How software can help support the changing role of academic librarians

Science, Computer Science

Like many industries, the academic library has seen comprehensive changes over the past five years due to the emergence of new technologies. This has forced many institutions to re-think how they manage the administrative tasks of collection, curation and acquisitions while dramatically changing the role of the librarian. Today's librarian is more likely to be found assisting students and patrons access educational resources than carrying out administrative tasks. This poses a challenge for many educational institutions who are being forced to redistribute staff or re-allocate duties due to the different skill sets required. But far from seeing this as a problem, some forward-thinking academic institutions are taking the opportunity to redefine the librarian's role. Traditionally, academic librarian roles are filled by candidates with a Master of Library Science (MLS) degree. But some universities are starting to see the benefit of hiring candidates with PhDs to help provide specialist knowledge to support students.

The goal is to make the librarian a more integrated part of the learning process. So rather than merely facilitating learning, librarians will become valuable liaisons able to provide specialist field knowledge to help students achieve their goals. So where does this leave the management tasks of the traditional librarian's role? How curation and selection will be managed in the future Software vendors and publishers have a role to play in ensuring methods for selection and ordering are reliable and robust. All library management systems should be capable of providing accurate information on the books and publications currently available on the system along with any new books which are due to be published. Traditionally this information is used by librarians to make decisions about which books to purchase.

However, because librarians have limited knowledge in each discipline, this can lead to books being purchased which contain duplicate information to books already held by the library or do not provide the depth of coverage required to support the curriculum. This problem can be solved by collating more detailed metadata from publishers. Library management systems can then use this metadata to provide more accurate information to members of the faculty. This allows lecturers with specialist knowledge to make more informed decisions about which books are suitable to be added to the libraries collection. Using this system, potential book purchases could also be made available to students to review books before a purchasing descision is made. They are, after all, the ones who will be using these books the most. So it makes sense to involve them early in the acquisitions process.

The benefits of this system are two-fold. It removes the librarian from the time-consuming task of administrative curation and acquisitions. And it allows the library to purchase books which are better suited to the curriculum. This reduces expenditure on books which are seldom used or provide little value and frees up time for librarians to carry out student support activities. As the academic library evolves it is vital that any library management systems in place are capable of keeping up with technological advancements. A system which is not capable of adapting to the future risks compromising the standards of students education while damaging the reputation of the institution.