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**Beyond books: The concept of the academic library as learning space**

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## 1. Beyond books: The concept of the academic library as learning space

The academic library is more than just a building and book repository. This paper will draw on a wide literature to challenge the concept of academic libraries and present how they are becoming reframed as different spaces. This not only demonstrates a change in purpose for academic libraries, but it also reflects a change in the concept of the library itself. This paper will demonstrate that libraries are more than just information repositories; they are learning spaces. While these changes are positive developments, they also present a risk to the concept of academic libraries. While the purpose of academic libraries may be reframing, it can be argued that the users' conceptualisations of such spaces will not automatically change because of this. This is an issue that libraries need to be aware of and something they need to actively engage users to resolve.

Technological developments, policy changes and financial pressures within the Higher Education (HE) sector have influenced universities to rethink the purpose and function of academic libraries. From the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through to the mid-1990s, the main purpose of academic libraries used to be the curation of their collection (Becker, 2015; Holmgren & Spencer, 2014). Throughout this period, it can be argued that the conceptualisation of academic libraries was their purpose as a repository of information (Sternheim & Bruijnzeels, 2013b), often serving as the "intellectual heart" of the university (Marmot, 2014: 64). The core role of academic libraries was to develop and make available a collection of scholarly resources. This role was so significant that the reputation of an institution could be measured by the size, breadth and depth of its library's collection (Holmgren & Spencer, 2014). This led the historian Foote to famously argue "a university is just a group of buildings gathered around a library. The Library is the university" (quoted in Chepesiuk, 1994: 984). The current research presented in this paper suggests that this is no longer a fair representation of academic libraries or libraries elsewhere in the educational sector (Dickinson, 2014; Foote, 2014; Kowalski, 2014). The collection is important, but it is not the sum of a library. While this may be widely acknowledged by library professionals, this is not always reflected in user conceptualisations. Even though user demands have changed, it can be argued that many novice users still have outdated views of libraries (Snavely, 2012; Matthews & Walton, 2014).

The changes outlined above demonstrate the need to challenge user definitions of the academic library. However, there needs to be a more radical reconceptualisation of

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3 academic libraries to ensure they maintain their central role within universities and HE as a  
4 whole. As Lefebvre (1991: 167) suggests:  
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7 “An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d’être* which  
8 determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become  
9 vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite  
10 different from its initial one.”  
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13 As spaces, academic libraries have changed dramatically over the last thirty years to stay  
14 relevant and avoid vacancy. These changes need to be reflected in the concept of academic  
15 libraries and this paper will focus on libraries in the UK and the United States of America  
16 (USA). The reason for this spatial focus is the similarity of issues and trends in academic  
17 library development within the UK (Graham & Graham, 2014; Watson & Howden, 2013) and  
18 USA (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015; Simon, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. These recent  
19 developments have included an increase in technology; the development of new, often open  
20 plan spaces; and the collocation of existing and development of new support services  
21 (Simon, 2013; Watson & Howden, 2013). Niegaard (2011: 175) argues that it is now  
22 “absolutely necessary” for libraries to rethink what they offer. Library users need to be  
23 engaged as part of this process to ensure they have the opportunity to challenge the  
24 concept of academic libraries and reframe their own understanding.  
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27 As Lefebvre (1991) may argue, these developments are reappropriating and diverting  
28 academic libraries into something very different from their original purpose. This is not a  
29 problem *per se* as Savin-Baden (2008) champions the need for space to be re-created and  
30 redefined to support the wider academic community. However, while library spaces are  
31 physically transforming, the understanding and conceptualisation of libraries for many users  
32 is still founded on an idealised version of the library as an information repository (EunYoung  
33 et al., 2013). For many libraries, this is no longer appropriate. While libraries are beginning to  
34 change this through the engagement of stakeholders and users, there is still a need for  
35 academic libraries to be redefined.  
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## 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 2. Understanding academic libraries as spaces

