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## Libraries and Research: Five Key Themes for Sustainable Innovation in Strategy and Services

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This themed issue, which draws together articles that explore *Supporting Researchers: Sustainable Innovation in Strategy and Services*, seemed to sharpen in relevance even as the manuscripts were being written and developed. The global environment and the impact on Higher Education continues to change rapidly and demonstrates the need to be prepared for the unexpected but also the need to create a compelling vision for the future. Five themes emerge strongly across these articles and case studies as libraries seek ways of innovating to develop flexible, yet sustainable and purposeful approaches.

The overarching narrative foregrounds **building and evolving relationships**. This is not in itself new. Librarians have often showed initiative and skill in forming alliances that maximize access to information, shape collections and foster the attributes required to operate effectively in an increasingly complex multi-format and multiple rights holder environment. Nor is involvement with research activity new. Librarians have themselves been noted scholars over the years. What is clear from the articles in this volume is that libraries globally are engaging more systematically, both with the actual craft of research activity and with the development and monitoring of research strategy.

These collaborations are forming and deepening at all levels from international to local. A Canadian case study of the network linking the national statistics agency to institutional users shows the strength of librarians as knowledgeable ambassadors, also demonstrated by the expanding portfolio of advice available as a result of new training approaches. Several of the case studies identify new modes of staff development for researchers and professional experts, including collaborative learning. Innovative ways of learning together, transferring knowledge and understanding across currently partially siloed communities, could be key to effective support for large scale interdisciplinary activity.

Within Universities new collaborations are forming that go beyond the formality of staff structures to embrace deeper social alliances. These facilitate the more

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flexible and responsive ways of working that may well be required to stay relevant in a higher education environment that is challenging but full of opportunity. There are examples of the benefits of evolving communities of practice that encourage a reflective approach and of the development of centers of digital scholarship where co-creation and contribution to research practice flourishes with academic partnership. Can greater involvement with research activity help improve both the reflective and critical approach of practitioners and the evidence-base available? Libraries are well placed to provide strategic and service alignment across teaching and learning activities and a deeper involvement in research can add value to the profession in the round.

Another interesting question posed by this collection of articles and case studies is what is the **distinctive contribution of libraries** in research collaboration? We have evidence here of librarians working in research offices, similar services being led by different parts of Universities, shared service teams developing where integration blurs the boundaries between providers. We may well be evolving into a more fluid world where career pathways can develop across professions. This can be seen as an opportunity for richer development, not a cause for protectionism. However, it is still useful to ask what a profession or particular role might contribute that is distinctive, even though it may not be unique. Three areas emerge as possible distinctors.

- The role of libraries in the management and development of what we might call socio-informatic space, both physical and virtual. Research is, after all, about the making of new knowledge and librarians have a distinctive contribution to the creation of the research “maker-spaces” of the future where this knowledge will be made and shared.
- Libraries have a particular view of the long term. Librarians and archivists have a strong track record of caring about access to information for future generations and certainly past the end of a 5 year business plan. Case studies here show that librarians are aware of this responsibility and the scale of the challenge, but perhaps flag this up as a key area where there is more work to do.
- Librarians have a distinctive interest in the full range of scholarly communication activity, as represented in this volume by the engagement with writing centers, editorial activities, social media, evidencing research contribution and impact, and perhaps most importantly embracing the ethical challenges of the changing information landscape and demonstrating commitment to new modes of publishing and dissemination.

There is currently much debate in the sector regarding the next steps for opening up access to scholarly work. New business models are slowly emerging to mixed reception and much scrutiny. This volume highlights through case studies some library-led initiatives to **develop new and sustainable approaches** through open access university presses, showcasing original works through repositories and adding value through contextualizing and showcasing research impact narratives.

In order to provide sustainable services to support the growing areas of research partnership libraries are taking a fresh look at best fit staffing configurations and approaches to professional development. Libraries are balancing the need for cross-cutting flexibility in planning and delivery with clarity of purpose. All with the backdrop of economic uncertainty, a challenging policy landscape and a requirement to evidence impact and operational efficiency. In such an environment the ability of libraries to continually hone expertise and demonstrate their contribution to collaborations is paramount.

Libraries are shown in this special issue to be strongly contributing to **evidencing activity** for both the individual researcher and for the institution as a whole. Australian research particularly shows the growing involvement in bibliometric and altmetric analysis and the potential of the contribution to the overall research environment in institutions. Case studies also demonstrate the expansion of the research repositories to support annual research planning, working to inform institutional strategy. These show that libraries are not just providing research services. They are developing their contributions to the shaping of research visions for Universities and in monitoring activity and identifying success.

Many of the articles draw out the challenge of turning pilots and projects for new services, or innovations to existing services, into sustainable core activity. A U.S. based initiative demonstrates the utility of a specific Research Innovation Framework which draws on design thinking to track projects, maximize lateral communication, and assess funding options. Another model draws on urban theory to inform the development of typologies. Embracing methodological innovation brings research practice to research service development. A collaborative approach to enquiry and investigation is a platform for sustainability.

One of the most striking areas of commonality in this collection of articles is a **focus on nontextual elements of research practice**. Not only are libraries embracing research data management and undertaking numerical analytics, there are cases studies here that are all about visual research objects and outputs and that capture the creation of more visual learning materials. We are potentially at a tipping point where the primacy of the written word as the core means of communicating research may be under challenge. The exponential growth of research data and its heterogeneity is well documented. In the year in which we have lost John Berger, it has never been more apposite to ask anew how we look at the world and reflect on “ways of seeing”? Increasingly the information environment is underpinned by algorithms, software coding and forms of data manipulation, and is surfaced in an image-rich context. These visualizations often embrace interaction, from virtual reality worlds to methodological investigation of data mash-ups. Extending engagement with these non-textual areas will be essential if libraries are to continue to lead and collaborate on all aspects of research strategy and services.

This range of research papers and case studies provides plenty of reasons to be optimistic regarding libraries of the future. Librarians individually, in partnerships and in communities are well placed to be innovative leaders and provide enduring

services. Public trust in research authenticity and the expertise of researchers is currently the subject of debate. Librarians have a role to play in securing and nurturing this trust by providing complementary expertise and skills to support research replication, shared ethical practice, reflective communities, and a responsible approach to use of metrics. They can foster a culture of appropriate openness and necessary privacy; not just for access to research outputs and engagement with all aspects of research activity, but for intelligent citizenship in a global digital world.