

Every nook and cranny: making the library central to research and engagement

This article discusses the institutional spaces, both large and small, where academic libraries may become embedded in research-related activities throughout the university. It then goes on to consider some of the possible changes and outcomes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It outlines current research on opportunities for change in libraries, researcher demands, collaboration and the need for more research about working together. It concludes by suggesting that libraries and individuals should embrace principles of 'planned happenstance' so as to expand what may be possible with our new working spaces and realities.

Keywords

collaboration; happenstance; research; scholarly communications; Covid-19

Setting the scene of 'nook and cranny'

The rationale of this discussion fits neatly with the reality of life before, during, after and then during (again) the Covid-19 pandemic. It seems axiomatic to suggest that, in the UK, we can divide almost every aspect of our professional and personal lives into time periods before and after the national lockdown. How we live and how we work within the context of this 'new normality', remains an unresolved question. For some, life will continue to be defined by varying degrees of disruption and uncertainty, while others may be experiencing the first shoots of growth and recovery. In the time of 'before the March lockdown', this article was going to take the form of a presentation at UKSG 2020 in Brighton, England. I had hoped that the intended paper would spark discussion and debate and, linked to this, participants might feel galvanized to effect change within their own workspaces, whether that be in libraries, publishing and/or research support.

Life is now more complicated. 'Galvanizing the research support troops' feels like a distant and perhaps unrealistic goal, especially when contending with a slow laptop, balancing work and looking after two small children and the stress and impact of existing within an unprecedented (at least for many a living generation) worldwide pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has thus unleashed new forms of work and, with it, new forms of stress, and it has also brought about new opportunities for learning and collaboration.

I also wondered: how can this resonate with others when right now there is just so much weight to the world? The reality, of course, is that, within each of our own experiences, there may be only particles of possibility. As such, the aim of this 'offshoot' or 'alternative' presentation is to explore some of the opportunities that may arise for those of us working within research support and scholarly communications. It is also informed by a recognition that for many of our peers these opportunities may not currently be within reach. It will then address the idea of 'planned happenstance' and apply it to research support. Finally, it will argue that whatever your own 'nook and cranny' may be, there is opportunity to embrace innovation and learning, and let the library lead the way.



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'The Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed new forms of work, new forms of stress and new opportunities for learning and collaboration'

Foundation of possibilities

Much research and experience can attest to the rapid growth within research support generally, but particularly within libraries. There has recently been an explosion of interest in the links between the library and research. This includes (but is not restricted to): data management, scholarly communications, bibliometrics, open research and research support roles and collaboration. In her case study at Imperial College London, Harrison¹ comments, 'the delivery of services by libraries for scholarly communications ... has become a significant, challenging, and relatively novel departure from our expected roles'. White² has highlighted the 'distinctive interest in the full range of scholarly communication activity' and both how 'libraries are well placed to provide strategic and service alignment' and how they are 'engaging more systematically'. Moreover, White³ posits that libraries are also able to 'foster a culture of appropriate openness and necessary privacy' for researchers, and also 'for intelligent citizenship'.

To facilitate this rapid growth and opportunity within research support, Nickels and Davis⁴ suggest libraries 'establish and grow relationships with campus partnerships to develop a shared understanding of complementary services to create a stronger network of support for researchers at different stages of their careers'. These relationships, they suggest, might also extend beyond the 'typical' partnerships with the research office to also consider 'other departments like human resources and the office of institutional equity and diversity'. Similarly, Dishman and Stephan⁵ suggest focusing on partnerships with those that 'share a similar purpose' so as to 'develop relationships' that could lead to 'interesting and fruitful collaborations'. Notwithstanding the importance of these combined insights, libraries should be conscious and aware of the fact that, while you can create such opportunities and collaborations, it does not necessarily mean that researchers embrace those chances. On this particular theme, Nickels and Davis⁶ found that researchers commented on 'lack of time and being too busy [as] the most frequently mentioned challenge'.

