

Technology and the Positioning of the Library on Campus: Challenges and Opportunities

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TECHNOLOGY AND THE POSITIONING OF THE LIBRARY ON CAMPUS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Technology has transformed how teaching and research happen, and the strategies and priorities of higher education institutions are continually evolving in response to emerging demands. Positioning itself optimally in a changing organisation is a key challenge for any academic library. The positioning of the library in the institution impacts its status, resources and opportunities. Technology has made effective positioning more challenging, competitive and fluid. This paper examines positioning challenges libraries face on campus and outlines some approaches to advancing their position in the institution.

Digital publishing and communications have moved academic libraries from a position of monopoly for access to scholarly publications to being only one of many information providers seeking to fit into new academic workflows. The digital shift has blurred the identity of the library as a change in emphasis from collections to users progresses. Buildings have been adapted from a collections-centric to a more social focus, with services increasingly co-delivered with IT or other partners and staff from backgrounds outside librarianship joining teams. Optimal staffing structures and roles are uncertain. Academic libraries face complex issues of collaboration and competition with other units on campus which, while partnering with the library in areas of mutual benefit, also rival it for resources, credit and leadership. Updating the often-traditional perceptions of libraries held by key stakeholders is a further positioning challenge.

By recognising and acting on these challenges libraries can overcome them to advance their position. An agenda of strong contribution to institutional priorities, close connectivity with stakeholders, exercising both leadership and partnership, and selling clearly the library's new identity and value proposition will progress the library in its parent organisation, as will acting globally to realise the opportunities of open scholarship.

Keywords: Universities; Libraries; Positioning; Strategy; Information Technology; Partnership

Introduction

The positioning of the academic library in its parent institution is something which is shaped by a range of factors, including developments in technology. This paper begins with a definition of the concept of positioning, explores why it is important for academic libraries, considers the environment in which higher education institutions operate and discusses positioning challenges and opportunities for libraries. The influence of technology, positive and negative, on academic library positioning is a recurrent theme throughout, although it is recognised that technology is now so pervasive and mainstreamed across any library's activities that it may be artificial to see it as a separate context. Positioning the academic library successfully on campus spans a range of tensions, paradigms, audiences and relationships but the conclusion the paper draws is that technology offers more positioning opportunities than threats.

What is Positioning and Why Does It Matter?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2019) first included an entry for positioning in 1884. Its current definition is “the action of putting a person or thing in a certain position, esp. an effective or advantageous position; (also) the fact of being in a certain position or location.” Interestingly, the *Dictionary* introduced a further definition in 1957, identifying a marketing context for positioning, specifically the “identification of a product, service or business as belonging to a particular market sector; strategic or distinctive promotion within a targeted market sector”. This definition clearly emphasises positioning as an activity, something to be performed with the conscious intent of selling a particular idea of an entity to an identified audience. The academic library can shape its own positioning on campus according to the directions it takes and how effectively it communicates its identity and value to stakeholders in the institution.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of how an academic library positions itself in its parent institution. At stake potentially are its prospects for resource allocation, its influence with institutional leadership, the way in which it is perceived by stakeholders, whether it is grouped with service or academic departments and where it is located in the organisational hierarchy (Cox, 2018). Advantageous positioning will create strong conditions for success, but the opposite also holds true as a weak position will likely promote decline. The current positioning climate is difficult too, as reflected in the 2016 Ithaka US library survey which highlighted a sense of decreasing support for libraries on campus among more than 700 library directors who participated (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017).

Higher Education Institutions in Flux

The positioning of the library on campus needs to take full account of the environment in which higher education institutions are operating. That environment is pressurised, challenging, and somewhat unstable due to a number of factors. These include: a major focus on accountability by governments and other regulators; intensified competition for students and research funding; higher expectations by students who take an increasingly consumerist perspective, especially as fees rise; greater internationalisation, with institutions becoming global players, seeking to attract students from many countries, working with international partners and ranked according to their standing worldwide; and a persistently difficult financial environment over the past decade in which institutions receive less government funding and are expected to generate a far higher proportion of their own income than previously.

