restrictions from various sides, and limits on the disclosure of research processes, data or results. Openness in this sense therefore always means "as open as possible, as closed as necessary"[3] in the sense of the FAIR principles.

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1   The position paper was prepared by the Commission for Research-Related Services of the Association of German Librarians (VDB – Verein Deutscher Bibliothekarinnen und Bibliothekare) at the suggestion of the VDB Executive Board. It serves as a basis for a positioning of the professional association as well as the various specialist commissions of the VDB on the topic of openness. For more information and contact details of the commission see <https://www.vdb-online.org/kommissionen/forschungsnahe-dienste/>, retrieved 26.04.2022. The position paper is also available in German: Openness in Bibliotheken. Positionspapier der Kommission für forschungsnahe Dienste, in: o-bib 9 (2), 2022. Online: <https://doi.org/10.5282/o-bib/5826>.

2   Cf. What is Open Science? Introduction, FOSTER, <https://www.fosteropenscience.eu/content/what-open-science-introduction/>, retrieved 26.04.2022.

3   Cf. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation: Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) of the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC). Version 1.0, Brussels 2021. Online: <https://doi.org/10.2777/935288>, p. 61.

How does the situation look for libraries in particular?

Libraries are already in favour of the journey to more openness because of their self-image and social responsibility as an institution that promotes democracy. Beyond that, however, there are further *reasons* for promoting an open approach to knowledge:

- *Academic principle of sharing knowledge*: The entire research and publication cycle should be freely accessible and transparent. Only those who have access to this information can build on it with their own research and develop new scientific knowledge. Openness promotes interdisciplinary cooperation and scientific innovation. Society also benefits from this progress.
- *Libraries as open learning and teaching spaces*: In the sense of learning commons or research commons, library spaces offer low-threshold accessible learning and research environments for individual and group work. They provide access to the internet and all library holdings. Library staff gives advice on information research, use and evaluation.
- *Public funding*: A large proportion of libraries are funded by the federal, state or local governments and thus by the public sector. Accordingly, all library services should be freely accessible to the public.
- *Verifiability of information*: In order for content to be reviewed and, if necessary, evaluated, it must be freely accessible. Openness thus contributes to the quality assurance of information. Open science is part of good scientific practice.

In order for libraries to be able to fulfil their self-image of providing an open offer of rooms, information and advice, the following *requirements* must be fulfilled:

- *Training and further education*: Employees need not only professional and methodological skills, but also the willingness to work transdisciplinarily, interculturally and multilingually.
- *Free licences*: For software, research data, audiovisual media, publications and other knowledge formats, free licences that allow subsequent use must become the standard.
- *Infrastructure*: Networked, sustainable infrastructures are required for the publication, storage, indexing and research of information. The monopolisation and commercialisation of information services should be opposed by not-for-profit service infrastructures.
- *Networks for the development and operation of services*: The implementation of openness is technically, administratively and legally complex and requires structures based on the division of labour across institutions and associations. The globalisation of the publication market and the international networking of the scientific community also demand generic, supranational solutions.
- *Standards*: In order to enable and strengthen the exchange and subsequent use of knowledge, (open) standards in the field of formats, metadata and software are required. This also applies to standards for identifying authors and institutions (e.g. ORCID, ROR).
- *Resources*: The implementation of openness along with the associated change and expansion of services require additional staff resources as well as appropriate spatial and technical equipment.

Libraries additionally offer their own *services* as well as training and consultancy to support the implementation of openness in different areas and are already engaged in the following areas:

- *Open Access*: Free access to scientific publications – Libraries support researchers in publishing their research results freely under open licences and ensure that the research results are available to the public.
- *Open Data*: Free access to data – Libraries support researchers in making their research data accessible in a structured way and sustainably available to the public, and also make their own data produced in the library freely available for further use under appropriate licences.
- *Open Educational Resources (OER):* Free access to learning and teaching materials – Libraries make educational resources available for re-use by their users. This includes free educational materials created by library staff and other members of the institution.
- *Open Innovation*: Transparency in development and change processes – Libraries open up their innovation processes and involve external stakeholders (e.g. users).
- *Open Peer Review*: Transparent assessment processes for publications – Libraries advocate for open communication in research assessment.
- *Open Source*: Free software and hardware – Libraries use open source technologies and make self-developed products available for further use.

Against this background, the Commission for Research-Related Services of the VDB sees the following *challenges* on the journey to more openness:

- *Long-term accessibility*: Licensing sometimes offers only temporary access. Libraries face the challenge of ensuring long-term access to acquired or licensed materials independent of commercial partners and their economic interests. Long-term availability must also be ensured for materials published in libraries (research data, publications, etc.).
- *Legal hurdles* stand in the way of the idea of openness in many application scenarios. For example, the legal certainty of CC BY licences is not always given. Copyright, personal rights, data protection or export restrictions also set limits to the idea of openness.
- *Security of personal data*: Large commercial publishers are increasingly using data tracking to create behavioural profiles of users. Free access to publication services must not be linked to misuse or commercial re-use of personal data.
- *Ethical aspects*: In individual cases, a limitation of openness may be necessary. For example, data should not be published if this violates an individual or societal need for protection or if the published data has the potential to be misused.
- *Openness of spaces and openness of services*: An open information society continues to need open libraries – in the sense of comprehensive opening hours and openly usable spaces. These services are also staff-intensive. At the same time, openness also applies to newer services such as research-related services, which are only just becoming established. The competition arising between these two forms of openness due to staff shortages in libraries should not lead to one falling victim to the other.
- *Resources and competences*: The opening up of existing services in the sense of openness and the development of new services in the context of digital transformation require systematic

personnel development and, as a rule, additional personnel, additional technical infrastructure and additional financial resources. In terms of staff, skills such as a mindset for innovative thinking, accepting and learning from failure, and experience in project management are indispensable for the transformation of existing services and the development of new ones.

The Commission for Research-Related Services sees the promotion of openness as a central task of libraries. In this sense, it is strongly committed to the establishment and further development of innovative library services, and committed to the principles of openness.

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