

Guest editorial

Assessing value and impact in academic libraries in the 21st century: personal perspectives and views from the Guest Editors

This Editorial is specifically grounded in the Guest Editors' personal views and experiences around value and impact assessment in academic libraries. For this reason, the choice has been made not to provide citations and context. This substantive and evidence-based approach will be found in the papers that make up this themed issue.

The two Guest Editors of this themed issue started working in academic libraries in the late 1970s when the role of the library and the services provided were fairly self-evident. The library, situated symbolically at the centre of the campus and usually a standalone department, was widely accepted by managers, academics, researchers and students as being central to the support of academic and student activity. Online searching of remote databases was in its infancy and, even then, it was rare for the users to do the searching themselves. If the intention was to make full use of its services, the library building itself had to be visited. Library stock and services were visible – printed books and journals displayed on shelves, face-to-face enquiry services and all loan of items from a staffed desk.

Fast forward to 2018 and it is a very different picture. The move to digital services in academic libraries has brought huge gains in the access and availability of resources and services. These improvements have been well received by students and staff, but, at the same time, it has made the contribution of the library and the library staff less visible. From a user's perspective, the role of the library is now much less clearly defined, with libraries, particularly in the UK, often part of a larger department. Access to online library resources is widely available, but for the user, it is unclear whether the library has had a role in making the resources available and paying for them. Indeed, the user may not care whether the library has been involved or not. Users can access these online resources from a multitude of devices, including desktops, laptops, smartphones and tablets. This calls into questioning the need to visit the library when so many resources can be accessed remotely. Users routinely and regularly access a wide range of information online for work, study and leisure, particularly through their mobile devices. It is unlikely that they differentiate their searching techniques when seeking to access online journals and research information. Users, particularly researchers, will view themselves as self-sufficient with digital services and feel that they have no need for instruction in "information literacy" or "digital literacy". In the 1980s, both Guest Editors worked in a multistorey library, each floor having its own enquiry desk, staffed throughout opening hours. In the equivalent library building in 2018, there may be a single enquiry desk, staffed for only some of the library's long opening hours. Users are now encouraged to borrow items themselves. It is not obvious what library staff do and why they are needed and, again, users may not know or care.

The above position fundamentally influences why librarians need to be concerned and focused on impact and value assessment. Academic librarians in 2018 need to be increasingly proactive, to make themselves more visible within their institution and to demonstrate that their library provides value for money. Value and impact assessment work can help to provide the evidence. Funding is tight – senior university managers will want to see clear evidence for the benefits of investing significant resources in libraries. A university education is no longer a cheap option – students (and parents and others advising them) are



taking on customer characteristics where they make more careful and informed decisions about which university to go to. University library staff need to provide evidence of the ways in which library services can enhance the student experience and make their university better than others. In past decades, academic libraries built up their collections and services and expected that users would come to use them as there were no other alternative information sources. In 2018, libraries need to move away from taking a purely library perspective to understanding and acting on the perspective of the student, teacher or researcher or the university as a whole.

Work around determining value and impact also provides an opportunity for libraries to take a more central role in institutional planning and make a major contribution to activities around the key strategic aims of the organisation – student recruitment and retention, helping students achieve high academic performance and future employment, attracting research funding and producing high-quality research. Historically, academic libraries tended to work in an isolated and siloed way. Institutional planning increasingly places a greater emphasis on collaborative working and cross-university approaches and libraries need to be a part of this.

There are some key challenges and issues that libraries need to address in how they approach value and impact assessment. For many university libraries, collecting data and evidence has been taking place for as long as the library has existed. Digital delivery now also makes it relatively easy for libraries to capture extensive and detailed metrics on how electronic resources have been used. This quick and easy evidence gathering would seem to indicate that there is no issue in gathering evidence on value and impact, but this is not the case. First, librarians need to collect the right data and then they need to apply the data to demonstrate relevance to the university's strategic aims. Developing a data set will have limited value no matter how detailed or comprehensive it is unless it can be linked and integrated into the wider university data. If the library can demonstrate that its value and impact data contribute to the university's broad strategic aims, then the library will make its case immediately.

In the twenty-first century, libraries gather evidence to prove value and impact to the wider organization, but there are other purposes that the data are needed for, primarily around evidence-based practice. Data are needed to inform how continuous improvement is taken forward by helping determine how services can be enhanced and developed in the most effective way. Rather than collecting the data to meet these different agendas separately, there needs to be coordination across evidence-gathering activities. It makes more sense to gather data that can be used for all purposes. Another level of complexity is that the library has to cover the different agendas of its various stakeholders. Value and impact evidence for an esteemed researcher will differ significantly from the evidence needed by an 18-year-old wanting to know what difference the library will make to them if they choose that university. This need for variance is extended to how the value and impact evidence is presented to the different stakeholders. Infographics, social media, reports grounded on research and face-to-face presentations will be needed in various combinations depending on the audience it is intended for.

If value and impact data and evidence are to be collected systematically, it needs to involve a wide group of library staff rather than falling to one or two individuals. Staff on front-line desks are in the prime position not only to gather customers' *ad hoc* comments but also to complete short interviews. This does prompt the need for effective staff development that covers skills around gathering and recording evidence and also making sure that the staff are aware of the value/impact purposes of the data collection.

Benchmarking with other university libraries is a very powerful tool in proving value and impact but it is not without its challenges. Unless libraries collect the same data sets using identical methodologies over the same time period, it will be open for questioning. By ensuring there is validity and reliability, libraries can overcome the real risk that attention will be drawn away from the value and impact of the evidence with people raising questions instead around the methodology. Librarians are understandably proud of their credibility as professionals who have a strict moral code that extends to protecting privacy, confidentiality and data protection. These attributes sometimes impact on proving value and impact in a way that it does not with other higher education staff groupings. Librarians need to be aware that their drive for ethical practice may limit the effectiveness of the data collection and analysis. Effective collaboration with other university staff groupings, adopting a common philosophy and approach, will be key to the success of the library's value and impact work.

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