An overarching factor driving change and challenge for higher education institutions is the revolutionary influence of technology on how teaching and research are conducted. Technology has increased student choice and expectations, emphasised greater flexibility, influenced learner behaviours and changed the profile of the student body (Bell, Dempsey, & Fister, 2015). It also affects profoundly the research process, for example by promoting more collaborative and computational approaches (McRostie, 2016), often through transnational partnerships. Education at all levels is experiencing continuous change, happening over a period of time and often driven by technology, as identified in Figure 1 (European Political Strategy Centre, 2017).

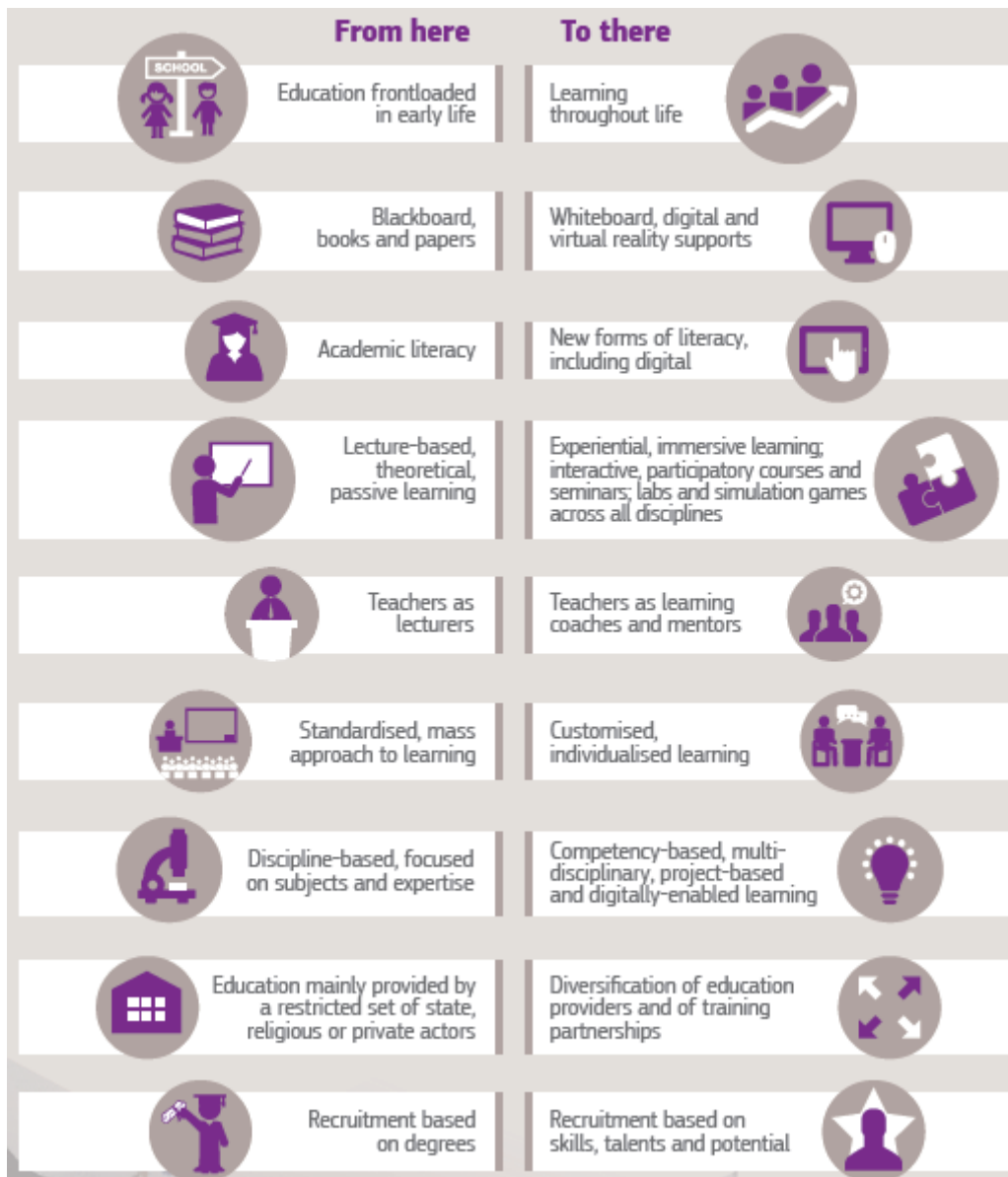


Figure 1. Ten trends transforming education. Source: European Political Strategy Centre. (2017). *10 trends transforming education as we know it.*