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50 Before continuing, it is important to discuss how users form their concept of an academic  
51 library. Snavelly (2012) suggests that the only experience of a ‘library’ that the latest  
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56 <sup>1</sup> See European (Sternheim & Bruijnzeels, 2013a) and Chinese (Anderson, 2013) academic libraries  
57 for a contrasting example.  
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3 generation of students have is their music collection. While perhaps unfair, this can only be  
4 supplemented with experience from public libraries or movies, both of which are different to  
5 their academic counterpart. In contrast, older students and staff will only have experience  
6 based on older forms of academic libraries. Sternheim and Bruijnzeels (2013b) suggest it is  
7 difficult for such users to adapt their conceptualisation to newer forms. This may not be an  
8 issue for users that regularly engage with academic libraries, but for all others it  
9 demonstrates the greatest risk associated with the concept of academic libraries; the user  
10 conceptualisation is not necessarily a fair reflection of what libraries offer. While universities  
11 may develop the physical library space, users will not change their conceptualisation of such  
12 spaces unless they are engaged in the process or have first-hand experience of it.  
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### 19 2.1. Space as a concept

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21 As people form concepts based on previous experience, it is important to ask how  
22 individuals construct their own understanding of a space. As a concept, space can be  
23 considered in many ways. Within HE, Temple (2014) discusses space in the physical sense  
24 and Savin-Baden (2008) the mental and metaphorical. Both authors acknowledge the  
25 relationships between the two and it is often difficult to draw a distinction between the  
26 physical and the metaphorical. Indeed, for the context of this paper, both understandings of  
27 space need to be considered. This is because the conceptualisation of libraries as learning  
28 spaces is a social product of library spaces and the metaphorical constructions of their  
29 users.  
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36 Lefebvre (1991) discusses a triad of spaces: perceived space, conceived space and lived  
37 space. Perceived space is physical, mathematical and measurable, whereas conceived  
38 space is made of the flows of people, money and information. Zhongyuan (2006) suggests  
39 these spaces sit at opposite poles and that between them the subjective lived space sits.  
40 The lived space is made of an individual's knowledge of a space as they construct and feel  
41 it. To look at this in the context of libraries, each space of Lefebvre's (1991) triad can be  
42 used as a lens through which to consider library space. The perceived space can be used to  
43 focus on the empirical materiality of library spaces, how big is it, how many chairs and so on.  
44 The conceived space allows focus on the flows within and through library spaces such as  
45 the movement of users and books. The lived space allows focus on the inner subjectivity of  
46 each user and ultimately their understanding of libraries. It is within this space that a  
47 reconceptualisation of library space needs to take place, to move user understanding of  
48 libraries away from their role as information repositories. Lefebvre's (1991) approach has  
49 been used academically by Bilandzic and Foth (2013) to help understand a new social  
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3 library space, demonstrating that it can be used to help libraries understand how users  
4 perceive and use their spaces.  
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6 While Lefebvre's (1991) triad is useful in showing library spaces to be a social construction,  
7 as an approach this is not enough. Learning is more than just a physical environment, it is  
8 also a mental space. For learners, Savin-Baden (2008) suggests learning spaces are  
9 metaphorical in that they are the mental spaces people create for themselves to read,  
10 research, reflect and write. Even though these actions may take place in some physical  
11 space, this is a reminder that there are different mental components for individual learners  
12 and therefore different spatial requirements.  
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## 17 18 2.2. Zengagement 19

