

Libraries of the future

This is an innovative futures-based research project to help UK academic libraries and information services prepare for the challenges of the next 5-10 years. This poster covers the background to this project, our method, emergent outcomes and possible future scenarios for higher education libraries. It is based on the key assumption that the future of academic and research libraries is bound up with the future shape of higher education.

Project purpose

The last decade has brought profound changes in teaching, learning and research, and in how academics and students use information resources and services in their work. This has had a big impact on the role of libraries and other organisations in the scholarly information supply chain. Further change is undoubtedly on the way.

As yet, however, there has been no systematic attempt to gather and analyse information about key trends likely to affect the future of scholarly library and information services in the UK. These trends may include:

- Uncertainty or cuts in higher education funding, affecting library and information service budgets;
- New technologies, which change the way in which users find and access scholarly information, and the role of the physical library building
- Students and researchers treated increasingly as 'consumers', changing their expectations of library and information services.
- Globalisation of higher education and the consequent uncertainty about the sector's structure, including increased differentiation between types of higher education institution

Methodology

This project has three main strands, as set out below.

- **June 2009 – March 2010:** identify, review and assess the key trends and drivers for change through:
 - Desk research and interviews with key stakeholders
 - 2 scoping workshops to identify important issues
- **September 2009 – September 2010:** formulate and test scenarios through:
 - Scenario planning workshops
 - Series of focus groups with users
- **May 2010 – April 2010:** set out possible futures and steps that must be taken to achieve them through:
 - Visually stimulating documents to bring scenarios to life
 - Briefing papers for a range of audiences
 - Recommendations for project sponsors.

Key messages

Although this work is still at a relatively early stage, there are some key messages from the scenario development. In particular, it is evident that there is no single clear future for UK higher education. The next stage of the work will ask some important questions about the steps that higher education libraries will need to take in order to be prepared for a range of possible scenarios.

For more information, visit the project website at www.futurelibraries.info or the RIN website at www.rin.ac.uk.

Emergent scenarios

The initial workshops identified several important trends which will shape delivery of higher education over the next 40 years. Further work has refined this down to three detailed scenarios, which are outlined in the table below. These scenarios are not predictions of the future; rather, they should be treated as a starting point for discussions about the future of UK academic libraries and information services.

	Wild West	Bee Hive	The Walled Garden
Key scenario characteristics	Instability. Government can no longer afford to tackle inequality and is often subservient to international corporations. Much of HE has been taken over by the market, often via local organisations.	European Federation created with open values. Strength of BRIC countries is driving even high-tech jobs away from the West, hence most HE courses are highly focused on employability.	UK is reasonable self-sufficient despite increasing isolation and waning influence. Technology has connected like-minded people across the world, leading to closed-minded entrenchment of values. HE system is fragmented, though galvanised by 'grand challenges'.
Number of teaching and learning institutions	System is multi-tiered: around 20 research-intensive universities, 40-50 vocational institutions in regional clusters, and about 25 new entrants from the private sector.	Around 200, although only around 10% use traditional teaching methods and subject classifications.	Around 300, 170 of which focus just on learning, including vocational and applied courses. Institutions are specialised and the range is more diverse; some elite organisations still exist.
Number of research institutions	Primarily the 20 research intensive universities, plus regional clusters of private research that is near-market.	Around 20 research-led universities.	Around 130 institutions focusing on research and learning, and a further 40 focusing only on research.
Percentage of population in post-18 learning	Total student numbers are around 5 million (10% of the adult population) at any one time.	Increase in work-based, vocational and part-time students makes total number around 4 million (8% of the adult population) at any one time.	Total student numbers are around 3 million (6% of the adult population) at any one time.
Number of researchers	Hard to estimate, as most people work on short-term secondments rather than long-term careers in research.	Around 0.25 million researchers in the UK.	Approximately 0.7 million researchers in the UK.
Number of non-UK learners and researchers	Concentrated in 20 research intensive universities.	Around 5% of academic students and around 2% of vocational students come from overseas.	Non-UK students have fallen sharply, due to the global isolation of the UK.
Funding of post-18 learning and research	Mixed between industry, state and local partners for research. Learning is funded by employers and students, with a few scholarships.	Mixed between state and student fees; a handful of privately-funded institutions. State research funds are targeted to key areas and topped up by commercial investment	Mixed funding model. Public money focused on areas of UK advantage, with commercial and not-for-profit sponsors for many institutions. Some student fees are underwritten by such sponsors.
Regulation of post-18 learning and research	Little state regulation, though some at sectoral level where society demands it (e.g. health).	UK implements strategy, which is set at a European level, to maintain control over accreditation.	Institutions are regulated by funders, be they private or public sector.

Next stage

The next stage of this work will ask several important questions about higher education in the context of each scenario. In particular, it will consider:

- What are the implications for teachers and learners – how will they do teaching and learning?
- What are the implications for researchers – how will they do research?
- What are the implications for libraries and information services – how will they provide support?