Another challenge related to the way in which research support positions itself within and across the university. In their work on research data management and libraries, Verbaan and Cox⁷ comment on the 'between space' where there may be 'new roles supporting researchers embedded in research teams or lying between several professional services emerge'. Despite this, even in 2014, they contended that these posts could 'be unstable, vulnerable to shifts in funding or wider agenda'.⁸ There is perhaps good reason to think that the economic fallout of Covid-19 will lead to a realignment of the role of research support within the university system. Bradley⁹ also comments on the realization that 'both librarians and administrators regard themselves as integral to the research mission but there has been little documented dialogue between the two professions in the literature of either field'. She further contends that 'librarians and research administration will benefit from a better understanding of the current research support landscape and new modes of working'.¹⁰ A similar point is made by Cox and Verbaan¹¹ in their discussion of, 'the extent of the gap that needs to be bridged to build close partnerships among professional services themselves and with researchers'.

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Building opportunity: libraries and research applied to planned happenstance?

The literature is instructive insofar as it tells us that there are numerous nooks and crannies running in parallel with large developments and continuous forms of change within and on the scholarly communications landscape. It is also telling us that demands on researchers' time are acutely felt, and whatever support we do offer needs to be targeted and effective. A closer look at the existing literature also reveals significant gaps in the role (and importance) of communication and collaboration between various stakeholders and those that support research and researchers.

3 As it happens, my own approach to seeking out opportunities has always felt slightly serendipitous rather than calculated. This rather haphazard approach has meant that I have experienced both the benefit and the friction of a new post. That is to say that everything is new and exciting but also, on occasion, these opportunities have generated uncertainty. My approach to expanding research support within my workplace became clearer at a recent event. I was fortunate to co-host a Northwest Academic Libraries (NoWAL)¹² exchange of experience research support event in July 2020, about moving in and up in research support. We were also fortunate to have three wonderful speakers, one of whom was Joshua Sendall, Research and Scholarly Communications Manager at Lancaster University, whose talk on planned happenstance really struck a chord with me. It occurred to me that much of my own work in seeking out and embracing opportunity resonated with the way in which Joshua had described his own career trajectory. In the course of his presentation, Joshua invoked Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz's¹³ work on the 'planned happenstance theory'. Within their theory, 'career counsellors can assist clients to develop five skills to recognize, create and use chance as career opportunities'. Although they are focused on careers, I would go further and suggest there are similarities in how to connect and balance the need for new services, time constraints and the lack of perceived or real communication between research support within this 'planned happenstance' framework.

Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz¹⁴ highlight these five skills:

1. Curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities.
2. Persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks.
3. Flexibility: changing attitudes and circumstances.
4. Optimism: viewing opportunities as possible and attainable.
5. Risk-taking: taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes.

Building on these insights, I wish to argue that by shifting these ideas onto research support, libraries may be more open and better equipped to exploit opportunities for growth and change when they come about.

Curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities

From the research support point of view, this may be focused on training. Many of us have made the 'pivot' online and may have found a myriad of new things to learn (both good and bad!). This may be using new formats to deliver training (for example, a webinar) or means to do so (via Canvas, Teams, Zoom, etc.). It may be by including videos into training via Panopto. Some of you may already be doing webinars and your new opportunity might be considering the utility of developing a new session or inviting another university or setting to attend. My colleague and I took the opportunity of the swift change of this online pivot to attempt new training sessions that we were meaning to put on but had not yet done. By giving ourselves an approximate one-hour training session target, and, buoyed by a firm date in our training calendar, we arranged new sessions on open access publishing options and deals, data management and a focus on databases for research, alongside our other 'normal' sessions. These were not large-scale learning opportunities, but they felt important and innovative for our team.

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The move to online formats is not just about training. Conferences are almost entirely online, many free, recorded to view later and accessible to a much larger audience. We now have more opportunities to engage with forms of academic learning and professional exchange that may have previously existed outside our orbit. Equally, for those of us balancing home life/work balance, it is possible to *attend* online conferences while still being present at home. As outlined earlier, the literature is telling us that there needs to be more research into working together across research support. Now might also be

- 4 the time to create an opportunity to approach a colleague in a different department or university, speak at that conference or co-author a paper or a blog post discussing joined-up research support.

Persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks

This particular skill can seem unattainable given the constraints and difficulties of working from home for many of us. Everything takes longer and thus requires greater effort. I believe that some opportunities are worth the persistence, even if the outcome may not be what was intended. This issue is a recurring theme, but numbers are not an absolute quality. By way of example, I ran one session this spring entitled 'Punchy Presentations' that was attended by one person. As it happened, she was in Spain under one of Europe's strictest lockdowns but was able to derive pleasure and information from the fact that she could attend from the safety of her own home. You can also consider the format; try something out in a shorter space of time. Ask for feedback. All of these things will help you persevere, despite perceived setbacks. For many of us, this may include a future with far less funding for hospitality, events, training and resources. Within this space, it will be important to consider what you can control, at least for the time being. Perhaps you know you can no longer afford a resource: make sure you use it as well as you can up until that point. If you no longer have money for refreshments, consider changing the in-person format to a bring-your-own approach, or moving something permanently online.

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Flexibility: changing attitudes and circumstances

I will surmise that many of us have been exceptionally flexible during the Covid-19 pandemic. For myself, moving online was a major shift change for our training programme. Between lockdown and the Easter 'holiday' it was a few weeks before I felt prepared to go into that space and I was nervous. Being flexible meant that I was willing to give it a go. Yet, embracing this change but being realistic, too, has meant a chance to try new sessions, far more than we had previously done. This has also changed our attitude to what a 'good' session means. As my colleague can attest, I often had young children come in asking for snacks and had one child at my side for our entire session on open access publishing options. I was slightly mortified. At the end of the session, some people said goodbye to my daughter – and it was fine. Equally, the idea of running research cafes¹⁵ online filled me with dread: the whole point of them was a closeness and informality that I did not feel would translate online. And yet, on the day itself, it felt comfortable and safe and we had more people attend and more relevant, curious questions than we ever had in person – and my parents from Iowa were in attendance, along with my family downstairs. This would have never happened without flexibility and being a little bit brave. Now is also the time to be flexible with what you can accomplish and honest with yourself. It might not be the time to write or prepare a conference paper. Being flexible is not only about doing new or more things, but it can also be about turning down opportunities that have not come at the right time.

'Now is also the time to be flexible with what you can accomplish and honest with yourself'

Optimism: viewing opportunities as possible and attainable

I feel strongly that there needs to be an acceptance that things will be far from 'business as usual' when we return to our physical workplaces and have students and staff back on campus. Having said that, there may be opportunities that are possible and attainable, and it is worth aiming for those. Instead of planning a full-scale event, could you try a couple of hours? Was there a database you wanted to promote but never had time? Could you do fewer examples? Within reason, now could be the time for you to try a new format, a new session, a new joint session with another department or another university. It is worth asking, as it could lead to something useful and interesting. Know what works best for you, your place

5 of work and your circumstances. The same goes within our own personal development. You might not be able to attend an entire conference. Could you focus on listening to relevant sessions or bookmark the talks afterwards to listen back to? During lockdown, I considered what was on offer and attended where possible. Events that sounded unmissable were okay to miss. Ones that I was determined to attend, I would bookmark and block out time for, even if it meant me listening with my children playing Fortnite in the background. If time allows, make time to make something possible.

Risk-taking: taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes

For many of us, there are many uncertain outcomes right now. In the grand scheme of things, if a training event or an online outreach event does not go well, it is okay. You may have to make decisions at short notice, perhaps not consulting as widely, given the circumstances and/or with less planning time. Encourage people to be brave – contact others in a different department, you never know the outcome. You will know your own service and support, try to take action and make a difference within your own space. It may be as simple as mentioning ORCID in every training session you do. It may be signing up to attend one webinar a month. Take a small action, as it can lead to a large sense of accomplishment and control in a space and time where that may not feel as achievable.

'If time allows, make time to make something possible'

Conclusion

Discovering every nook and cranny to find a way for libraries to lead the way with research will be varied and diverse, depending on your university setting, priorities and your own commitments and struggles during this strange, unsettling time. As the literature states, research support and scholarly communications are still very much a growth area, although the positions and roles that we currently do may be changed or tenuous in the future. There is also opportunity to collaborate and work with others across the university and be more focused on what researchers need. Equally, there is a need for more research into how we work together. I believe that a focus on the fact that the library is open and operating through all of this, modifying, embracing the challenges set before us and making sure that research and knowledge is reaching all of our stakeholders and users, is key in moving forward. There will be time to learn, adapt and collaborate (and possibly even write about it!). By setting reasonable targets for learning, sharing, collaborating and accepting a 'planned happenstance' approach, we may discover ways that we can help lead research out to help change the world. That is a hope, of course, and a planned happenstance I am willing to embrace.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

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