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Academic Libraries in Challenging Times



John Cox

Abstract

This article identifies three key challenges facing academic libraries in a period of recession: resourcing, technological change and proof of relevance. A series of strategies is proposed to maximise the value, actual and perceived, of academic libraries in challenging times. These are based on clarity of message, cultivation of partnerships, service leadership and performance optimisation. Although it is clear that the global recession has placed a major strain on resources, it is argued

that there are real opportunities to enhance the relevance of academic libraries to the scholarly mission and to provide leadership through innovation, creativity and an outward-facing perspective. Collaboration on and beyond the campus is a recurring theme of the article and a joint approach to resource deployment and service development can pay dividends. A culture of opportunism, agility and flexible skills development will enable academic libraries to emerge stronger from the recession.

Introduction

Academic libraries were already facing significant challenges before the current recession but the global economic downturn has added new pressures, while also opening up new opportunities. The challenges are many but may be summarised under three headings.

The first of these concerns **resourcing**. After enjoying more than ten years of progress in staffing and non-pay budgets, growth has been replaced by a relatively sudden and steep contraction. Irish universities are now grappling with the Employment Control Framework which has mandated a reduction in staffing numbers of nine per cent by the end of 2011 relative to levels at the end of 2008. Purchasing power has also been reduced as a result of budgetary cuts occasioned by the need to reduce public spending. Libraries have suffered losses accordingly. To take the James Hardiman Library at National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, as an example, staffing is down by 11.7% and the non-pay allocation, including that for information resources, is 15% lower than in late 2008. This is hardly a good platform for meeting the needs of a growing user population, with student numbers

rising strongly in the same period, an increase partly spawned by the recession itself which has seen many newly unemployed people return to study in order to obtain new qualifications.

Technology continues to pose major challenges for academic libraries across a number of dimensions. Information is increasingly published online, but print remains a vitally important medium for libraries. Both formats, online and print, have differing but significant management overheads in terms of cost, presentation, access and preservation. The “hybrid library”, a concept first identified in the 1990s, can be expected to endure for some time, with major calls on resourcing and skills. Online access to information has also had a profound effect on the way in which academics and students view the library. Academics, particularly in the sciences, rarely visit the library building. Students, although still favouring the library as a place of study, take an increasingly self-sufficient approach, often seeing little need to develop information skills despite the complexity of the information landscape they navigate. The “library brand” is somewhat compromised in the online environment, with users frequently unaware that their library has negotiated access to the online journals on their screens. Content, free or subscribed, ▶

‘Online access to information has also had a profound effect on the way in which academics and students view the library.’



local or external, can appear to be merged and its delivery is most commonly credited to Google, a highly agile competitor to libraries but also potentially a partner. Agility is the major challenge with which technology confronts academic libraries, demanding rapid changes to business models and evolution in staffing skills in order to meet new needs and opportunities.

The first two challenges have combined to produce the largest of the three, which is to prove **the ongoing value of academic libraries**. The prominent place once assumed for the library on the university campus is now being questioned in all sorts of ways. Funding reductions have turned the spotlight on universities themselves in terms of the return on investment they offer in the context of scarcer public funds. Their libraries are equally subject to questioning within the campus, not least as they cost a lot to run. Academic libraries typically have a larger staffing complement than many other service units and struggle to find savings in the face of journal inflation and the need to sustain legacy operations related to printed collections of continuing value, while expanding support into new areas generated by technological evolution. Further questions are raised by a tendency towards loss of local library identity in the online environment, greater user self-sufficiency in access to information, increased reliance on low-barrier providers like Google and Wikipedia and alternative study locations to the library building. This combination of tighter funding and apparent lower reliance on the academic library to meet information needs makes it a major challenge to prove the value and relevance to universities of their libraries in a recession.

However, all of these challenges are definitely surmountable, by adopting appropriate strategies. Four proposed strategies are the focus of the remainder of this article which argues that academic libraries remain highly relevant to the scholarly mission and have the potential to provide leadership through innovation, learning and an outward-facing perspective.

Clarity of Message

Those of us working in academic libraries need, more than ever before, to be very clear about our own value and purpose and to

communicate this eloquently and indeed passionately at all times. A key imperative is close alignment with the strategic plans of our universities. This has always been important but is even more vital in a recession when the resourcing of academic libraries is under close scrutiny. Whatever is important to the university must be important to the library and all planning activity and reporting needs to be geared towards this. Slavish adherence to university planning is not advocated, nor would that be sufficient. There is scope for imaginative initiatives, underpinned by evolving partnerships, which can take the library in new directions while maximising its role as a key strategic asset for the university. Some such initiatives are explored later, but common themes throughout are the value of partnership, the opportunity for libraries to provide leadership and the scope for embedding our value further in the mission of the university.

