



## What is the True State and Status of Academic Librarianship in the UK?

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## What is the True State and Status of Academic Librarianship in the UK?

Taking advantage of the additional personal reading time afforded by the second English COVID-19 lockdown of November 2020, I came across a rare example of a professional UK library colleague being cited by name in a national, non-librarianship periodical and, rarer still, that said librarian being publicly criticised in a *negative* fashion (Liddle, 2020). This got me thinking about the current state and status of UK academic librarianship *as a profession* with the following questions springing to mind: 1.) Could such a personal and public critique (valid or not) have occurred in any of our own professional publications or fora?; 2.) If so, which ones?; 3.) If not, is that OK and what does that say about the state of our profession and our ability to hold ourselves to account?

Academic librarianship is no different to other professions in that we know that such frank discussions and appraisals of individuals, institutions or professional issues *do* take place via private emails, in library corridors, at conferences or in the preambles of video conferencing chats. Although some of this can be dismissed as idle gossip, I do recall an example last year where some form of profession-wide discussion on a potentially contentious topic may have actually been helpful to try to understand the consensus view or “received wisdom” of the academic librarianship profession, even if there was a risk of it being exposed to the cruel light of day of wider society via social media and/or the news media.

The example in question related to various comments and opinions appearing in professional mailing lists and Twitter posts from one of my head of library colleagues about the perceived dangers of keeping academic libraries open whilst other professional university services closed at the time of the first UK national lockdown at the end of March 2020. At that time, all heads of service were struggling with the timing of such a decision - trying to balance the expectations of students and their university peers against the safety of their staff and their own moral principles - so it was a very valid debate on which different shades of opinion could be held. Nonetheless, many heads agreed in private that statements from our colleague predicting that (and I paraphrase) many librarians would die if we remained open for much longer were not helpful or professionally appropriate in persuading senior university executives of the wisdom of closing physical library services.

This reflection then led me scratching my head trying to recall big “state of the profession” topics that had actually spilled out into the open in the UK during the past two decades since I had turned professional. Not many came to mind. I remembered the furore in 2005 of the then University of Wales, Bangor, UK’s decision to reduce its number of subject librarians as, it was claimed, students were surely able to get all the information they needed without them via the Internet (Sykes, 2005). There were certainly letters in the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional

(CILIP<sup>1</sup>)’s *Library & information Update* on the subject along with good discussions at the time on its longer-term implications with library colleagues when I was a business subject librarian at the Open University Library, Milton Keynes, UK (OU).

Now, 17 years on, there still seems to be at least four subject librarian equivalent posts at what is now Bangor University despite the appearance of Google et al. so maybe it was not such a big deal after all? Or such stories are no longer deemed newsworthy as they have become an accepted part of the ritual toing and froing with trade unions during UK university restructuring programmes?

An obvious riposte could be that social media has now become the outlet for such professional debates. That may be true of society as a whole but is it really true of our profession? Do we not still play safe and self-censor our views, lest we offend our employers or libel our colleagues? What is the last public Twitter spat you remember between librarians? Perhaps our seeming lack of professional debate is not a bad thing and that efforts are being targeted where they should be. There is, for example, a growing corpus of librarian social media criticism on scholarly publishing and Open Access with luminaries such as David Prosser from Research Libraries UK<sup>2</sup>, retired professor Charles Oppenheim or Johanna Anderson at the University of Gloucester not shy of speaking up in public or at publisher or industry events or on social media, calling out publishers on price gouging, predatory practices, dodgy author agreements etc.

## Professional reviews

Widening the reflective theme of this piece yet further, I have often been struck as a UK practitioner how little critical appraisal there seems to be of the various components that form the essence of academic librarianship as a discipline and profession. Yes, reviews of librarianship books are still being published (but when is the last time you read a negative one?). Where are the reviews of new librarianship journals (believe it or not there are some still appearing) or, indeed, a balanced overview of the state of the profession as a whole?

I do believe that we are perfectly capable of reflective and evidence-based discussion on the key topics in our profession within the walls of our professional journals, whether it be digital literacy, collection management or the costs of e-textbooks. But when was the last negative “lessons learned” piece that you read in a librarianship publication (including the *New Review of Librarianship* by the way!)? Or a negative case study article, given that the majority of our practitioner journals are filled with “show and tell” case-studies these days? I should know – I have contributed a few of these to our literature in my time e.g., (Wales, 2021) but I did manage one negative one at least (Wales, 2005).

Where are the critical reviews of library management systems on which we collectively spend millions of pounds each year? I doubt that they will be appearing anytime soon in those publications that depend on industry news, advertising and press releases such as *Research Information* and *UKSG e-News*. The nearest we have is perhaps Marshall Breeding’s excellent website and annual publications (Breeding, 2021) in the USA but even they do not raise the kinds of details that we often share amongst ourselves in our virtual college as we market-test products before public procurement exercises begin. It may be that the task is impossible not only logistically but also because we lost control of our own technological destinies some time ago after successive waves of market consolidation over the past 30 years led to the creation of

megalithic monopolistic suppliers (including Library security/RFID suppliers, Library apps, research information systems etc) with price differentiation being the only real significant point of comparison between systems (whatever organisational procurement frameworks would lead us to believe). Yes, I realise that there are product user groups for such systems which can be very critical of the hand that feeds them from my experience but these are held *in camera* and comments are rarely made public.

