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Academic and research librarians engaging a global mindset

From awareness to action

Five years ago, the first *C&RL News* International Insights column¹ was published in response to the question raised during the Research Forum at ACRL 2015, What can ACRL do to highlight research and practice that provides an international and/or comparative understanding of issues that affect academic and research libraries? As the current column coeditors, who end our stewardship of the quarterly column this issue, our goal has been to provide a global perspective on issues relevant to academic and research libraries, and offer ideas and opportunities for action. Thus, we wish to conclude our editorship with a focus on action by the academic and research library community that engages a global mindset.

Our action orientation takes a cue from the ACRL Plan for Excellence,² which states one of the association's core organizational values as: "ACRL is committed to visionary leadership, transformation, new ideas, and global perspectives." While the plan doesn't have specific goals that expand on the value of global perspectives, we propose to fill the gap by offering ideas for action, grounded on a global mindset in four focus areas to move from awareness to action: practice, service, teaching, and research.

Practice

As academic and research librarians, our practice is guided by our institutional missions to advance academic excellence. What does it mean to approach this work with a global perspective? While in some institutions such a practice may not have been essential, the global COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how interconnected we are, the need to share not only our ideas and practices, but our resources, especially digitally. Information and communication technologies are allowing librarians from different parts of the world to not only interact with each other to exchange comparative, complementary, or supplementary practices, but also to learn through webinars and virtual conferences, many without any cost, and recordings for those in a different time zone or not able to attend.

In collection development, academic and research librarians have been forced to acknowledge the "deeply rooted inequities and the precariousness of institutional structures across all socio-cultural and geographic spaces,"³ to which our libraries have responded by

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developing short-term policies of suspending our paywalls (e.g., JSTOR expanded access)⁴ and restricted access (e.g., Hathi Trust)⁵ as well as by expanding institutional affiliation to the necessarily virtual international scholars to access resources that they would only have been able to access physically at the host institution. While these policies have addressed the immediate needs of their respective constituencies and institutional partners, these measures point to rethinking and broadening support for international scholarship through digital means. These implications for resource sharing and the open access movement underscore the need to change our policies and economic models to close the gap between less- and greater-resourced libraries and Global North and Global South academic institutions.

Service

Academic and research librarians engage their leadership through institutional, professional, scholarly, and community service. Here, we focus on professional association service, from which lessons can be drawn for service in other contexts. International matters in professional associations are most often addressed in a distributed or concentrated manner or both. In a distributed approach, global perspectives are applied across all association activities, while in a concentrated approach, sub-units (e.g., committees, special interest groups, round tables) have the specific charge to address international association matters. We advance the adoption of both approaches that simultaneously enable all association members to assume responsibility for global-mindedness and action, and to allow internationally focused sub-units to concentrate expertise and provide leadership for international action by the association. Complementary to this association approach is the need for collaboration with associations from other regions (e.g., ACRL with LIBER [Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche—Association of European Research Libraries and international associations] or the Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries) or international ones, such as IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), which has an Academic and Research Libraries Section.

Teaching

The ACRL Plan for Excellence lists as one of its goals: advancing “equitable and inclusive pedagogical practices for libraries to support student learning” and to do so by empowering “libraries to build sustainable, equitable, and responsive information literacy programs.” This ACRL strategic focus needs to be viewed in a context of “disruptive” innovations resulting from rapidly evolving digital technologies globally, requiring increasing pedagogical support from academic librarians working in the higher education (HE) environment. However, in a context of globalization of HE, such support for institutions’ teaching and learning from academic librarians requires a global mindset that is culturally and socially inclusive as well as embraces multiple ways of knowing. The forthcoming new IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library and Information Science (LIS) Education Programmes⁶ also advocates in “Literacies and Learning,” one of its eight foundational knowledge areas (FKAs), that LIS professionals foster multiple literacies and lifelong learning in all contexts, including orality and traditional knowledge.

In a context of such global and inclusive imperatives, we draw exemplars from the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, of transitioning to action the global mindset awareness in librarians’ support of HE teaching and learning. In the aftermath of severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a diversity of teaching and learning communities at

a residential university in a highly unequal society such as South Africa, whose inequalities and inequities were starkly accentuated by the pandemic, UCT Libraries acknowledged its team of academic librarians for: "... embracing the new ways of being, thinking and doing ... we succeeded in making a huge paradigm and mindset shift" in addressing the teaching and learning support required by a diverse user community. In an effort to transition from a mindset of awareness of equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility to tangible action, UCT Libraries, in a context of largely digitally mediated teaching and learning in a pandemic-induced environment, engaged in a "re-conceptualization of the entire UCTL network of libraries for future relevance and sustainability."⁷

Two examples, *inter alia*, of such actions in teaching support include the reconceptualizing of user services and information literacy programs. UCT Libraries reported in its Library Working Group Report that in conceptualizing its Virtual Library Services, its librarians "continuously visited its services to ensure optimal support commensurate with changing COVID protocols" and that in doing so it "kept track of international practice," but developed "its own benchmarks for an engaged service model" that suited local user needs amongst a diverse user community. To address inequities in device and connectivity needs, typical of an unequal South African society, as well as other challenges, UCT Libraries opted for a challenging and labor-intensive "hybrid service model" to provide "as equal a service as possible" in dual environments (campus and virtual) and which involved "reskilling and upskilling of staff" in a highly transient HE environment.

