

Digital Transformation: Andrew Barker interview

Lancaster University Director of Library Services & Learning Development, **Andrew Barker** discusses how technology and digital transformation helped to create new interactions within the library CILIP's **Digital Transformation Event** takes place on 3 and 4 November.

For details and to book, visit www.cilip.org.uk/DigitalTransformationEvent.

ANDREW Barker took the helm at Lancaster University library in September 2019. It was his first directorship and he arrived with a vision:

“I wanted to focus on Lancaster’s traditions and its ambitions for the future – its history of being collegiate; the diversity of its students; and the library’s reputation for digital innovation. I see it as a research-intensive university with a research-intensive library, but with a real eye on widening participation, on civic engagement. I went in with a vision to create a library that reflects this diversity, collegiality and digital innovation.” Another strand was added to this vision soon after his arrival. “For Black History Month in October, when Faculty Librarians brought in an author for an event, I suddenly felt the library was more like a public library, serving an on-campus community in a completely different way.”

Covid vision change?

When Boris Johnson announced the lockdown in March Andrew had to shut the library. It didn’t open again until July, but he says: “This crisis hasn’t changed the agenda. My agenda was to ensure that the library was right at the heart of the community, not just physically, but in the three strands of the strategy: research, teaching and engagement. Our Covid figures have been lower than universities in the big cities because we’re isolated. But this gives us a



Rob Mackinlay (@cilip_reporter2, rob.mackinlay@cilip.org.uk) is Senior Reporter, *Information Professional*.

different kind of responsibility. There were still a lot of people here, in their flats, on campus, isolated and we felt we weren’t just a library – it goes back to that public and community aspect of what we do. And when the library building was closed, we pushed everything (teaching, resources, research support, services) to digital so the library isn’t just its building, despite the importance of that building to the university. “Our driving focus was that we still have a lot of post-graduate students on site and we wanted to ensure that they had access to the print collection as soon as possible. We spent three months working on it with facilities and it re-opened in July at 40 per cent capacity. We upgraded our issue system meaning people needed less taps, less contacts, we put in our 72 hour quarantine

system, including books picked up by browsers. We also introduced social distancing measures, face masks and sanitation stations to keep hands clean. But all you needed to get in was your university card, which tied into a camera to limit numbers.”

Civic engagement

For a long time we’ve been getting better at the research side, and we’ve been doing learning development – providing English for Academic Purposes, Maths and Stats support. This is now central to the idea of what a library is and what it does – but we need to do more on the engagement front. Although there was a pause in March, we got pretty swiftly back to developing that vision and next year we want to develop some library values to run alongside our library vision. The vision hasn’t changed, it’s moved things faster... and I’ve been determined not just to focus on the here and now and lose the future. I want to learn from the current situation and keep moving forward.

He said: “A future opportunity for us on both civic engagement and widening participation are the opportunities that the potential of Eden North and the Morecambe Bay Curriculum might bring us and we are looking at ways to be involved in these projects as we develop our new library vision (<https://bit.ly/39W9x536>).

Technology vision

Lancaster’s tradition of digital innovation was initially developed by Masud Khokhar who left in 2018, and is now being moved forward by Tom Shaw. Andrew sees his mission as tying that



Andrew Barker.

success into the wider university and library strategy, particularly in terms of civic engagement.

A new in-house Alexa App, Ask LU, (<https://bit.ly/3o99g3K> and p. 11 of the *Buyers Guide*) is one area of innovation.

“In one case we’re working with Amazon. So now, through Alexa, students can ask ‘can I book a library room today?’ or ‘what does my timetable look like?’ It’s a project we worked on with our IT department, and with Amazon to develop an app.

“Another tangible piece we’re working on, in partnership with Cambridge using the Cambridge Digital Platform, is to take some research projects into the university. There’s one now, a cinema project from the 1920s and we’re using that platform to make the research visible, not just for researchers but also for civic engagement purposes. It’s an example of the library working on a research project and developing a platform to visualise the work that’s happening on that project.

Technology practice

So, alongside technology being used in its traditional role to manage and give access to content, Andrew acknowledges this other development – the ability to roll out the library technology itself. “A lot of universities have already invested in Lib Chat and LibCal. “Both are being

used outside the library now as well as inside. So we use LibChat for library staff to speak to students wherever they are and we use LibCal to book seats in the library. LibCal is used outside the library for academics to book time with students and for other events and meetings across the university. LibChat is being rolled out elsewhere within the university to ensure students can speak to a member of staff online at point of need. Again, working in the joined up collegiate way, to take things that are successful out of the library and roll them out across campus.”