A clear sense of direction is vital, particularly when resources are tight and despite ongoing change and uncertainty. This is not a time for enormously lengthy, complex and long-term planning documents. Identification of core themes, informed by university strategy and customer needs, coupled with achievable annual targets which are backed by a highly focused collective effort, can maximise the effectiveness of the library in the university and provide scope for development in new directions. A focus on selected core objectives can helpfully drive library service development during the current recession. These might include: providing an excellent, high value-added customer experience; maximising the value of staff expertise; ensuring the full exploitation of collections; and managing space effectively.

Communicating what academic libraries offer, be it through traditional or newer activities, is critical, and failure to gain institutional acceptance of their value proposition has been identified as a particular risk for research libraries (Michalko et al., 2010). Universities are political institutions and perceptions are vital. A low profile on campus does the library no good and a strategy of continuous communications to highlight the contribution of the library is vital. This can take a number of forms. The creation of a post of Service Promotion Librarian at NUI Galway has brought structure and continuity to library marketing efforts, ensuring a series of campaigns throughout

the year and systematic use of press coverage for public events. Closeness to the customer is vital in understanding our business environment, and service planning is now better informed by focus groups, observation and survey data. Investment in the identity of the Library, particularly through publications and a redeveloped website, has been a valid priority.

However, there is more to marketing than frequent communication. The language and tone of communication are vital in embedding the value of academic libraries. Others may still see the library as a relatively passive storehouse of past knowledge. But how do we see ourselves? If we take care over the language of communication we can implant a sense of academic libraries as places of active knowledge creation which stimulate curiosity and enable scholarship through staff who are information agents and skilled partners in the academic mission. Language of this kind can create a new and distinctive impression of the library on campus. Recessions tend to spawn planning exercises but the right use of language can focus these exercises and turn them into a communications opportunity, highlighting the value of the library. The tone of library communications also needs to take on a new passion and conviction in tough times. A sense of pride in what we have achieved previously, allied to the diversity of contributions we can make and the goodwill felt by the academic community towards libraries, provides an excellent platform for positive communications and further achievement.

Cultivation of Partnerships

Recession promotes partnership. There is a realisation that resources can go further through joining forces and sharing expertise, often resulting in innovation. Academic libraries are very well placed in this regard. They tend to occupy a central place on campus and to have a strong service ethic. Another advantage, often overlooked, is that academic libraries are generally a “good news” story for the academic community, positively enabling its work rather than generating a lot of administrative effort for it, as can be its perception of other service units. This set of circumstances creates goodwill and makes us ideal partners with a range of parties on and beyond the campus. Such collaborations can also attract new funding streams even in recessionary times.

A new series of partnerships has emerged on campus. Centres of teaching and learning have become established in universities in the past few years, offering good collaboration opportunities for libraries. This is particularly true in the area of information literacy which has achieved a higher profile in recent times, with high quality programmes increasingly embedded in courses and reinforcing partnerships with academic units. This improved profile stems in part from an increase in non-traditional learners, for instance mature or distance students who need extra support in using libraries. The major factor is, however, the concern for academic standards raised by the highly variable quality of information on the web and the tendency for students to use it uncritically, often practicing very basic search skills and sometimes plagiarising other work. This has given libraries and centres for teaching and learning a common cause and really opened the door for initiatives to improve information