Technology-Driven Positioning Challenges and Competition for Libraries

Shifting sands is a phrase that comes to mind when describing the environment in which higher education institutions operate. Their situation is far from stable and this means that a key challenge for academic libraries trying to position themselves successfully on campus is that they find themselves chasing a moving target as their parent institutions' drivers, circumstances and priorities evolve. The shifts identified in Figure 1 impact libraries as profoundly as the institutions in which they operate, for example placing a premium on lifelong learning, digital literacy, interdisciplinary approaches and technology-rich spaces that promote collaboration. All of these transformations, and others such as flipped classroom teaching methodologies and data-centric research, raise new expectations of libraries. The effectiveness of their response in terms of space, infrastructure, expertise and partnerships, can significantly impact their positioning in the institution.

Technology has also contributed to making effective positioning more challenging, competitive and fluid. Digital publishing and communications have moved academic libraries from a position

of monopoly for access to scholarly publications to being only one of many information providers seeking to fit into new academic workflows. Formerly one had to visit the library building to access collections which were built and acquired by library staff, specific to the institution, and the only resources available there. Today the library's online collections can be accessed anywhere alongside digital materials provided by others, and the ubiquity and convenience of digital devices make a visit to the library a matter of choice rather than necessity. The library can no longer claim to be the uncontested heart of the campus (Murray & Ireland, 2018). Students and academics may not even recognise that the journal article they are reading was provided via their institution's library. This lack of visibility has consequences, potentially compromising the library's standing at all levels, including institutional governance.

Technology has fuelled a number of partnerships on campus. These can be fruitful, for example with the research office in relation to open access publishing, with the IT department around research data management and with the teaching and learning support unit to advance digital literacy. There is, however, also a definite element of competition for leadership in the institution in these areas of collaboration. Libraries might sensibly see these partners as "collab-etitors", entities with which it is important to maintain an appropriate balance of collaboration and competition for recognition and resources.

Competition for libraries from high-technology companies beyond the campus is also plentiful. The obvious examples are Google and Amazon, both long established in areas of core business for libraries. Beyond these two, many other companies and products have emerged in the area of scholarly communications workflows (Kramer & Bosman, 2015), aiming to save time for researchers in the generation and publication of papers, data and other outputs. Commercial publishers, notably Elsevier (Posada & Chen, 2017), have become active in this space, acquiring products and engaging researchers directly in their use, thereby bypassing libraries. A further competitor, perhaps not fully recognised to date by libraries, is *Sci-Hub* which circumvents paywalls to make an estimated 85% of scholarly articles in toll-access journals available for free (Himmelstein et al., 2018). Libraries tend to focus on the illicit nature of this operation, but it has gained traction in preference to other discovery systems for the convenience with which it offers access to material via a single platform, challenging the position of libraries in this space.

The identity of the academic library is less clear in the digital world and this can compromise its positioning on campus. A few factors are at play in this regard. The transformation of library buildings into more social, technology-enabled, interactive learning spaces aligns well with pedagogical trends and institutional needs but may mean that the library building loses distinctiveness as it looks increasingly similar to other learning locations across the campus. Libraries have been enlightened in joining forces with, and hosting, a range of other student-facing services on campus, commonly IT and writing support, and sometimes including student administration, student services, counselling, welfare, and careers advice. The library may, however, lose its scholarly association through convergence with other services (Bulpitt, 2012). This may be most noticeable in terms of library space but the professional identity of the library becomes more blurred too as staff from a range of backgrounds work in library buildings, co-deliver services or join library teams, often as specialists with technology skills essential to new areas of engagement such as digital scholarship or research data management. Academic libraries, as described later, are paying more attention to their branding and the assertion of a distinct identity as they evolve their positioning in the institution.

The perceptions of the academic library held by key stakeholders in the institution may not reflect a fully up-to-date recognition of its broader technology-driven agenda and contributions. Traditional views may predominate, especially among senior administrators who sometimes continue to think of the library as it was when they were students. A study of the future academic library engaged a number of non-library participants and found that many of them still saw libraries "primarily as storehouses of books" (Pinfield, Cox, & Rutter, 2017). Perceptions of this nature are unhelpful to the library's positioning in the institution.