20 While not its purpose, the "zengagement" model developed by Hunter and Cox (2014) for  
21 libraries demonstrates the interactions between Lefebvre's (1991) triad and Savin-Baden's  
22 (2008) metaphorical learning spaces. In the model, the user establishes a personal (lived)  
23 zone, often marked with belongings. While a physical zone in one sense, this can also be  
24 seen at the metaphorical space for which the user is constructing somewhere they can  
25 study. This zone is situated within both the physical, perceived space and the conceived,  
26 fluid space of the library. It is possible to see how both these spaces interact with the  
27 individual learner, from the décor of the perceived, to the flows of people in the conceived.  
28 All of these stimuli interact with the learner within their lived space and help form their  
29 understanding of the space itself. Broadly speaking, these stimuli can be either inspirational  
30 or distracting to an individual learner (Hunter & Cox, 2014). For example, while an aesthetic  
31 view through a window will inspire some, it will distract others. For this reason, the  
32 applicability of this model is limited to an individual basis.  
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41 The zengagement model is also useful for looking at how space can limit users. All learning  
42 spaces provide users with a set of "affordances" for what they are able to do (Waite, 2014:  
43 73). In a library context for example, a learning space does not facilitate laptop use without  
44 the availability of Wi-Fi and a power socket. As such, without the appropriate affordances,  
45 library spaces will not facilitate certain user behaviours and this can be a limiting factor.  
46 Looking at libraries with the zengagement model highlights the way in which individual users  
47 perceive spaces and their associated barriers or enablers for use.  
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## 52 2.3. Engaging users 53 54

55 University spaces are difficult to research as the staff and students who use them are often  
56 embedded to a point at which they cannot see any other physical "reality" than their own  
57 (Beyes & Michels, 2014: 15). While it can be argued that these individual realities are the  
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3 productions of the lived space, this is difficult for library management to engage with as such  
4 interpretations and understandings are highly individualised. This is problematic as to  
5 understand academic libraries, questions such as “When we think of the “library,” do we  
6 think of rows of book stacks or a series of services for users or a suite of technologies or all  
7 three?” (Little, 2013:251) must be considered. However, with the intricacies of the lived  
8 space, it is clear that this question cannot be addressed in a generalised context. This  
9 demonstrates the need for library staff to engage users in understanding what libraries do  
10 and how their library will support them.  
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16 This section has so far focused on how users may understand, interact and conceptualise  
17 the library space. Another way to look at the concept of an academic library is to consider  
18 institutional planning documents. While academic libraries have always provided spaces for  
19 study, the majority of such libraries are now making it their strategic focus to develop  
20 learning spaces. In a study of 63 American academic and research library strategic plans,  
21 Saunders (2015) found that 94.2% made explicit reference to physical space. This was  
22 second only to the development of the library collection, demonstrating the near-equal  
23 importance of both. Graham and Graham (2014) discuss this in the UK context and also  
24 suggest libraries have become known for their expertise in developing learning spaces. An  
25 example of the library as a learning space innovator can be seen in the Disruptive Media  
26 Learning Lab at Coventry University Frederick Lanchester Library (Adema, 2014).  
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33 As library strategy moves to include elements beyond just collection management, it is clear  
34 that libraries are becoming conceptualised as more than just repositories. To what extent  
35 this translates to all library users however is an issue localised to individual libraries. This  
36 section has demonstrated that it is more accurate to conceptualise libraries as learning  
37 spaces, inclusive of resources. Herein however, lies the problem. This section has also  
38 shown there is no reality to the library, as library spaces are as much a product of their users  
39 as they are products of architects and librarians. This poses a risk to the concept of libraries,  
40 as there are so many conflicting viewpoints it may not be possible to reconcile them. This  
41 makes it difficult to engage users and libraries need to work harder to address this issue.  
42 Without approaching this problem, the user understanding of the library as a space will not  
43 change.  
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### 50 51 3. The reappropriation of library space; libraries as learning space 52

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54 To understand the definitional and conceptual issue of libraries, this section will demonstrate  
55 how libraries have changed and developed to maintain relevancy. As these changes have  
56 taken place over several years, this has seen the slow reappropriation of library space for  
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3 new purposes. While Chan and Spodick (2014) argue that space is the most valuable asset  
4 of the academic library, the pressures on this space have dramatically changed over the last  
5 thirty years. Developments in computer technology have been the largest contributor to  
6 these changes (Becker, 2015) and this section will briefly review how it has impacted  
7 academic libraries. It is important that these changes are integrated into the understanding  
8 and concept of libraries. Allowing users to maintain the view of libraries as no more than  
9 information repositories is dangerous and poses a risk to the concept of libraries. This is no  
10 better represented than with the paper titled “The Library is Dead, Long Live the Library!” by  
11 Ross and Sennyey (2008). In their paper, the authors warn of the competition academic  
12 libraries now have from other information providers and how the existence of academic  
13 libraries are under threat. This stark view of libraries perhaps symbolises the issue of  
14 focusing too heavily on libraries as mere repositories. It also demonstrates that  
15 reconceptualising libraries as learning spaces is not just an issue of semantics, but is a real  
16 struggle for the future of libraries.  
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### 24 25 3.1. Free space: The shrinking resource collection 26