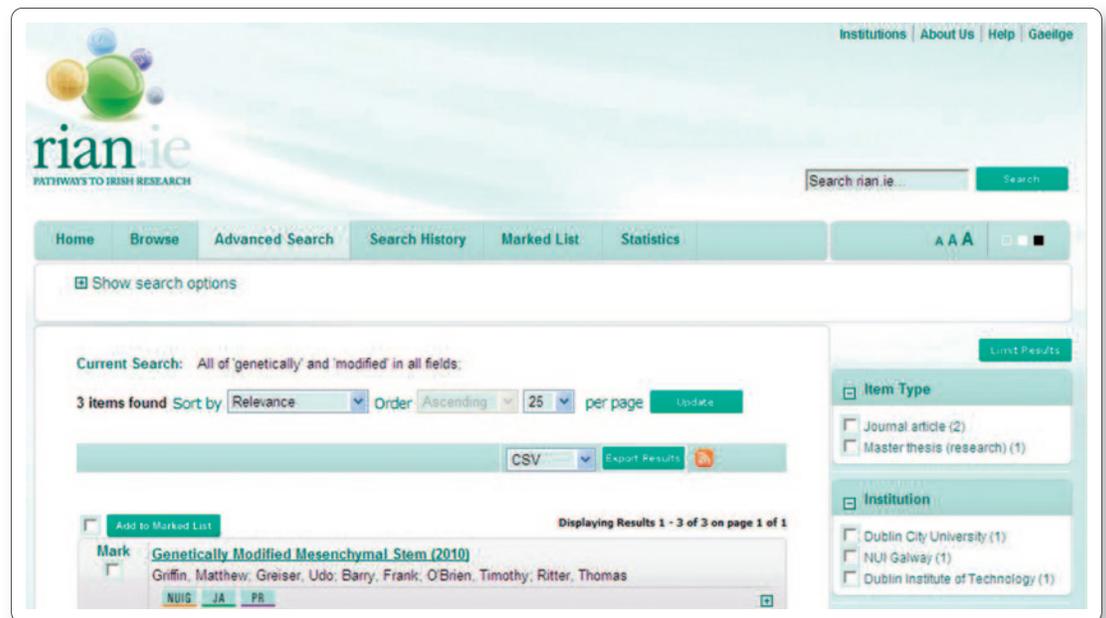
handling skills and critical thinking. There is scope for collaboration across a broader skills agenda too. Concerns with the level of writing skills possessed by students has led to the development of writing centres which offer support with essay composition and project work. The library is a common and logical location for such centres and there are clear synergies with not only information literacy but also with a range of study skills which can improve success rates for students and also secure stronger student retention.

There is increased focus in universities on the quality of the student experience as numbers grow and as competition between institutions increases. The number of services with which students need to interact is large and can involve treks to many locations around the campus. This, along with a general drive towards greater efficiencies in the recession, has led to efforts to consolidate services into fewer locations. The central and well recognised location of library buildings on campuses makes them a strong candidate for collocation of student-facing services. This may be limited to having IT support desks in the library, or can go somewhat further, as at Liverpool John Moores University in the UK, where a wide range of services including finance and registry is accessible. This has been called superconvergence (Heseltine et al., 2009) and is symptomatic of a move towards maximising the library building as a versatile asset to the university. There is a need to take an open-minded view of this, keeping a balance between the opportunities for stronger embedding of the library’s centrality on campus and the risks of diluting its identity.

Research is another area where libraries are deepening their partnerships with academic staff. The importance of archives and special collections as sources for original research continues to grow and Irish universities have rich holdings. There is an increased emphasis on broadening access to such material, as well as enhancing its preservation, through digitisation. Two notable examples are the 1641 Depositions project, which has encompassed the transcription and digitisation of 3,400 documents held in the Library of Trinity College Dublin (Lillington, 2009), and, at University College Dublin, the Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (University College Dublin, 2010). The field of digital humanities is a real growth area, rich in opportunities for academic libraries in terms of new services and spaces. Humanities researchers continue to place a very high value on libraries and University College Cork boasts an excellent new research library building. New modes of research need new buildings and a recently funded Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Building at NUI Galway, adjoining the University Library, will bring a range of researchers together in an innovative space which will promote collaboration, knowledge generation, archival research and online dissemination of outputs. This investment is proof that innovation can still flourish in a recession.

Beyond the campus, Irish academic libraries have established a fine tradition of collaboration. Shared services are very much in vogue in the current recession and the Irish Research eLibrary (IREL) is an excellent example. The IREL consortium has delivered over 28,000 e-journals and other information resources, accessible at lower collective subscription costs than would be

Rian: a single route to over 12,000 open access Irish research publications



realisable per institution and underpinning research and teaching. Scholars see IREL as a key part of the academic infrastructure and this has been evidenced in recent times by survey feedback (IREL Monitoring Group, 2009) and by the fact that additional money was voted to retain the service when one of its main funders, Science Foundation Ireland, discontinued its support due to budgetary pressures. This endorsement of IREL shows the value of partnership between Irish academic libraries, particularly in recessionary times.

