Keith Webster: eResearch and the future of research libraries

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Abstract

The conventional role of the academic library in support of research has predominantly focussed upon the purchase of published books, journals and conference proceedings. By extension, the Library has assumed responsibility for the storage, indexing and retrieval of these materials, and the provision of physical space in which they may be consulted. In some areas of academe, notably in the arts and humanities, the Library has acted as a surrogate laboratory in which scholarly enquiry is conducted. The emergence of online journals and databases has brought change to these activities, but in many instances the Library has simply extended the processes of the print era into an electronic environment. The overarching process of procuring and providing access to published materials has persisted.

The research and scholarly communication landscape is being changed, however, by two major international activities: the increasing acceptance of open access models of scientific publication and the deployment of technology to provide an infrastructure base for eResearch. These developments bring new forms of communication, and make possible the sharing of vast amounts of data and other scholarly materials. The focus of the Library upon formally published research outputs will continue but must extend considerably to embrace researcher behaviour and need in the eResearch environment.

The paper will focus upon the transformation of the university library into a key component of the eResearch infrastructure. This transformation will bring with it fundamental questions for the academy: what does it mean to be a Library? What skills are required of information professionals in this setting? How much space and money should be devoted to Libraries? And how can libraries transcend their institutional boundaries to provide a collaborative platform for data and information sharing, storage, retrieval and use?

About the speaker

Keith Webster has been University Librarian and Director of Learning Services at the University of Queensland since June 2006. Previous posts include University Librarian at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, Head of Information Policy at HM Treasury in London and Director of Information Services at the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London. He is Adjunct Professor of Library Management at Victoria University of Wellington and Honorary Professor of Information Science at City University, London.