A second exemplar of global mindset transition to action worth noting is how UCT Libraries re-imagined "information literacy in the form of scholarly and research capabilities." According to the Library Working Group Report, this reimagination was "underpinned by the need to address the inequities within the [South African] education system [a legacy from its apartheid past] and the provision of context for students" to embrace information literacy skills. Hence a period of engagement by the Library Teaching and Learning Task Team with academics and students resulted in a series of learning modules (e.g., Tackling your first assignment, Information gathering, etc.) "mapped to the research life cycle to give meaning and context," especially to undergraduate students coming from underserved backgrounds.

Research

Research support from academic and research libraries also has been transformed by rapidly evolving digital technology. This transformation has been informed by developments in copyright legislation, budget constraints and funding challenges, knowledge sharing and related policies, institutional strategies, and structures.⁸ Hence, academic libraries globally have been rethinking and reimagining their services to meet changing needs and requirements of their research user communities. UCT Libraries has been no exception. In a context of competition among researchers for limited resources at national, regional, and even international levels, academic libraries such as UCT Libraries have restructured their services to accommodate new areas of research support and, in the process, demonstrated a move from awareness to action in global mindset in response to Global South research imperatives.

For example, the Library Working Group Report makes reference to UCT Libraries' Bibliometric Services assisting researchers to "showcase their research impact," including "aligning the service with a broader research impact in mind"; that is, impact beyond

the academy and into the realms of African society, economy, public policy, services, the environment, etc.

The ACRL Plan for Excellence lists as a research goal the need for the “academic and research library workforce” to accelerate the “transition to more open and equitable systems of scholarship.” This global mindset shift is evidenced in the work of academic librarians at a research-intensive university such as UCT through its Library as Publisher Services involving UCT Libraries hosting platforms (institutionally as well as across the African continent) for open access publishing of journals as well as monographs. This is a direct response to addressing social justice imperatives of inclusivity and accessibility by making institutional scholarship accessible to the “African continent first [where it is needed to address local challenges] and then to the world.”

Conclusion

We conclude by referring back to the ACRL Plan for Excellence and specifically to the concluding sentence of its Core Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion:

The Association will acknowledge and address historical racial inequities; challenge oppressive systems within academic libraries; value different ways of knowing; and identify and work to eliminate barriers to equitable services, spaces, resources, and scholarship.

To advance the core value of global perspectives, the commitment of the association should engage historical racial inequalities comparatively across the globe; challenge oppressive systems within academic libraries collaboratively across geographic spaces; value different ways of knowing in the Global North and Global South; and identify and work to eliminate barriers to equitable services, spaces, resources, and scholarship as a universal and collective imperative.

Lastly, we call for the inclusion of global perspectives in ACRL’s ongoing and future strategic planning, and more particularly moving global perspectives from a core value to articulating goals and objectives.

Notes

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2. Association for College and Research Libraries, “ACRL Plan for Excellence,” (accessed March 25, 2022).

3. Joint Area Studies Task Force, “Coalition of Librarians for Equity and Access, July 31, 2020,” <https://coalition-lea.org/mission-statement/> (accessed March 31, 2022).

4. JSTOR, “Expanded Access to Journals and Primary Sources: Supporting Libraries During the COVID-19 Crisis,” <https://about.jstor.org/covid19/expanded-access-to-collections/> (accessed March 25, 2022).

5. Natalie Fulkerson, Sandra McIntyre and Melissa Stewart, “HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service: Reaping the Rewards of Long-term Collaboration,” *Collaborative Librar-*

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6. LIS Education Framework Development Group, IFLA Building Strong LIS Education (BSLISE) Working Group, “IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library and Information Science (LIS) Education Programmes,” <https://bslise.org/lis-education-guidelines/> (accessed March 31, 2022).

7. UCT Libraries, University of Cape Town, “Library Working Group Report: For the Period December 2021-March 2022” (unpublished).

8. Andrés Fernandez-Ramos, “Online information Literacy in Mexican University Libraries: The Librarian’s Point of View,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, no. 3 (2019): 242-251, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.03.008>. *zz*