Another well established collaboration is the Academic and National Libraries Training Co-Operative (ANLTC). ANLTC was established in 1994 and continues to deliver a wide range of training courses every year, accessible to all member institutions at a highly economic rate and vital to library staff skills development in changing times. A more recent partnership is Rian¹ (Rian, 2010) which provides a single point of access to over 12,000 research publications harvested from institutional repositories developed by the libraries of the seven Irish universities and Dublin Institute of Technology. This library-led initiative is highly relevant in making Irish research publications openly accessible and has been applauded by university presidents and by the Irish Universities Association. Looking to the future, there is scope for developing early work in the area of collaborative storage of printed material, delivering valuable savings by obviating the need to duplicate retention of lesser used materials at multiple institutions. More formal collaboration between certain universities, exemplified by the recent strategic alliance between NUI Galway and the University of Limerick (Healy and Flynn, 2010) will promote the development of shared services at library level too. Such partnerships are of their time, offering the potential to make scarce resources go further and to share talents in support of innovation. An interesting model from further afield is 2CUL (Cornell University and University of Columbia, 2010), a partnership between the libraries of Columbia University and Cornell University which aims to

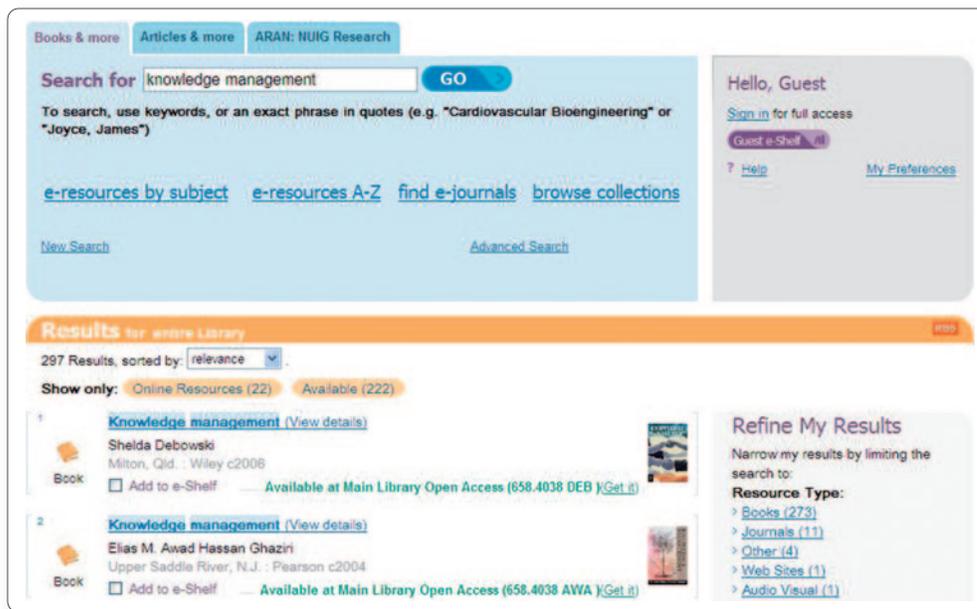
maximise collective effort in areas like digitisation, collection development and cataloguing.

Exercising Service Leadership

Academic libraries can influence their future positively by exercising service leadership, thereby creating new roles for themselves which can enhance the academic mission. Some of the partnerships already mentioned fit this bill but there are other areas where libraries can open up new frontiers proactively. Open access publishing of institutional research outputs is a striking example. The Irish university libraries anticipated its importance by winning funding for three years under the Strategic Innovation Fund in 2007 to establish institutional repositories. These repositories are now very much of their time, not only in having published a critical mass of Irish research papers on open access, but in both driving and supporting a culture in which researchers and funders expect research outputs to be freely accessible in the public domain. It is now estimated that about 20% of the world's scientific journal literature is available on open access, bringing significant benefits to the research process (Bjork et al., 2010). Libraries have played a vital role through the skills of their staff in areas such as metadata and preservation and particularly by taking a lead in advocating change. Open access has been something of a slow burner among the academic community to date but persistence by librarians, along with the stronger focus on value for money and return on funding investment occasioned by the recession, has increased its momentum. Growth areas on the shorter and longer term horizons are the inclusion of research theses in repositories and the digital curation of research data sets, the latter an area of neglect to which librarians could bring valuable leadership (Brown and Swan, 2007).