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28 The largest pressure on space has always been physically housing and navigating the  
29 resource collection. Libraries have always needed lots of space to store materials like books,  
30 journals and microfiches (Becker, 2015). In this “paper world”, libraries were constructed to  
31 support users in their reading and the library was seen as the destination for accessing  
32 information (Sennyey et al., 2009: 253). However, this is no longer the case. Computer  
33 technology first started to change this with the introduction of electronic catalogues which  
34 were widely adopted by academic libraries between 1980 and 1994 (Becker, 2015). This  
35 withdrew the need for bulky card indexes and started to allow library users to easily browse  
36 the collection themselves. The wide scale availability of the internet by the mid-1990s  
37 triggered further changes in academic libraries as search engines slowly began to replace  
38 the need for most items in the reference collection (Becker, 2015). The most significant  
39 development from the internet has been the evolution of electronic resources such as  
40 eBooks and online periodicals (journals) (Thomas, 2000). Becker (2015: 42) argues that  
41 2009/10 was the “tipping point” for eBooks as publishers began to offer their collections in  
42 both print and digital formats, while archives such as JSTOR render entire back catalogues  
43 of material obsolete (Sennyey et al., 2009).  
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53 Although it can be argued that electronic resources will replace the physical library collection  
54 (Spiro & Henry, 2010), how this collection is managed is rapidly changing. The development  
55 of high-density storage has had a significant impact on this as it provides more efficient  
56 storage solutions (Webb et al., 2008). This has been implemented by an increasing number  
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3 of institutions with the use of off-site storage facilities that Little (2013) argues have now  
4 entered the mainstream. This can also be seen in the UK context with SCONUL (2014: 36)  
5 statistics indicating an increase in the use of “out of library” book stores across UK academic  
6 libraries. While these stores are used for less-frequently accessed parts of the collection  
7 (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015; Seaman, 2003), they damage the ability  
8 of users to browse the stacks (Massis, 2011). However, such facilities have demonstrated  
9 large financial savings for libraries, with estimates placing off-site high-density storage at  
10 20% of the cost of open stacks (Courant & Nielsen, 2010: 91) with some instances costing  
11 just 10% (Seaman, 2003). While saving money, the investment in such facilities shows the  
12 physical collection is still an important part of academic libraries. At the same time however,  
13 it also demonstrates a shift in the significance of the physical collection as the free space is  
14 often used to create new or additional learning environments.  
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### 22 3.2. Pressures on library space

