Libraries, literacies and lifelong learning: looking forward within higher education institutions

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Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Individuals working in academic institutions are now required to engage with increasingly complex learning processes and interact with a vast array of information and range of literacies to complete their academic and professional tasks. In order for academics to maintain participation within this evolving context, it has become essential for them to embrace an evolving concept of knowledge, breadth of learning and an array of learning strategies and learning technologies.

In this context, acceptance of the imperatives of lifelong learning is vital for both individuals and for academic institutions. As an individual’s academic and professional objectives are impacted upon by this evolving context, the ways in which they achieve their objectives and the sources of their support needs to change in order to ensure that they respond to their changing needs.

The acquisition, maintenance, development and accumulation of knowledge and a range of learning strategies and technologies are key features of libraries. Libraries are purposeful in their role as the impetus and companion for the development of knowledge, understanding and a range of literacies to the ongoing benefits of academics’ lifelong learning.

Libraries: context and challenges
The changing nature of the profession of librarianship, the role of corporate influence upon information management and knowledge management, and the evolution of technological capacity (ICT), all significantly impact upon academic libraries. Compounding these challenges, academic libraries are influenced by the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs), and thus confront the same challenges as those of their parent institution. HEIs are still responding to the many challenges that have arisen from the integration of new public management techniques, in their approaches to management and administration. In this context there has been an increase in managerialism and micro-management, and the diversity of tasks that need to be achieved without commensurate access to more resources by all staffing levels within HEIs (Becher & Trowler 2001, Jordan 1998).

At the same time, HEIs have been forced to achieve more with less. In addition, there has been an emphasis on providing seamless access in the provision of services, which has been criticised (Becher & Trowler 2001, Brophy 2005, Jordan 1998) as being both unattainable and unsustainable. It has been argued that this model’s unattainability and unsustainability stems from HEI’s relationships with their many clients and stakeholders. These clients include students, academic and
general staff, government regulators, and professional and academic bodies. The diverse clientele of HEI’s, within this environment, have repurposed the service focus, to form a hybrid customer-service focus, which is also evident in academic libraries.

Academic libraries must also confront the challenges of responding to the changing nature of higher education, including the massification and widening access of higher education and the popularity of vocational and course work degrees. These changes strongly influence the development and revision of course design and teaching methods such as with distance and virtual ICT-based learning, as well as the research trends of the institution. These challenges in turn shape the design and function of hybrid library services, such as the physical and digital collections, digital repositories, inter-library provisions and relationships, and increasing demand for the library to serve as multipurpose learning commons (Becher and Trowler 2001, Brophy 2005, Jordan 1998, Williams 2009). In this context academic libraries not only confront challenges that require significant changes to the practice of their day-to-day functions, but also the very nature of their role and objectives.

ICT has had the biggest impact in living memory (Brophy 2005, 75) on libraries. Information professional and libraries are continually responding to this impact upon the actions of information search, retrieval and provision. Library patrons and information seekers are exposed to an abundance of information, more than has ever previously been available or accessible (American Library Association (ALA) 2008a, 2008b, Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 2002, 2006, Hock 1999, Keen 2007, Longworth 2003, Margolis 2000).

Information abundance partly complicates the task of isolating specific and relevant information. Personal and occupational information needs have increased in systematic complexity, as an increased number of systems are required to be used, both asynchronously and synchronously for access. Caution should also be exercised when navigating this proliferation to avoid information overload (ALA 2008a, 2008b, ALIA 2002, 2006, Hobart and Schiffman 1998, Hock 1999, Keen 2007, Longworth 2003, Margolis 2000) of which Margolis derides as an ‘embarrassment’ (2000, 64) of topical and atypical information. Another notable matter relevant to all who are exposed to the information abundance, is that they must actively accommodate the controversial quality of excess information, which includes the purposeful action of misinformation, heterogeneous orientation of information and the inconsistency of ethical objectivity (Hobart and Schiffman 1998, Hock 1999, Holmes 2006, Keen 2007).