Academic library leadership is also in evidence in another aspect of research output. This is in bibliometrics, the measurement of the impact of published research. Such measurement, primarily based on the extent to which research papers are cited, has become highly important as a criterion in deciding the allocation of research funding or, as in the UK Research Evaluation

1. National Portal for Open Access Research. *Rian* is the Irish word for path.



A simpler search interface based on Primo software

Framework, ranking the performance of research units. Irish interest in this field is increasing, as illustrated by a recent Higher Education Authority/Forfás report on research strengths in Ireland (Forfás and Higher Education Authority, 2009). Librarians have long been engaged in establishing the citation frequency of individual articles but have now extended this expertise considerably to encompass the analysis of citation trends for larger collections of papers from whole research groups (Coughlan, 2010) or comparatively among different disciplines and institutions. This new expertise is recognised and valued on campus, particularly by central research offices which are often charged with the provision of complex citation data to illustrate research performance. Bibliometrics extends well beyond number crunching and librarians' knowledge of the literature of different fields is invaluable in data interpretation. This expertise is likely to find further outlets due to a national bibliometrics project funded under the Strategic Innovation Fund and led by the Irish Universities Association. This project will afford access to a major dataset for Irish citation performance, the National Citation Report, and librarians will play a vital role in its use and analysis.

Digital preservation in its widest sense is a field where librarians can make a real difference. As previously noted, the field of digital humanities is growing and needs the right infrastructure in which to flourish. Academics value the increased volume of digital information available, enabling detailed textual analysis which, for example, throws new light on the evolution of language and ideas over time. However, there are two areas of particular frustration and concern. Firstly, global mass digitisation projects like Google Books generate sub-optimal tools through scanning errors and odd gaps in coverage (Henry and Smith, 2010). Secondly, research funding enables the creation of digital objects during the lifetime of a project, but long-term preservation and storage may not be provided for due to lack of technical knowledge. There is a definite opportunity for academic librarians to broaden the base of local expertise in digital preservation and to work together with academics and the Digital Humanities Observatory at the Royal Irish Academy to provide a stronger platform for digital humanities research in

Ireland. This is all the more timely following the award of funding for this field of research under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL 5). It also makes sense in light of a likely increase in emphasis by academic libraries on the curation of a wider range of institutional digital outputs, perhaps ultimately at the expense of traditional roles in the provision of access to third party publications (Lewis, 2007).

Empowerment of users represents another lead role for academic libraries, especially in recessionary times when staffing resources are being reduced, although the key is to achieve an appropriate balance between self-service and the availability of expert in-person help by staff. Major strides have already been made in areas like self-issue which now accounts for the majority of book loans in many libraries, freeing up time for more detailed interventions by library staff. The delivery of e-journals to the desktop is another example which has improved access to information dramatically in terms of both volume and flexibility. The next such opportunity for libraries may well be the e-book which holds the promise of easier access to textbooks if academic publishers embrace the online medium for this purpose. Irish academic libraries will want to build on their earlier work with e-books (Cox, 2004) by taking the upper hand through expert advice on available content and licencing and by researching the range of access devices on the market.

The ongoing proliferation of online content, while promoting self-sufficiency to some extent, places the onus on academic libraries to ensure excellent interfaces and easy access to staff expertise. Google has increasingly become the yardstick for search systems and there is undoubtedly a need for academic libraries to make the online experience of their users as effective as possible. This often involves simplification, and libraries have implemented a range of metasearch tools to support simultaneous retrieval from a range of catalogues, databases, e-journals and other sources. There is, however, an ongoing need to provide expert staff help, sometimes online but often in person and at different levels of complexity, to students and researchers. Excellent customer service is something which libraries have always emphasised and its value is even higher in ▶



‘Academic libraries continue to be distinguished more by their printed than their online collections.’

a climate which combines recession, higher student numbers, greater complexity in information provision and increased pressure on time.

Collections, print and electronic, remain the lifeblood of the academic library offering, and ensuring their ongoing development and ease of access is an ongoing priority. Although online publications often appear to attract most attention, printed collections continue to provide significant challenges and opportunities for leadership. Space is a particular consideration, and there is a growing realisation that the high cost of providing printed material on open access in the library building (Courant and Nielsen, 2010) can only be justified by high usage. Although it compromises the opportunities for discovery offered by serendipitous browsing, the trend is now towards the removal from open access of lesser used or online-available printed material. This allows repurposing of space to support new, often collaborative and technology-enabled, modes of learning. A gradual rather than sudden shift in this direction makes sense and the University of Glasgow offers a good example of progress on a floor-by-floor basis.