And what about those library databases and subject collections that we collectively spend nine figure sums on annually in the UK according to SCONUL's *Annual Library Statistics* (SCONUL, 2020)? I remember reading the US librarianship trade journals *Online* and *E-Content* with gratitude in the early 2000s when I was working at the OU as they were the few publications in my discipline areas that really “looked under the bonnet” of information resource products and was not afraid to call out usability, indexing and coverage failures in a fair and credible manner. But I think these no longer exist. Even critical or reflective commentaries on online information topics, such as the “Dial-Out” column written by my old colleague Jonathan Eaton at London Business School, UK disappeared with DIALOG and ASLIB and their *Managing Information* periodical.

### Professional accountability and transparency

How many UK librarians were kicked off CILIP's *Register of Practitioners* in the past decade? I presumed that there have not been any as I never saw this information published anywhere so I asked CILIP. Sure enough, I was told:

“Members aren't really expelled from the Register [of Practitioners] – they are expelled from membership after a disciplinary process. This is a very rare occurrence and we don't have a record of any in the last 10 years.”

Does this fact mean that we are a perfect profession? Or that our standards are too generic to contravene or measure? Or that in truth we are an irrelevant profession (we have never appeared, for example, in the *IPSOS MORI Veracity Index* which has been measuring public trust in professions since 1983 (Ipsos MORI, 2021)? I do not know the answer but it would be good to hear that there is a debate happening somewhere in our profession around these fundamental issues, perhaps in library schools? Maybe it is a good thing that we are left to get on with our professional lives without the full scrutiny of journalists, authorities, analysts, commentators etc to deal with as is the case with other professions. We have seen examples in the UK's Civil Service where the deliberate public exposure of perceived failings that took place within the Johnson government's departments has not ended well for either the aggrieved party or the government (although some might challenge that assertion).

No surprise then that there is a tradition of *omertà* in our profession in which incoming library heads neither criticise the work and/or methods of their predecessors nor publicly explain why there has been a succession of changes of library management in a short space of time. But is that deafening silence on good and bad practices within our profession inhibiting its maturation and evolution? Apparently unpublished memoirs do exist written by long retired colleagues that are very critical of some of their (named) peers but we only really ever hear about the good ones from those that reach publication, reflecting the 21<sup>st</sup> century trend of self-censorship of negativity (or the cult of positivity).

Of course, Murphy's Law applies in our relatively small sector. I remember being publicly critical of University of West London, UK (UWL), calling it "a basket-case" when it was still known as Thames Valley University whilst I was working nearby at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK and then ended up working at UWL four years later to try and turn its library around!

## Concluding thoughts

Part of me idly wonders at times whether we should establish some kind of official library inspectorate or a ratings framework owned by e.g., SCONUL<sup>3</sup> (or an auditing body like the Financial Reporting Council<sup>4</sup> that oversees the UK accountancy profession) to give us a public and credible way of holding ourselves to account and to a set of defined standards (which many of our institutions are doing anyway via accreditation frameworks such as Customer Service Excellence in the UK<sup>5</sup>). Otherwise can we really claim to be a true profession, being more of a "semi-profession" as posited by Freeman (Freeman, 1997), in danger of diluting ourselves even further, as evidenced by the growing number of library heads who do not have a formal librarianship qualification?

I doubt though that there is the appetite or inclination or need for this level of public introspection and self-flagellation. Anecdotally, I have heard examples from managers of those academic library staff who have dared to give direct, albeit blunt, feedback on their profession in public or professional fora being contacted afterwards by "the powers that be" insisting that disciplinary proceedings be enacted against the whistle blowers. Hardly evidence of support for academic freedom of speech or of a healthy profession!

One final point to illustrate my topic – I had to think long and hard about where to publish this opinion piece about our profession's appetite for public reflection and criticism. Partly because I wanted it recorded in a formal publication of record within the profession rather than on social media. Partly because I could not identify any current librarianship publication with an active and vibrant letters page or readers' comments section which would help stimulate a healthy professional debate (e.g., even CILIP's *Information Professional* has stopped publishing a regular readers' letters page). And partly because I still shied away from wanting to name names or organisations in a form of self-censorship as I (correctly) believed nobody would publish the piece if they were included. This personal experience makes me think that a library equivalent of the US Society of Scholarly Publishing (SSP)'s Scholarly Kitchen formally edited blog (Society of Scholarly Publishing, 2021) is the way to go, including as it does a mixture of publishers, consultants and librarians as its "Chefs" and a deliberately provocative style at times – e.g., publishing articles with such titles as: "Academic Libraries and the Textbook Taboo: Time to Get Over It?" or "Library-Institution Misalignment: One Real-Word Example". The nearest equivalent to SSP on this side of the Atlantic is arguably UKSG<sup>6</sup> but would they pick up the gauntlet and who would write such articles over here anyway, other than provocative columnists in non-librarianship periodicals? In my beginning is my end.

## Notes

1. CILIP, [www.cilip.org.uk](http://www.cilip.org.uk).
2. Research Libraries UK, [www.rluk.ac.uk](http://www.rluk.ac.uk).

3. SCONUL, [www.sconul.ac.uk](http://www.sconul.ac.uk).
4. Financial Reporting Council, [www.frc.org.uk](http://www.frc.org.uk).
5. Customer Service Excellence, [www.customerserviceexcellence.uk.com](http://www.customerserviceexcellence.uk.com).
6. UKSG, [www.uksg.org](http://www.uksg.org).

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