**Literacies**

Twenty first century citizens and library patrons require increasing amounts of a combination of generic and specific understanding and knowledge in order to achieve their daily objectives. These literacies have the capacity to serve an individual so that they can continue to acquire, maintain and develop knowledge and understanding throughout their life span (ALA 2008a, 2008b, ALIA 2002, 2006, Information For All Programme (IFAP) 2000, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) 2006). These literacies need to assist individuals to address the changing needs that society values, and contribute to an individual’s ability to cultivate, define and implement common and personal goals (ALA 2008a,
There are spectrums of literacies, beginning with a foundation of generic skills (IFLA 2006, Skilbeck 2006), and progressing to highly specialised job-specific skills (Skilbeck 2006). The nature and need of these literacies are, for the most part revealed on the continuum from cradle to grave. Twenty first century citizens equipped with literacies have a ready device, able to be deployed as the situation or circumstance arises. It is only with the individual ownership of these literacies, that individuals can be left to their own devices for lifelong learning.

ICT literacy, information literacy and digital literacy are increasingly emphasised as essential for functioning within the knowledge society (Dudfield 1999, IFLA 2006, Longworth 2003). These spectrums of understanding and knowledge are assessed as so integral to daily life, that literacies should be accounted for as constituting a basic human need and right for a quality of life (Dudfield 1999, IFLA 2006, Longworth 2003). Of the three literacies identified (ICT literacy, information literacy and digital literacy), information literacy and the acquiring of the understanding and knowledge of which it is comprised, is not technologically dependent and is specifically a matter of learning (IFLA 2006). Information literacy presents the greatest versatility for opportunity, ownership and support to advocates and recipients.

As informational processes grow incrementally, there is an individually unquantifiable and intangible breadth of literacies, that vary from site, situation, occupation, geography, societal and cultural context, media and medium specifications. Learners are encouraged take ownership of their learning and accrue literacies (IFLA 2006), maintain their currency for application and extensibility as needed. Such is the inherent accumulative nature of literacies, IFLA emphasises that ‘information literacy and lifelong learning are of the same essence’ (2006, 5), and what is more, that ‘information literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning’ (2006, 3). Learners equipped with these literacies, can use them in isolation and in unison to filter, interpret and reveal deeper meaning (IFAP 200), when transacting with the abundance of available and accessible information.

The changing nature of academic work
The nature of academic work has changed dramatically in response to the varied and ongoing fluctuations occurring at the HEIs where the academic work is undertaken. Whilst all institutions have specific local challenges, the majority of HEIs also simultaneously contend with a multitude of overarching factors. These overarching factors are informed by global knowledge economies, in which HEIs ‘are more important than ever as mediums for a wide range of cross-border relationships and continuous global flows of people, information, knowledge, technologies, products and financial capital’ (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 5). The importance and breadth of the roles that HEIs occupy within global knowledge economies are indicative of the longitudinal impact upon the nature of academic work. Concurrently, HEI employees operate within a distinct cultural context, emphasised by internal hierarchies and infrastructures, both official and unofficial, yet nonetheless significant. This context has a role in the psycho-social responses by individuals to the changing nature of academic work (Haymes 2008).
HEI’s have responded to the demands of their roles within global knowledge economies by assuming the techniques of new public management. The competitive nature of new public management has accentuated signs of discord between academic disciplines and faculties, and similarly between HEIs (Becher and Trowler 2001). It has been argued that the reforms occurring from new public management and the global knowledge economies, emergent from the effects of globalisation in the last two decades ‘have been the strongest single driver of change’ (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 8) upon HEIs.

The dynamic context of HEIs within global knowledge economies, has strongly impacted upon various aspects of academic work. In such a context the changing nature of academic work has been characterised by:

- The impact of ICT on learning, teaching and research which is multidimensional, with existing frameworks being enhanced or outmoded, and contemporary frameworks facilitated (Longworth 2003).
- Students’ and educators’ relationships to information, which is changing as the infrastructure of information develops in knowledge societies. Ubiquitous access and availability to information without the prior restrictions of time, space or geography have affected the interpersonal relationships for mediating information, especially those between student and teacher, teacher and researcher, and student, teacher and researcher with the library (Becher and Trowler 2001, Brophy 2005, Holmes 2006, Jordan 1998).
- The new public management approach of compartmentalisation and specialisation of HEI functions and outcomes, which have encouraged a transition towards domain based degrees, emphasised the micro-management of both staff and students, increased the volume and complexity of tasks while reducing resources and staffing levels (Becher and Trowler 2001, Brophy 2005, Longworth 2003, Marginson and van der Wende 2007).
- Changes in student demographics, with increased numbers, mixed-mode delivery to on campus, online and distance students, widening access to first generation tertiary students, mature age, part- and full-time employed, continual education, rural and international students, has been accompanied by unfamiliar demands. Additionally, the distinction of fee-paying and fee-supported students has impacted upon the relationship dynamic between students and institutions, as paying customers demand value and satisfaction (Becher and Trowler 2001, Brophy 2005, Jordan 1998).
- Increased and varied demographics of students which have likewise placed increased and varied demands on HEIs. Negotiations of, staff and student ratios, the extent of flexible learning and, semantic and ideological conflict between the concepts of e-learning and learning management systems, are ongoing. In some circumstances there have been imbalances between the demand and delivery of student and staff support services, alongside the limited scope and dehumanisation of these support services. These imbalances of demand and delivery have increased the roles undertaken by staff that currently occupy interpersonal and interactive roles such as academic and library staff. Physical and electronic visibility of these staff, has in some instances contributed to these staff members acting as surrogates for career guidance, counsellors, health advisors, legal advocates, parental and family figures and friendship (Brabazon 2007, Brophy 2005, Candy 2000).
• The ageing work force that HEIs are predominantly comprised of, have personal needs that sometimes conflict with the dynamism of the context of their employment (Haymes 2008).

• The roles of HEIs within global knowledge economies which have impacted upon the techniques of knowledge management applied to the academic work attributes of, learning and teaching, research, administration and governance, and community engagement. Knowledge management impacts upon the conception, analysis and dissemination of knowledge, the effects of which, are enacted upon academic and general staff, administrators, students, human expertise, information and technology (Cain et al, 2008, Marginson and van der Wende 2007).

There is the expectation for academic staff to confidently, efficiently and practically incorporate technology within their teaching and learning environments, which gives prominence to the effects of the changing standards of information management and the consequential impact upon information retrieval and the instruction of literacies for academic staff. The instruction and retention of literacies is at present disadvantaged by a failure to acknowledge the system of complimentary evolution to ICT.

University teachers and lecturers are role models for learning (Jordan 1998), and their reactions and attitudes inform students’ experiences (Candy 2000, Hauxwell 2006). Their academic work requires discipline expertise refined over a lifetime of learning to be transposed across media (Brabazon 2007). The complex transpositions of an educator’s expertise from conceptualisation to the varied formats anticipated for the purposes of learning and teaching, may include verbal presentation (lecture, podcast), written presentation (report, journal article, book) and multimedia presentation (PowerPoint, website, blog, learning management system). Accordingly, to better integrate and benefit from evolving technologies, academic staff are required to apply and promote an appreciation for the available resources (Beard et al., 2007) that support their learning and teaching roles.

Given the cultural shift of HEIs to ‘massification’ and the practices of managerialism and processing, provisions for lifelong learning are necessary for academics to stay relevant, up to date and employable (Longworth 2003) within the evolving workplace environment. Lifelong learning can, at times, appear to be conceptually opposed to the HEI transition towards domain based degrees (Becher and Trowler 2001) and the compartmentalisation and rigid specialisation of HEI functions (Longworth 2003). This challenging environment of often competing and opposing demands is further compounded by the reshaping of HEI processes due to the implementation of technology. Technology has conveniently become the universal scapegoat (Holmes 2006) for the causes and effects that in turn have impacted upon learning, lifelong learning and teaching functions. Alongside these challenges, educators are increasingly aware of the new guiding roles they are required to occupy for twenty first century learning. The actions of an educational guide further emphasises an educators need to be informed and experienced of the provisions they are required to equip their students with in order to fulfil their personal, social and occupational aspirations (Chapman et al, 2006, Longworth 2003). Consideration by HEI employers and educators of their conceptualisation by students as learning role models and role models for lifelong learning (Candy 2000) when responding to the
changing nature of academic work. In this context, HEIs’ and educators’ values and views are relative (Candy 2000) to their students’ becoming lifelong learners themselves. Thus Jordan (1998) supports the unified values that become embedded when there is a sharing and demonstration of learning experiences across the demarcations of academic staff, general staff and students.

**Research into the nexus of libraries, literacies and lifelong learning**

My current PhD study is undertaken in the belief that the response of libraries to the changing nature of academic work has sometimes been to modify and in particular circumstances, cease to instruct library patrons in the literacies necessary to function effectively in the changing academic environment. In doing so, academic libraries have sometimes limited their patrons’ capacity for lifelong learning, rather than enabled and enhanced the acquisition of knowledge and capacity.

