

On the edge of invisibility: Can academic libraries design a new wardrobe for the emperor?

“The tailors were hard at work, completing the emperor’s new clothes. They pretended to take the cloth down from the loom; they made cuts in the air with great scissors; they sewed with needles without thread; and at last they said, “Now the clothes are ready!”

The image of the tailors’ workshop in the fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen is reflected in the contemporary academic library. The library collection has become a collection of predominantly digital materials; the infrastructure and the processes that are integral to service delivery are all electronic. A consequence of the seamless delivery of modern library services is the very real danger, like the emperor’s new clothes, of being totally invisible. In this increasingly virtual world, the intangible academic library is therefore faced with the challenge of creating a meaningful identity and establishing effective relationships with its stakeholders.

Needless to say, many academic libraries are rising to meet this challenge as they design their own new future in the digital learning environment. Many false assumptions are currently made about the abilities of students and staff to navigate this learning environment and, ironically, many support services are being curtailed precisely at a time when policies for widened participation are drawing an ever more diverse student demographic into the academic community. On many levels, librarians are already active partners in the digital learning environment, as facilitators, collaborators and participants. The significant role played by university libraries to develop information and media literacies should not be underplayed: as well as helping students and staff master and apply new digital literacies, academic librarians can support the development of integrated policies and strategies for learning through their activities as ambassadors across organisational boundaries. In this paper it is argued that the university environment should be characterised by the sound integration of library, learning and ICT skills and supported by innovative and relevant digital pedagogies. The evolving role in learner analytics can also allow interesting correlations to be made between library activity data and student attainment. A number of case studies are introduced to highlight some of the strategies used to demonstrate the very real contribution that the academic library can make to the institution’s learning and teaching goals. Ultimately, as librarians work to develop a fresh identity and to build productive new stakeholder relationships, the result should be a fine new wardrobe fit for an emperor.

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