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Predicting the Role of Library Bookshelves in 2025

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ABSTRACT

University libraries are questioning the added value of open shelves with books. As scientific publications are increasingly available in electronic format, which role do bookshelves have in the future library space? The Utrecht University Library case study invites librarians to fundamentally rethink how they could strengthen the function of open shelves in their library. Based on acquisition and user data, and on interviews with publishers and users, this article suggests that in 2025 bookshelves could play an important role in providing access to those publications which are preferred by users in paper format. However, bookshelves should no longer focus solely on paper publications, but on digital publications too, as most library collections increasingly become hybrid. Moreover, libraries should also think of ways to enhance the inspiring role of bookshelves. Then, the open shelves could have added value within the library space of the future, providing access to a hybrid collection and an inspiring place to study.

Introduction

University libraries find themselves in a transitional period. For decades, a large part of the library space was taken up by open shelves, providing information to students, scientists and scholars. But now, as information is becoming increasingly available in digital format, many question the added value of shelves in libraries. University libraries are slowly transforming into study environments, in which open shelves are replaced by a variety of other library services (Beard & Bawden, 2012; Beard & Dale, 2010; Kao & Chen, 2011; Montgomery, 2014; Paulus, 2011). Some technical universities have decided to become fully digital and now only focus on creating spaces for collaboration and online facilities (Cha & Kim, 2015; McAdams, 2011). Other academic libraries postulate that books on the open shelves can be moved to the depositories, having hardly any disadvantages for students and faculty staff as long as customers can quickly gain access to material they need for their study or research (Haapanen et al., 2015).

Does this mean that the days of the open shelves are over? In many libraries the public space is still heavily dominated by bookshelves (Smith, Kinash, & Brand, 2013). Often, libraries have large paper collections that are of interest to students and faculty staff (Keller, 2011; Massis, 2011). Moreover, research shows that books in the library are positively contributing to the learning experience of students. The physical presence of books stimulates students to become engaged with literature (Pennington, 2012; Wayne, 2015). In that sense, open shelves are not only a source of information but are also considered an essential part of the library atmosphere (Andrews, Wright, & Raskin, 2015).

But, how will these roles of the open shelves in the library evolve, during the so-called digital age? Remarkably few libraries have tried to thoroughly answer this question. To ensure that facilities within the public space of Utrecht University Library (UUL) continue to meet the needs of its future users, UUL has taken up the challenge to “predict” the future role of library bookshelves in academic libraries in, say, ten years from now. Based on trends in the composition and usage of the UUL open shelves, this article hopes to inspire librarians and others who think about the future of open shelves in libraries. In doing this, three stakeholders are identified: librarians, publishers and users. To a large extent these three stakeholders determine in which format publications are made available, how these publications are made available and, not in the last place, how these publications are being used.

Methods

This case study focuses on the open shelves in the two main library locations of UUL, called the University Library Uithof and the University Library City Centre. The library on the Uithof houses mainly, but not solely, publications for Geosciences, Medicine, Science, Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine. The open shelves in the University Library City Centre contain material for the Humanities and Law, Economics and Governance. As all disciplines have their own open shelves sections on these UUL locations, it is possible to compare trends in the usage of the collections within the various disciplines. In the process, three user groups were identified, namely Bachelor's students, Master's students and faculty staff. Moreover, the study was

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limited to publications published after 1900. And, as the UUL open shelves currently mainly contain books, because almost all scientific journals are available in electronic format, this study focuses primarily on books.

Acquisition data & interviews with publishers

To get a clear picture of the developments related to the open shelves, quantitative data on the period 2005–2016 were extracted from the registration systems of UUL.¹ These data show trends in the acquisition of paper and digital books and journals and the changing ratio between these formats. To explain these acquisition trends, the results were discussed with UUL faculty liaisons and subject librarians. This provided background information, for instance on sudden budget changes, on the moving of collections within UUL and on deciding the division between books on the open shelves and in the depositories.

To place these acquisition trends in a broader perspective, interviews were held with two suppliers and seven publishers.² The aim was to cover all (major) scientific disciplines and to get input from publishers both large and small, and from different countries. The focal point of the interviews was to identify what will influence the decision of future university libraries to buy books in paper or in electronic format. Respondents were asked what determined their choice to publish e-books and to share their ideas on the future of scientific publishing, especially related to books. Based on the input of publishers and suppliers it is possible to estimate in what format and under what conditions publications will be available in 2025.

