

Approaches to Negotiating Change Through Evolving Library Management Styles in Australian University Libraries

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Evidence Summary

Approaches to Negotiating Change Through Evolving Library Management Styles in Australian University Libraries

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – Investigating current change management practices to create a conceptual management framework for the 21st century.

Design – Interviews using a qualitative constructivist approach.

Setting – Australian university libraries.

Subjects – Chief university librarians of 18 public universities out of 37 in Australia.

Methods – Chief university librarians in more than half of the public university libraries in Australia were interviewed. The interviews were completed face-to-face using a semi-structured questioning approach, based on themes and concepts derived from the literature review. Observation data were also gathered through physical visits to the libraries. The data analysis was conducted using two Microsoft Excel matrices, one grouped thematically and the other populated with relevant literature

review commentary when it aligned with interviewee commentary. The conceptual framework used to guide the research is made up of six fundamentals of performance improvements to effectively manage change: resources, relevance, stakeholders, strategy, government policy, and university infrastructure. The research focused on current change management practices of chief librarians as they address these issues.

Main Results – The research revealed that the influence of, or the relationship between, the factors affecting changing university library environments creates a complex administrative environment where decision making addressing one of the fundamentals can have negative unintended consequences in one or more of the other key areas. The authors note that the literature and views of the informants show a change in the objectives of the future academic library characterized by, but not limited to, initiatives that are designed to meet changing needs of a diverse group of stakeholders. These objectives must be “innovative” and “add value to the university business rather than continue to do what was traditionally done” (Gunapala et al., 2020, p. 203).

Conclusion – The authors profess that the study provides theoretical insight to help library leaders address the many challenges currently in place and emerging across the Australian university library landscape. They assert that the research reveals the need to shift focus from a more traditional transactional oriented model to an engagement orientated model, due to the introduction of market forces coupled with declining public funding. They conclude by claiming to provide a theoretical framework that when practically implemented will allow library leaders to successfully navigate and negotiate emerging changes across the spectrum of higher education.

Commentary

Positioning academic libraries to best deal with change is a topic that is covered significantly in the library leadership literature. Although not a new topic, the article excels in the area of giving a multi-faceted view of the change landscape as opposed to focusing specifically on one aspect of change management, albeit those articles also have their place. This holistic approach allows the reader to get a sense of the delicate interplay between the forces that cannot be as fully appreciated in articles that focus on one aspect of change.

Many expert views are shared regarding the change factors that make up the conceptual management framework, along with corresponding information gathered from the interviewed library leaders. Although interesting and compelling, the data is presented in an informal style that fails to give a detailed picture of which of the different change factors take priority and are most top of mind for library leaders. A useful addition would be the inclusion of the matrix containing how often and to what lengths library leaders responded to questions regarding specific components that make up the framework. In short, having a more quantitative or mixed methods approach would have been preferable to the qualitative research method used.

The article contains a welcome summary bullet list of eight change objectives for the future of academic libraries, identified in the literature and addressed by chief university librarians during the interviews. It does not, however, contain the interview questions themselves, which negates the possibility of examining them through the lens of a qualitative critical appraisal tool. Other limitations of the article include the lack of use of deidentified supporting quotes from the interview participants to underpin the themes arising from the data collection. Basic demographic information about the 18 participants and the libraries they are employed by (for example, breakdown by gender, years in the profession, library size, university size) is also lacking. A final potential shortcoming is the omission of a discussion section. This would have given the authors the opportunity to reflect upon the potential limitations of their research and potentially address the issues raised above.

The authors note that the data were collected in 2014, six years before the article's publication. In defense of the current relevance of the data, the authors simply write that "the data collected remains valid as the change process continues rapidly" (Gunapala et al., 2020, p. 196). Many of the references that are foundational to the paper are well over a decade old and the paper makes multiple references to how the library landscape has changed since the 1990s. Ultimately the reader will decide for themselves if the lapse of time has rendered some of the observations obsolete or imbued them with an urgency that may no longer be present.

This reviewer feels that despite the age of the references and six-year lag in between data collection and article publication, the conclusions arrived at by the analysis of the interview data are still applicable and provide a useful blueprint for academic library leaders in Australia, and other countries around the world as they face many of the same change issues, constraints, and opportunities afforded by unprecedented transformation in higher education in general, and in academic libraries specifically.

References

- Gunapala, M., Montague, A., Reynolds, S., & Vo-Tran, H. (2020). Managing change in university libraries in the 21st century: An Australian perspective. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 69(2), 191-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2020.1756598>