

Designing libraries for research collaboration in the network world

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



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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.

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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

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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**

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