User surveys & user group interviews

To see how acquisition trends relate to the usage of paper and digital publications within UUL, user data were gathered. Trends were identified on how often paper publications were borrowed, on average by students and faculty staff during the past years. Besides, data was available on how often publications in the open shelves were borrowed, in absolute numbers, but also in relation to the size of the open shelves. These data give a strong impression of how students and faculty staff of the various disciplines use the collections and the open shelves in particular. This was contrasted with trends in the usage of digital publications. However, in this respect results were limited by the fact that UUL is not able to make any distinction between user groups and disciplines when it comes to digital publications. Therefore, with respect to e-books and e-journal usage only general trends were identified.

To get a more accurate picture of the usage of the open shelves, in September 2015 a paper survey was distributed in both the libraries on De Uithof and in the city centre. The aim of this survey was to collect more quantitative data on issues where the UUL registration systems proved inadequate, such as on using material that is not for loan and the frequency by which visitors browse the shelves. Next the survey dealt with the background of the visitor, what activities visitors undertake during their library visit, and whether they use the open shelves, and if so, in what way. The questionnaire was distributed during several sessions by library staff and completed on bar tables at the entrance. To avoid bias, visitors were only allowed to fill in the survey once and the maximum number of completed questionnaires per session was set on 50.

Because it was expected that faculty staff does not visit UUL as much

as students do, a supplementary online survey was distributed among scientists and scholars. Faculty liaisons and subject librarians were asked to send the online survey to their contacts. They had to ensure that the most important UUL user groups were represented in the response group. The data of both the paper and online survey were put together, and resulted in the following response group: a total of 831 respondents, consisting of 365 BA-students, 285 MA-students and 181 faculty staff.³

Faculty	BA-students	MA-students	Faculty staff	Total
Geosciences	33	56	30	119
Humanities	100	47	73	220
Law, Economics and Governance	78	50	15	143
Medicine	13	17	16	46
Science	31	45	18	94
Social and Behavioral Sciences	108	64	28	200
Veterinary Medicine	2	6	1	9

The results of the survey were discussed within four focus groups, in order to interpret the user data and try to seek possible explanations for the trends in the use of the open shelves. The focus groups consisted of students and faculty staff of disciplines sharing a common background: Social Sciences and Geosciences with 6 participants, Medicine, Science and Veterinary Medicine with 6 participants, Humanities with 7 participants and Law, Economics and Governance with 2 participants.

Results

Library' perspective

Like most other libraries, UUL provided students and faculty staff access to the latest and most frequently used paper publications via open shelves. For decades, visitors considered these shelves an essential part of the library and a very important source of information (Chrzastowski, 2015; Corlett-Rivera & Hackman, 2014; Dahl, 2013; Rowlands et al., 2007). Although looking for a place to study has always been an important reason to visit libraries too, in general, most students and faculty staff primarily came to the library to consult books. A large-scale survey of British university libraries in 2008 showed, for instance, that 87% of the students came to a library to borrow or read books while 54% came to study quietly (Nicholas et al., 2008). In UUL these percentages were probably largely the same, but times are changing.

Increasingly UUL acquired scientific publications in digital format and year by year purchased fewer paper books: in the period 2007–2016, the number of paper books UUL acquired was reduced by more than half. Since 2014 more than 90% of the UUL acquisition budget is spent on digital publications and databases. An important reason for this was the ambition of UUL to provide access to scientific information anywhere, anytime. Besides, as in most other academic libraries, it is seen as an advantage that searching for specific information in digital publications is easy and that there are options to enrich the text (Mincic-Obradovic, 2010; Moore, 2015). Moreover, in general, acquiring publications in a digital format is for libraries more efficient than buying the paper alternative. And last but not least, the digital format gives libraries the opportunity to make more new scientific publications available than ever before (Anderson, 2011; Ferris & Buck, 2014; Seger & Allen, 2015; Sharp & Thompson, 2010;

³ Visitors of UUL who were no BA-student, MA-students or faculty staff of one of the seven UU faculties were excluded from the response group.

¹ The data underlying the findings of this article are available at request by the author, with restrictions on those qualitative data which are privacy sensitive or confidential.

² Interviews were held with representatives of Erasmus Boekhandel, Yankee Book Pedlar, Boom, Brepols Publishers, Edward Elgar Publishing, Olms Verlag, Springer Nature, Uitgeverij Verloren and Wiley. To strengthen the internal validity of the interviews an instruction was written, which ensured that the interviews had a similar structure.

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