Covid effect

“Covid has driven home even faster that we can’t simply keep on buying print textbooks that might not be available electronically.” But the immediate reaction of publishers to the pandemic was problematic: “When some textbooks were made available at the start of the pandemic for free, we realised that that was going to change, and we had to work with academics to make sure that they were teaching textbooks that we would always have access to. So we had to think about how we would work with our academics. It’s a very grown-up relationship, we don’t tell them what to do and they don’t tell us what to do. It’s that word collegiate again. So we worked with departments to ensure we understood concerns regarding

access. Sometimes we've made the case that the publisher's model for a particular text book on an FTE basis is just not supportable and we work with academics to move them to a different publisher and a different textbook where we're not at the mercy of them saying we have to pay so much money per FTE who could use that book, we are doing much more of this since the pandemic."

Staff

"We worked with the staff and the unions on our risk assessment. But we tried to do things in an inclusive way. It would be barmy to just tell people what they have to do. You have to bring them into the discussion all the way through – to limit and mitigate some of those challenges."

But Andrew points out that the nature of the pandemic sometimes made inclusivity difficult, with staff rarely in one place, or all working at the same time.

"To start with we were working with people who were in all summer, they'd been involved in the discussions," says Andrew. "Then when people came back to work who hadn't been, I suspect they felt like they'd been done to, rather than worked with... so we met with the unions to go through these issues."

He says transparency has been vital. "I've tried to be visible and honest and transparent at all times. My colleague Regina O'Brien leads a weekly meeting with our LSAs and I attend that. I've talked through why we were taking a particular approach and I think I've won some trust."

But he points to another helpful, positive factor: "I know how much they all care about our students, so when push comes to shove, short of putting them in a real danger zone, they will do all they can to support those students on campus. This is a wonderful team who care passionately, and I have learnt a lot from them this last year – we would not be open to students without them."

Collegiate

Andrew says transparency plays a big part in his role as a leader – and also fits into the collegiate style at Lancaster. "Sometimes you can't tell someone to do something and expect them to get on with it, you've got to think much more, use emotional intelligence. There are ways you ask people and bring them into a discussion. It isn't just a case of saying 'do this', it's more a case of saying 'we need this to happen' or rather 'this is what we think we need to do, what are your thoughts on that?'"

He said: "On the Tuesday after lockdown I thought: my staff wouldn't know what's going on – there were none of the usual places to discuss things. I tried to replace those small conversations and every morning I'll write something. If we were



Lancaster University.

in the office we'd say 'this is what I've been doing' and 'this is what I'm doing next' and so when the furlough scheme was announced I wrote about it and tried to be transparent on the approach we were taking. Also challenges on the finances and what we think it means. And because we're on Teams, I ask people what they've been doing, what they've been working on. And I'll also say how I'm feeling, and how I try and cheer up. It's all about trying to retain the human elements of the working week via Teams. All the social elements that we all miss."

Finances

One of the big fears – and unknowns – is the financial impact of the pandemic. How it will affect different universities with different mixes of home, EU and international students?

"When you move all the income from government to student fees it puts a lot of pressure on securing your income streams," Andrew says. Whether that be student fees or retail outlets and accommodation – particularly relevant to a campus university.

He said: "This university, like many others, has projected lower numbers of international students. That's where the hit on the income comes. It hasn't happened yet, but we're preparing for it. That has meant significant savings on pay costs. It has included people being asked – and we're not unique – to donate salary back to the university at five to 10 per cent for three months, and looking at other ways of generating income like people buying additional leave, or working different hours and

reducing the hours they work. There's also a voluntary severance scheme in place. None of these are unique to Lancaster."

He adds: "Like many other libraries, we have also been given a budget reduction on our information budget. In our case this is 30 per cent." But Andrew said this blow is not as devastating as it sounds: "We've been able to keep VAT so – with VAT recently coming off ebooks and ejournals – the 30 per cent cut becomes nearer a 20 per cent cut. Clearly, given these targets, there is more work to be done with publishers in relation to costs and the challenges we face with student numbers, income drop from accommodation and other campus facilities and our budgets." **IP**



Lancaster University.