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24 While technology had a significant impact on the library collection, it also had a significant  
25 impact on the library spaces. Thomas (2000) suggested that no library would succeed  
26 without successfully incorporating technology and this is certainly demonstrated in the latest  
27 environmental scan (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015). The integration of  
28 new technology was not a smooth transition as library buildings were never designed for the  
29 ventilation, networking and electricity requirements of new technology, slowing down  
30 progress and leading to the clustering of computers and catalogue machines (Thomas,  
31 2000). For some buildings substantial redevelopments or new builds were needed to  
32 accommodate the requirements.  
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39 So far, this section has demonstrated that academic libraries have needed to respond and  
40 adapt to developments in technology, publishing and HE pedagogy (Association of College  
41 & Research Libraries, 2015; Becker, 2015; Saunders, 2015). There have also been a  
42 number of indirect pressures, particularly financial from the wider HE environment in both  
43 Europe and America (Holmgren & Spencer, 2014). Reductions in overall HE funding have  
44 impacted library budgets (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015), placing  
45 pressure on delivering better value for money and finding external sources of funding  
46 (Saunders, 2015). In the UK, this has coincided with the financial burden of tuition shifting  
47 entirely towards the students for most subjects (Temple et al., 2014). While this is delivered  
48 via government-backed loans, students are, in the long term, paying more for their university  
49 experience. As libraries form a core part of this experience, there is an increased pressure to  
50 deliver a better service and despite financial uncertainty, there have been a series of capital  
51 investments in academic libraries across the sector in the UK (Beard & Dale, 2010).  
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3 This section has established that academic libraries have changed significantly in the last  
4 thirty years and it is not possible to argue that libraries have not modernised and developed  
5 their services. As electronic resources and offsite storage have reduced the pressure on  
6 stacks, less space has been needed to physically house the collection within the library itself  
7 (Courant & Nielsen, 2010). This has left free space to use for other purposes. Developing  
8 support has also been important to assist users in accessing resources as the collection  
9 moves online (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015; Spiro & Henry, 2010).  
10 This has made IT an essential part of libraries, as well as access to the internet and its  
11 resources. These changes have been the start of a move within libraries towards the  
12 provision of support for digital and information literacy (Beard & Dale, 2010), with staff time  
13 being invested in more focused and individualised user support (Holmgren & Spencer,  
14 2014). The historical developments overviewed in this section have already surpassed the  
15 concept of libraries as information repositories. It is only by looking at the current  
16 developments in libraries that the concept of a library can be understood.  
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#### 25 4. What is the modern academic library? 26 27

28 The previous section of this paper outlined the substantial changes that have taken place in  
29 academic libraries over the last thirty years. To understand what libraries are now, this  
30 section will look at the three main developments within modern academic libraries:  
31 technology, learning spaces and the development of new support services (Simon, 2013;  
32 Watson & Howden, 2013). Each of these aspects is an important part of the modern library  
33 as such services and facilities attract users into libraries and away from alternative learning  
34 spaces (Cunningham & Tabur, 2012). Modern libraries must therefore work harder to  
35 engage users with a new concept of academic libraries as technology centres, learning  
36 spaces and support hubs as well as resource collections.  
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##### 43 4.1. Technology 44

45 Farmer (2009) and Cunningham and Tabur (2012) suggest technology such as wall to wall  
46 WiFi, quality printing, computing and extensive power outlet availability has become  
47 “ubiquitous” within libraries. While access to such technology used to draw users towards  
48 libraries, it is now a bare minimum and something that users expect. Technology has also  
49 created new ways for people to communicate and millennials in particular tend to engage  
50 with social media (EunYoung et al., 2013). This has created new opportunities for libraries  
51 and many have started to utilise social media to meet user expectations and engage with  
52 new demographics (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2007).  
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3 Technology has also shifted the boundaries of the traditional library. Previously, libraries  
4 were contained by their physical building but the advent of electronic catalogues and  
5 resources has changed this by enabling users to access library collections and resources at  
6 distance via the internet (Sennyey et al., 2009). While helping libraries introduce new  
7 services, technology has eroded their position as an information provider. Previously  
8 academic libraries had no competition, enjoying a monopoly on providing access to  
9 information (Ross & Sennyey, 2008). However the internet has provided alternative sources  
10 and libraries now need to compete with other providers and market their resources (Ross &  
11 Sennyey, 2008).  
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#### 17 4.2. Learning spaces