The study begins with the presupposition that the current notion of instruction in many academic libraries tends to rest upon the notion of library literacy, and in doing so is limited in its approach. I argue that library literacy and information literacy, whilst distinct, are complimentary literacies and in the higher education context are better served when not operated in isolation.

In my study I argue that the combination of the changing nature of academic work and the changing techniques of management within HEIs have impacted upon the library’s provision of information and services. In some instances of information literacy being adapted or abandoned, the replacement literacy has limited the library patron’s competency to the specific library type, for example an academic library, or a specific library site or venue. The libraries that have adopted such limited responses appear to have replicated the compartmentalisation of the institution’s infrastructure, and applied this schema to their learning opportunities, and accordingly, their outcomes.

Libraries intrinsically have the potential capacity to cultivate, challenge and support learners across their lifespan. The context and varying concepts of higher education impacts upon the library’s ability to fulfil its potential as a forum for lifelong learning, advantageous to both, the short- and long-term goals of academic work and in the pursuit of lifelong learning.

**Proposed methods**

My study adopts several qualitative and quantitative research methods, to better address the aims of this research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, McGrath and Johnson 2003). The design of methods utilized in this study is based on their capacity to support and act in accordance to the notions of the provisional character of knowledge, research, truth and, the importance of criticism to bring about the elimination of error (Popper 1972, Pring 2005). This approach aims to demonstrate and advocate the potential of mixed methods research and mixed model designs, particularly with the underpinning of the Popperian approach of making research accessible to criticism.

The proposed design for this study is a four-stage approach, with participation from academic staff at St Patrick’s Campus (Victoria) of Australian Catholic University. Data collection has begun with a series of preliminary interviews in the first phase.
Following, and central to this research, is the use of the Delphi method for the second phase of data collection, which acts as an evolving iterative means for collaborative conjecture and refutation. In phase three, a series of focus groups will be conducted to explore and elaborate upon the findings of the preceding phase. The fourth and final stage of data collection will comprise of lifelong learning personal history profiles.

**Tentative findings**

The first phase of preliminary interviews in this multi-phase research approach resulted in the identification of several recurring themes amongst participants. The data collected from the preliminary interviews, indicated that the changing nature of academic work especially the emphasis on computer-based work, is dominated by fragmented tasks. This fragmentation is suggested to be the outcome of the influence of managerialism in higher education, which has disassembled tasks into a series of components. These components are distributed in both their administration and management throughout the institution, resulting in the completion of said components in isolation to the overarching task and lacking in overall perspective.

Computer-based and disparate access to information has been highlighted as dominant in higher education at this time from the preliminary interviews conducted in this study. To function effectively in this environment the knowledge of a range of literacies is required. Among the breadth of literacies used to support the access, retrieval and use of information within HEIs, information literacy is a central ability. An information literate person is both able to and has an understanding of the discrete, multifaceted and holistic qualities of information-based tasks.

The increasingly fragmented nature of academic work has emphasised both a mode and means of completing tasks. This has the potential to re-arrange and re-orientate an academics approach to interacting with information. The possible outcome of these changes in the dominant mode and means of academic work, I propose, is an underdeveloped compliment of skills among academics. These underdeveloped complimentary skills have the potential for extensive impact upon the ways in which academics seek to adopt and enhance their skills. The culmination of the present situation of academics and their opportunities and support for development within HEIs, in turn condition the characteristics of their lifelong learning.

For academics seeking learning opportunities in several of types of libraries across their lifespan, the need for overarching and different types of understanding and skills will become prominent. The instantaneous nature of electronic library resources has made patrons much more aware of the unpredictability and decelerated pace of manual/human intervention in library services and systems. These experiences have shaped the ways that academics interact with libraries, in preference for electronic systems and resources, many of which emphasis the compartmentalisation of their parent institution. Library patrons, with an overarching understanding of the purpose and functions of the resources that encircle the information they aim for, have a better perspective with which to respond to the breath of possible outcomes across a range of situations. My study aims to identify the ways in which all academics might be better assisted in developing the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to function in the new environment of
higher education and learning and in particular to identify the role that libraries can play in supporting them in meeting this challenge.

References
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