Technology-Led Positioning Opportunities and Strategies for Libraries

The challenges described in the preceding section might suggest that technology has more of a negative than a positive influence on the positioning of academic libraries in higher education institutions. These challenges are, however, balanced by real opportunities to leverage technology to advance the position of the library on campus.

In general terms, and relative to the past, technology carries fewer overheads for libraries. Previously libraries needed to invest considerable effort and resources in maintaining systems locally, and the complexity of those systems represented a high overhead. Today's models of outsourcing, cloud computing and software as a service have reduced the local burden hugely. Furthermore, user support is a noticeably lower call on resources as devices have become mainstreamed, standardised and simpler to use, relying on easily downloaded, automatically updated, applications rather than locally installed software. The opportunity for libraries is that resources previously tied up in maintenance and support operations can now be liberated towards more creative, more high-profile technology deployment. Libraries, if they take an enterprising approach, can get involved in scholarship at a higher level than before, with a focus on creativity, outputs and impact. There is scope for libraries to enhance their position by providing leadership on campus in a number of areas of benefit to the institution.

A fundamental shift is taking place towards the library as digital publisher. Lorcan Dempsey frames this as a change in balance from an "outside-in" to an "inside-out" collections role (Dempsey, 2016). The former represents the traditional role of libraries in acquiring and making available externally published material for their community while the latter focuses the library's contribution on making materials generated by the institution available to the outside world. Libraries have developed active digital publishing programmes, enabling wider exposure of institutional publications, datasets, teaching materials and unique collections. This publishing role has enhanced the status of libraries and exerted a positive influence for institutions seeking maximum global impact and recognition.

Technology has opened up opportunities for academic libraries to take digital leadership roles on campus. Digital scholarship is an example, with libraries developing systems infrastructures, creating physical spaces and taking on many new areas of activity, ranging from digital preservation and metadata creation to digital mapping and computational text analysis (Mulligan, 2016). Engagement with digital scholarship has often moved libraries from a service role to one of partnership and libraries have been active in creating and developing their own digital humanities projects (Posner, 2013).

The Library at National University of Ireland Galway led an institutional project from 2012 to 2015 to digitise the archive of Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey Theatre. This was a highly challenging project, encompassing over a million pages, with documents in a range of formats and sometimes in delicate condition. Positive outcomes for the institution included generating almost €1M in research funding and student scholarships, attracting scholars from around the world to the campus and thereby creating new international connections for the University, providing unique source material for a range of academic publications and underpinning the shaping of a new undergraduate curriculum for theatre and drama as well as the creation of new masters programmes (Cox, 2017a). A further benefit has been the positioning of the University Library as a key player in digital scholarship, with institutional leadership and researchers viewing its role differently following the success of this large-scale digital project (Cox, 2017b).

Research data management is another area in which libraries have stepped forward to meet a need for institutional expertise, as policy makers and funders have developed policies to meet new expectations around the curation and sharing of data. The leadership of research data management on campus is a contested space (Pinfield, Cox, & Smith, 2014), but libraries are well placed to take the primary position by virtue of the skillsets they possess, including metadata generation, preservation, rights management and publication, alongside their ability to

work in partnership with others and the experience they have gained through lead roles in digital publishing.

Open scholarship, also commonly called open science or open research, represents a new leadership opportunity for libraries in the institution and indeed beyond it. There are many descriptions of open scholarship; for the purposes of this paper it is defined as a global movement that aims to make publications, data and other research outputs publicly accessible as early as possible and to encourage active participation by the general public in a collaborative and transparent research process. Open scholarship calls for a new and distinctive level of engagement by libraries. It involves libraries in the whole environment of research, including issues of integrity, transparency and assessment. They have a key role in advocating changes to the established publishing and reward system, promoting cultural change, training researchers in skills for open science and challenging publishers to adopt new models focused on open access. Libraries can position themselves on campus as leaders in open scholarship, promoting institutional participation on a shared and global basis. This leadership role emphasises the importance for library positioning of acting globally, not just locally.

