

The Power and the Challenges of Collaboration for Academic Libraries

BY JEREMY ATKINSON

In recent years, considerable change has affected universities and their academic libraries, and this pace of change is likely to continue. Recent and current changes affecting academic libraries include:

- Increasing client expectations, with the consequent need to maintain and enhance the student experience, including student success and attainment, student retention and progression, and employability
- Disintermediation and the danger of library support in the digital age becoming invisible
- Current and future generations of students and researchers considering themselves self-sufficient in information skills
- A decline in the importance of the library as a physical entity
- Changing user needs and working styles
- The availability of alternative sources of information for learners and

researchers, with other providers as well as libraries in the digital environment

- The changing nature of universities, with new ways of working, changes in pedagogy, and increasing online delivery
- Changes in scholarly publication methods (such as open access) and the research environment
- Changing technologies, such as social media and mobile technologies
- Financial uncertainties, institutional cutbacks and an increasing pressure for accountability

In an editorial for a special journal issue on shared and collaborative services, Rose (2016) comments that “no librarian is an island.” Given the current environment and the kinds of changes outlined above, academic libraries can no longer afford to develop their services independently. Many of the changes taking place are large in scale, complex and difficult to navigate.

Partnerships are crucial for an academic library to successfully meet the needs of its clients and support the aims and objectives of its university. The library needs to work closely with client groups so that services are relevant, forge partnerships with other university professionals to provide seamless services, and develop innovative services with other local, regional or national organizations and universities to help deliver effective services and institutional efficiencies.

In a recent edited volume, I brought together a range of case studies providing useful insights into the nature and effectiveness of collaborative activities and innovative approaches involving academic libraries. Examples of internal university collaboration included embedding librarians in academic departments and online courses, working with partners to develop a university digital capabilities framework, co-designing a learning center with user groups, and delivering research support in



conjunction with other university departments. Examples of external collaboration included the development of a shared library management system and the procurement of electronic content, both involving a number of universities. I also analyzed these case studies to identify more than 130 key themes and lessons learned in order to help those planning or implementing their own collaborative initiatives. These fell into five categories, and I am including a few examples of each below to illustrate the potential power and the challenges of collaboration. A comprehensive list is provided in the edited volume (Atkinson, 2018).

CONTEXT AND DRIVERS FOR COLLABORATION

- Collaboration can be particularly effective where there are clear links to key institutional strategies and drivers. Alignment with national strategies and priorities can also help to gain buy-in at an institutional level.
- Collaboration provides an opportunity to deal with areas of activity that are too large for any stakeholder to deal with individually.
- Collaboration allows participants to take a wider perspective than they normally can, and to think institutionally, nationally or globally while acting locally.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

- The collaborative process allows for wider and deeper input from people with a variety of perspectives, expertise and experience. This helps to develop a more complete picture of the area and a richer service for users.
- Collaboration can provide efficiency savings, streamline work processes, and free up staff time for more value-added activities.
- Collaboration can help to change the role of the library in the university and move it beyond the traditional client service model.
- A more joined-up service delivery is developed. The

points of contact for users are minimized through the development of integrated services, single-user interfaces, single input of data, etc.

CONSTRAINTS AND BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

- There can be significant cultural differences between participants. Achieving the necessary cultural change can take time.
- There is a potential for loss of professional or institutional identity.
- There may be competing priorities for the staff involved, particularly for staff retaining some of their normal responsibilities. There may also be confusion on roles and responsibilities.
- Collaboration with other university staff and students may sometimes be problematic. Staff priorities will primarily relate to their normal areas of responsibility, and student priorities will be to their chosen course of study.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

Knowledge will need to be gained from other collaborative initiatives and consortia, including benchmarking against similar initiatives nationally and internationally.

- During the project, there should be regular, structured opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of work practice. These could include the development of communities of practice.
- “Champions” in each relevant locality or sector can help to gain engagement.
- There needs to be a meaningful review and evaluation of the collaboration at regular intervals using an “analyze, reflect and refine” cycle.

PARTICIPANT ATTRIBUTES

A number of contributors identified attributes and characteristics that individuals, teams and managers involved in collaborative activities need to possess. Examples included:

- The right attitude with an open approach and a willingness to share knowledge, information and skills freely
- A willingness to challenge conventional thinking, and an ability to bring to bear fresh perspectives and to rethink traditional library services
- All participants in the team need a common sense of purpose, a commitment to a shared goal, a common and agreed set of values and principles, and a high level

of trust. Team members need to be able to articulate the reasons for undertaking the work and have a clear and shared understanding of the mutual benefits of the initiative.

- The team needs to ensure that there is mutual sharing of success.

A similar approach has been adopted for looking at external collaboration and, in particular, shared services in SCONUL’s toolkit for library collaboration (Parsons, 2016), which identifies a series of defined characteristics for shared services collaboration.

Case studies have helped to demonstrate the value and benefits of collaboration in helping academic libraries deal with constant and accelerating change and deliver more effective and efficient services. However, collaboration is not always an easy path, and a wide range of individual and team attributes will need to be applied if the constraints and barriers are to be overcome. These include openness, trust and sharing; commitment, resilience and compromise; and a strong innovative approach. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeremy Atkinson (jeremyatkinson@hotmail.co.uk) is a library and information services consultant.

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