Academic libraries continue to be distinguished more by their printed than their online collections. Thus, all seven universities enjoy access to the online resources purchased by the IREL consortium but each of their libraries holds unique material in printed format. This is particularly so in the case of special collections and archives. Such collections not only underpin research but also enable libraries to make a strong contribution to the public profile of their institutions through seminars, exhibitions and other events. The acquisition of archives of local, regional or national significance often attracts media attention and public engagement, while the wealth of such material held by a university library can also interest prospective donors. There is a definite opportunity for academic libraries to promote awareness and exploitation of heritage collections and to take on an increasingly public function in their institutions.

Optimising Performance

It is said that what cannot be measured cannot be improved. The tightening of resources occasioned by the current recession has placed a strong emphasis on service measurement and this, far from being a threat, actually provides opportunities for academic libraries to prove their worth.

Irish university libraries have been active in surveying their users, whether institutionally or collectively (Cox, 2006), over the years and this activity has generated valuable data. When funds are tight, decisions on service development or curtailment need to be strongly evidence-based and a good understanding of the views, needs and habits of users is vital. Comparative data for performance benchmarking are increasingly called for and many of the members of the Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) are participating in the LibQual (Association of Research Libraries Statistics and Assessment Program, 2010) survey process during 2010. LibQual is used worldwide and the deployment of a standard survey instrument enables a level of benchmarking of service performance with similar libraries in Ireland, the UK and beyond, highlighting gaps between users’ desired, acceptable and perceived levels of service. It identifies areas for development against which progress can be tracked by participation at annual or other intervals. Regular evaluation itself conveys a positive culture of improvement to institutional management and can assist the case for resourcing. Collection of statistical data on relevant aspects of service performance offers further possibilities for benchmarking and inclusion in the SCONUL statistics database can broaden the range of comparator institutions.

The recession has also heightened the focus on efficiencies in general, and value for money in particular. As already noted, the IREL initiative has been highly successful in both respects and attracted very positive comment. Other collective purchasing opportunities will continue to be promoted within and between institutions to maximise return on investment. The drive for efficiencies is placing an emphasis on reviewing all processes in terms of costs, effectiveness and necessity such that only the most valuable activities are sustained and, in the face of non-replacement of vacated posts, often delivered via different, less staff-intensive models. Optimal use of all resources, from energy to staff, is essential. The most effective deployment of staff is a key issue and the way academic libraries organise themselves needs to achieve maximum performance, promote teamwork and support delivery to institutional priorities, with the customer at the centre. Accordingly, a restructuring of library senior management posts at NUI Galway has seen the four Head of Division posts for Bibliographic, Information and Reader Services and for Library Systems redefined as follows:

- Head of Information Access and Learning Services, bringing together the subject librarian, collections purchasing and cataloguing teams with online resource and interface specialists to maximize information access.
- Head of Customer Focus and Research Services, uniting research support services previously spread across three divisions, enacting a sustained marketing strategy and embedding the customer focus agenda.

- Head of Staff Development and Service Environment, maximising staffing capability for customer benefit, ensuring a fully-functioning service environment and planning new or existing space optimally.
- Head of Organisational Development and Performance, driving forward annual planning, process analysis, performance measurement, environmental scanning and technology strategy.

This structure is still new, but early gains are wider knowledge distribution within the management team and beyond, the emergence of some new synergies and a focus on shared strategic priorities and values which has driven a range of recent planning initiatives. One certainty is that staffing deployments will continue to be reviewed and adapted, with more fluid boundaries than before.

Conclusion

The global recession has certainly brought its share of pain to academic libraries (Cox, 2010). Staffing positions have been lost, budgets cut and expenditure on ongoing maintenance compromised. Tighter resources and alternative routes to information have challenged the status of the library on campus. It needs to be remembered, however, that libraries are not alone in this set of circumstances and the whole modus operandi of universities, including traditional hierarchies of knowledge creation, is being questioned by technology-enabled developments such as social networking. By refusing to give in to adversities arising from reduced funding, and by fighting back to develop new partnerships, roles and services, academic libraries are exercising a new brand of leadership on campus. Confronting recession is about more than just being more operationally efficient, although that is important too and is another area in which libraries can excel. Challenging economic times are actually facilitating academic libraries in enhancing their centrality to the scholarly mission and a culture of opportunism, agility and flexible skills development will serve all who work in them well.

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