Demonstrating and delivering value: the Academic library in the 21st century

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This presentation will explore the following questions:

• Traditional objectives for academic libraries?
• Are these objectives still valid?
• Do libraries still add value to the academic enterprise?
• How can we find evidence for this?
A different world

• Our new undergraduates were born in 1990s
• Often more computer literate & information-savvy than middle-aged librarians
• But many struggle to read & write at level required for academic work
• Have to deal with English as 2nd or even 3rd language
• Many haven’t had access to school or even public libraries
Students now with different needs

• Play computer games & Twitter & Flickr & download music to cell phones - but are they computer literate in an academic sense?
• Many find adapting to academic life inordinately difficult
• Find library an alienating place where they don’t really belong
• Old style spaces & services don’t appeal to them at all
• Are our library services still important; do they still have value for the new generation?
What is value?

- Value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder
- Something has value if it is perceived to have worth or to be important
- Perceptions of value may change
- Evidence of value only available from someone who shares the same value system
Why demonstrate value?

New LIS Transformation Charter specifically recommends that academic libraries:

“Commit to an ongoing process of self review in keeping with each institution’s need to ensure a system of reliable monitoring and evaluation and developing a method of demonstrating value and providing evidence of impact” (Draft 6, p.31)
**Library values?**

- Libraries count/value many things, e.g.:
  - Inputs (money; stock; staff...)
  - Outputs (circulation, downloads, ILL ...)
  - Size (of physical & digital collections...)

- Important to be able to quantify what we do for accounting & benchmarking

- But Orr (1973): distinguished between ‘how good is the library’ & ‘what good does it DO?’

- Our counts don’t say much about what good the library does
Just counting isn’t enough

• Town refers to the ‘higher order of beneficial effects of libraries’; which depend not on immediate goals, but on value systems

• Risk that much of what libraries do ‘may be invisible in a virtual environment’

• New pressure for proof of value

• How can we show the ‘Intangible wider benefits’ or the transcendent value of the library?
Demonstrating library value

• What does the University value?
•Expressed in official value statements
• E.g. (Unisa Principal’s address Jan 2010):
  For the next three years the focus will be on teaching and learning, and to enhance research and innovation
• Library can look for evidence here
• Explicitly demonstrate & provide evidence of adding to teaching & learning
Delivering value to whom?

University libraries have different groups of ‘clients’

• Academics: teachers & researchers
• Postgraduate students (who may also be researchers)
• Undergraduate students (at very different levels)
• University itself that pays for the library

All have different perceptions of what is valuable & libraries have to demonstrate value to them all
Understanding a University library

• The library as a collection
  – Are libraries still collecting stuff?
• As a space
  – Do users still need to go to the Library?
• As a function
  – Do libraries still buy, organise & lend books?
• As a service
  – Do users still ask librarians for help?
• How have things changed?

(from Akeroyd, 2001)
Collections still valuable?

• UCT LibQual in 2009: most common & urgent responses from both academics & postgraduates: concerns & issues with collections

• Responses show that respondents value collections, especially electronic journal collections, most highly in library

• Fewer books bought; so count & measure use of electronic resources
Dem-onstrating value of collections

• Demand for information resources higher than ever
• Collections no longer place-bound
• Full-text papers & journal articles now available from desktops
• Unique collections can be made more visible
Our unique collections are valuable

• Bleek & Lloyd Collection recording expeditions to the northern Cape to document San languages: one example from UCT

• Or the Kirby collection of photographs of musical practices & instruments in South Africa
Demonstrating our value

• Unisa: Institutional Repository with archives, research products & other valuable collections

• E.g. the C.M. Doke collection of letters from Mahatma Ghandi

http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/272
Space still valuable?

• How can we find out what students really value?
  
  *give me what I want, what I really really want...*

• Look at what they do and seem to want to do - like play with computers

• Can we combine computers & the library?

• Get them to experience that libraries can add value even to computers!
Knowledge Commons for Undergraduates

- Learning resource with a real difference
- Environment substantially different from both traditional library working space & university computer lab
- Best equipment; excellent technical support
- Printers & scanners that work
Knowledge Commons for Undergraduates, cont.

• Staff that will happily help with
  – Finding resources
  – Writing assignments
  – Technical or software problems,
  – Formatting, scanning, printing
  – Citations & bibliography (& RefWorks)
Research Commons for postgraduates/researchers

- Inspired by KC, but different:
- Knowledge construction not information acquisition
- State-of-the-art technology
- Social space: free tea & coffee in lounge area
Research Commons for postgraduates/researchers, cont.

• High-level support immediately available
  – Research expertise/referral
  – Software/hardware assistance
• Newspapers, journals, reference works
• Breakaway seminar rooms
U. Sheffield Information Commons

• Brand new futuristic building: ‘more than a library, more than a study space, more than an IT centre’
• Wireless: computers/laptop spaces everywhere
• Students check materials in & out automatically
• ‘Flexispace’: all furniture can be moved around – plenty of easy chairs, squashy sofas, movable workspaces
• Eating & drinking at computers (but pizza deliveries to the library have been stopped!)
• The place hums; everybody wants to work there
• Students love it & want to go to U. Sheffield because of it
• This library is highly valued & it shows
Library functions still valuable?

• Librarians have always been in the business of organising knowledge resources
• Are search engines & other web tools doing a better job?
• We can still add value by making our unique resources available for the world to see
• Open access for the products from our researchers (theses, dissertations, scholarly articles...)
• Our most important function is becoming our service
Service? New librarians for a new generation

From this: To this!
Service focus our greatest asset

New librarians:

• Know new door to library is the Web Portal
• Look outwards
• Are teachers
• Are subject specialists & researchers
• Are not scared of technology
• Know the mechanics of research
• Participate in assessment & evaluation
How to measure/demonstrate value?

• Measures & counts of use remain important
• But enhanced by qualitative accounts
• Provided by recipients of valued services
• By telling the stories & finding the narratives beyond the figures
Conclusion

• Libraries now provide access to more resources than ever before
• Library no longer primarily a physical space
• Librarians no longer part of the furniture
• WE are responsible for communicating the value of what we do if we want others to understand
References


University of Sheffield Information Commons. [http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/infocommons/](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/infocommons/)