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20 Webb et al. (2008) suggest that the user demands and requirements for library study spaces  
21 have changed little since 1960. While this is true for some factors, it is not entirely accurate  
22 for library spaces as a whole. In 1960 a study of university facilities identified availability of  
23 space, lighting, temperature and ventilation, comfort of furniture and freedom of distraction  
24 as the important aspects of the library study spaces (Stoke et al., 1960: 33). This is very  
25 similar to the findings of Cha and Kim (2015) who identified the most important requirements  
26 as availability of space, noise level, comfort of furniture, cleanliness and crowdedness. This  
27 shows the importance of environmental controls within libraries as they ensure users are  
28 comfortable. However, while some requirements have stayed the same, Stoke et al. (1960)  
29 also suggested the availability of typing rooms, the ease of book retrieval and the availability  
30 of smoking study spaces are also important. All these requirements are now obsolete due to  
31 technological and societal changes (Matthews, 2009; Waton, 2013), demonstrating  
32 requirements have changed.  
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40 While the move towards libraries as learning spaces is difficult to refute, developing these  
41 spaces is difficult as users have their own specific requirements related to their skill level,  
42 programme of study and experience. Beard and Dale (2010) argue that flexibility is a crucial  
43 aspect of modern libraries to ensure they can accommodate the variety of needs of their  
44 users. It is also important for libraries to ensure users understand how spaces should be  
45 used, especially if they are 'new spaces' that people may not have engaged with before.  
46 Bilandzic and Foth (2013) give the examples of the issues surrounding social learning  
47 spaces for users who do not understand their purpose, often leading them to get confused  
48 and leave or to complain about the noise.  
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### 4.3. Development of new support services

Supported as still current by Montgomery (2014), Bennett (2003) has suggested that the current phase of academic library development is 'learner centred'. This reflects similar developments across the library sector where the move is towards a 'customer centred' approach (Matthews, 2009). As this paper is starting to demonstrate, the majority of academic libraries have become known more for their learning spaces and facilities than for their collection. This has led Spiro and Henry (2010) to suggest that the measure of an academic library is now the quality and range of its services, not the size and scope of its collection. This is an important shift for libraries as it suggests a change in the metric of their success. Both libraries and the librarian profession have had to change rapidly to maintain relevancy.

Despite the 'learner' or 'customer' focus of libraries, it is difficult to support library users as they are not a homogeneous group (Bligh, 2014) and are now more diverse than ever before (Farmer, 2009). For this reason, libraries have increased the learning support they offer as the focus on learning spaces increases (Beard & Dale, 2010; Holmgren & Spencer, 2014). Often, the development of such support is going beyond traditional library services due to the extended opening hours and central location of many libraries. Co-locating other services within the library building has been shown to increase accessibility and save money (Holmgren & Spencer, 2014). Bruce (2010: 161) introduces this as the "one-stop" library experience with services including tutoring, disabilities support, counselling and administration. Examples of service colocation include "Campus Connect" based within the Keith Donaldson Library of the University of Hull (2015), and the "Learning Commons" based within the Lamson Library of Plymouth State University (2013). Facilities such as these aim to reduce the number of access points that students need and help to provide a better service.

## 5. The commons

This paper has demonstrated the complexities associated with the concept of academic libraries. This section explicitly looks at the more innovative reappropriations of library spaces and questions what academic libraries will become. It is first important to consider the new kinds of information and learning spaces such as information commons and learning commons. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, Little (2013) suggests there is a distinction that will be introduced in this section.

