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Lowering the drawbridge: academic libraries, information literacy, and open access

Scholarly communication has been hugely impacted by the growth of open access. From the international impact of the three Bs (Budapest, 2002, Bethesda, 2003, Berlin, 2003) to the national impact of the Finch et al. (2012) report, the UKRI (RCUK, 2013) and the REF (2019) 2021 open access policy, there has been huge growth in various forms of open access publishing and dissemination.

Despite this growth of openness, UK university libraries continue to sustain legacy structures for discovery and retrieval. Information continues to be framed as a commodity (Lawson et al., 2015) contained within archaic proprietary systems. This reinforces practices of information discovery and retrieval that predate contemporary approaches to scholarly publishing and creates a misalignment between the knowledge producer and knowledge discoverer. New advances in search engines and indexing have created better technology to enhance discovery of scholarly materials and by searching across and between collections, users may be able to more easily locate relevant resources. However this convenience masks the politico-economic reality that there is not and cannot be a single index for all scholarly information.

Information literacy in UK higher education is a varied practice but demonstrations of subject databases and other proprietary vendor-provided information sources are a significant form of delivery. This requires librarians to teach work-arounds for comprehensive searching across multiple platforms and to describe the reasons for incomplete or inconsistent results in discovery systems like Primo Central Index and Ebsco Discovery Service.

Free solutions and practices allow opportunities for less centralised resource access. We propose that the field of information literacy has a responsibility to engage with open culture to advance engagement alongside an evolving landscape of open information, discovery, and access. The opportunities for discussion in class environments provides a space to support students in their developing an understanding of open tools and resources, yet it remains unclear to what extent subject librarians are engaging with this kind of open practice in information literacy contexts.

The approaches towards information literacy practices for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students need updating. Our learning communities could actively participate in developments around scholarly communications and underpinning technologies that support information discovery and access.

Conceiving open culture as a process and a practice rather than a series of licenses (Moore, 2017) allows pedagogical space for subject librarians and taught students to participate in openness. This empowers taught students to think of themselves in the same space as researchers.

This panel will provide an overview of experiences in aligning developments in scholarly communications with information literacy teaching. We will consider examples of approaches to teaching and systems development to support closer relationships between liaison teams and scholarly communications teams. We will outline the benefits of open culture as a practice towards students' learning outcomes and awareness of the scholarly communications landscape, strengthening the role of 'open' in the context of information literacy, drawing on our own experiences of initiatives such as InstantILL and discuss emerging themes and good practice in openness with participants.

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Panel members

Simon Bowie is Solutions Architect at SOAS, University of London. He implements and supports open-source systems in higher education libraries and advocates for the use of open licensing models in librarianship. He also writes and speaks on the subjects of ethical practice in librarianship, cryptography and encryption, open access in academic publishing, and opposition to digital surveillance.

Kevin Sanders is Scholarly Communication Manager at the University of West London. Kevin has active interests in the politics and operations of open and free culture in the context of higher education. He also likes chips.

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