Two other areas of technology-related leadership are of note. The first is in relation to learning spaces. The transformation of many library buildings to technology-rich, versatile learning environments, conducive to knowledge creation and collaborative engagement, means that there is a lot of valuable experience which library staff can share with others seeking to create similar spaces elsewhere on campus. This is exemplified in a case study from Loughborough University (Matthews & Walton, 2014). The other area concerns digital literacy, which incorporates dimensions such as content creation, communication, collaboration and responsible digital citizenship (Alexander, Adams Becker, Cummins, & Hall Geisinger, 2017). Academic libraries have expanded their established role in information literacy to encompass digital literacy, taking account of contexts such as an increased institutional focus on employability and a renewed emphasis on critical thinking in the face of a recent proliferation of “fake news”.

Technology also invites academic libraries to consider their branding: how do they think of themselves and how might they shape the way they are perceived by others on campus? There may be risks in continuing to emphasise the library as a service. Interviews with provosts in a study on academic library impact, referenced earlier, revealed a view that they “envision service as less explicit and therefore less “proactive”” (Connaway, Harvey, Kitzie, & Mikitish, 2017). Digital scholarship, as already noted, has encouraged libraries to project themselves as equal partners with academic staff, and an interviewee in a report on how libraries are viewed by senior figures in the institution observes that “Librarians should be striving to be recognised as partners in the academic enterprise” (Baker & Allden, 2017). Pinfield, Cox and Rutter (2017) put forward some interesting paradigms for libraries, reflective of changed roles in the digital space. These include:

- the library as platform
- the library as infrastructure
- the computational library
- the library as digital third space
- the globalised library
- the boundaryless library

The language used is thought-provoking and could usefully stimulate debate around the evolving contribution of the academic library to the institutional mission, with potential for positive impact in terms of positioning.

Conclusion

Successful positioning in its parent institution is important if an academic library is to thrive. The stakes are high as the position the library achieves on campus strongly impacts its resourcing and level of influence with stakeholders. The same is true for other departments and there is intense competition for position within the institution. Libraries are in a fight and need to assert their value, taking credit where it is due and working to shape their destiny by adopting a proactive approach to their positioning. This can be challenging at a time when higher education institutions are experiencing continuous and disruptive change, pressure from different quarters and issues of sustainability. Technology is the major disruptor, transforming the *modus operandi* for teaching and research, promoting internationalisation and raising new expectations of the institution, including the library. The environment is not stable and institutional strategy is often fluid, meaning that libraries are looking to position themselves amid shifting sands and rising tides.

Technology may represent a mixed blessing for academic libraries as regards their institutional positioning. They have lost the monopoly position they formerly occupied on campus for access to information, with an attendant reduction in immediate visibility. There is lots of competition on and beyond the campus for roles in online information delivery and management. Users have choices, and technology companies are keen to have their business when it comes to information discovery and supply or streamlined scholarly workflows. The digital world has also blurred the distinctive identity of libraries whose transformed buildings may, in part at least, resemble other learning spaces on campus. Library staffing may be less clearly presented in multi-professional partnerships, no longer consisting only of librarians but embracing staff from a range of backgrounds as digital offerings evolve. A further positioning challenge is that stakeholder perceptions may not keep up with new technology-driven library roles and value, necessitating a constant communications effort to foreground the library contribution to the institutional mission.

Agile libraries can, however, take opportunities offered by technology to advance their positioning on campus. The advent of cloud computing offers a new freedom to move up the value chain in the institution as lower-impact, behind-the-scenes, effort can be outsourced or exported. The current emphasis on the library's digital publishing role is a case in point and is fully in tune with the needs of the institution for global influence through wider exposure of its research and teaching outputs. Libraries have exerted leadership through innovative contributions to digital scholarship, often based on unique collections and with positive impact for the academic mission, while also defining new library roles and contributions on and beyond the campus. The rise of open scholarship further encourages libraries to take a global perspective and to assume new roles, with scope to influence not just the dissemination but also the conduct, integrity and assessment of research, and to redefine their institution's relationship with scholarly publishers.

Libraries have expertise to share in the development of digital learning spaces and the promotion of digital literacy, with opportunities for new campus partnerships in each case. Technology promotes consideration of library branding, something which also plays a part in positioning. There is potential to escape the terminology of service and to project libraries more helpfully as partners and facilitators of knowledge creation. A positive embracing of the opportunities of technology can truly enhance the positioning of the academic library in the institution.

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