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3 Information commons emerged in the 1990s as computer labs were introduced into library  
4 spaces (EDUCAUSE, 2011). While often integrated into existing libraries, some information  
5 commons are new builds. The Information Commons at the University of Sheffield (2007) is  
6 one example of this, creating a brand new combined library, learning and computing space  
7 in one building. With facilities such as study spaces, books and IT resources, the Information  
8 Commons possesses the utility of a library, yet the name is a conscious step to disassociate  
9 the building from libraries. A more recent example of such a space is the “Commons” at Bath  
10 Spa University (2015). Including technology enhanced learning spaces, digital literacy  
11 support and flexible learning environments; the Commons provides many features usually  
12 associated with modern libraries. It does not however include the substantial physical  
13 repository associate with libraries. As these centres represent a diversification (or departure)  
14 of services traditionally associated with the library, it could be argued they are a threat to the  
15 concept of libraries and their future existence.  
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23 This theme continues with the idea of the learning commons. Carlson (2009: 16) suggests  
24 academic libraries now have to be “all things to all people” and this has led to the creation of  
25 academic or learning commons. EDUCAUSE (2011: 1) defines a learning commons as “a  
26 full-service learning, research, and project space”. By combining social spaces with  
27 academic spaces, learning happens as a “by-product of socialising,” also promoting  
28 interdisciplinarity (Bilandzic & Foth, 2013: 263). The “Athenaeum,” (Goucher College, 2009)  
29 is an example of a new-build learning commons, including a restaurant, exercise equipment  
30 and an art gallery alongside book stacks, learning spaces and classrooms (Carlson, 2009).  
31 While these new commons are very different spaces to traditional academic libraries, they  
32 are fundamentally libraries. In this, it can be argued that the reconceptualisation of libraries  
33 is the academic commons itself. This poses the greatest risk to the whole concept of  
34 academic libraries as it suggests they could become redundant and irrelevant when  
35 compared to the academic commons.  
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44 Indeed, it has been suggested that academic commons are the endpoint for academic  
45 libraries. Holmgren and Spencer (2014: 9) suggest that by 2024 academic libraries will be  
46 academic commons, no longer repositories for information but spaces “designed to enhance  
47 student learning and facilitate collaboration”. Such spaces symbolise the move towards  
48 focusing on the users (Niegaard, 2011), perhaps a result of the historic failure of academic  
49 libraries to engage users in the changes to library purpose and function. While it is easy to  
50 question how much of the library remains, such spaces are often managed by or situated  
51 within libraries, placing libraries at the centre and forefront on such developments  
52 (EDUCAUSE, 2011; Little, 2013). Little (2014) suggests libraries are the catalysts for such  
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3 developments, stretching the role of librarians to include technological support and teaching  
4 (Bruce, 2010).  
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7 The idea of commons as the new conceptualisations of libraries questions if the concept of  
8 libraries will endure. If the idea and concept of a library is to exist, it is important for libraries  
9 to continue to play significant roles within academic commons. The Association of College &  
10 Research Libraries (2015) and Holmgren and Spencer (2014) suggest this is inevitable in  
11 their prediction that by 2024, academic libraries will be very different facilities, only hosting  
12 what remains of the physical collection. Despite these predictions the Association of College  
13 & Research Libraries (2015) has also admitted that eBook adoption has been slower than  
14 initially predicted due to licencing issues and Digital Rights Management (Spiro & Henry,  
15 2010). This slower than expected adoption of electronic resources continues to make  
16 libraries dependent on the paper collection, delaying more radical library developments.  
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## 22 23 6. Conclusion 24

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26 To understand the concept of what an academic library is, this paper has looked at how such  
27 spaces are understood. The work of Lefebvre (1991), Savin-Baden (2008) and Hunter and  
28 Cox (2014) allude to the complexity of this and demonstrate a need for libraries to better  
29 define what they are. The approaches these authors take to space can be used to argue  
30 there is no material reality to a library as they are the social product of their users and non-  
31 users alike. This is problematic as it suggests there is no concept of an academic library that  
32 endures beyond an individual. While this may be the case, this paper has demonstrated that  
33 the challenge for libraries is to ensure users are aware of the library's role in the provision of  
34 not just information, but also technology, learning spaces and support (Simon, 2013; Watson  
35 & Howden, 2013).  
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42 The developments within this paper make it difficult not to argue that libraries have worked  
43 hard to stay relevant. Despite this, the concept of a library is at risk. This is because while  
44 the substantial changes outlined in this paper have seen libraries develop into multifunctional  
45 learning environments, the concept of a library has lingered. While this is not surprising due  
46 to the way users develop their own concept of libraries, it does demonstrate that libraries  
47 need to work harder to engage users.  
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52 Information, academic and learning commons have provided libraries with a new opportunity  
53 to conceptualise student learning spaces and support. While these developments step away  
54 from libraries in name, the final section of this paper has demonstrated that libraries are at  
55 the forefront of these developments. If anything, the reconceptualisation of the library is the  
56 academic commons. These commons represent an opportunity for libraries to break free  
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from old ideas and labels, providing the chance to create something new without the trappings of older concepts. The strength of the academic commons is that by name, it is something new and as such, provides users with no previous concepts for which to base their understanding.

For Review Only

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