

The new roles of libraries and librarians: building bridges to new horizons

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Abstract

Academic libraries are undergoing rapid transformation driven by digital change, evolving research practices and new expectations from students, researchers and institutions. This article examines the changing roles of libraries and librarians through two interconnected perspectives: insights from recent international literature on emerging professional identities, competencies, and responsibilities; and the practical experience of the Rīga Stradiņš University (RSU) Library, which illustrates how these trends materialise in a health-sciences academic environment. The article highlights developments in research support, information literacy, systematic reviews, scientific publishing, and digital transformation. It argues that librarians are increasingly embedded in research ecosystems, functioning as educators, data stewards, methodological partners, and contributors to scholarly communication. The RSU Library's achievements demonstrate how libraries can build bridges to new horizons by embracing collaboration, innovation, and sustained professional development.

Key words: information literacy; bibliometrics; libraries, medical; support of research; education, graduate.

Introduction

Academic libraries are experiencing a profound shift in their mission, identity, and strategic value. As higher education becomes increasingly digital, data-driven, and interdisciplinary, libraries are redefining their roles to meet emerging needs. Librarians are becoming “active partners in education and research” (1) and their work now integrates “digital resources, personalised services, and structured training” (1) into the academic environment.

This article synthesises current scholarly perspectives on the transformation of academic librarianship and presents the experience of the Rīga Stradiņš University Library as a case study of how these developments manifest in practice.

Evolving roles of libraries and librarians: insights from recent literature

Reinventing professional identity

Recent literature emphasises that librarianship is expanding beyond traditional service models. Ducas, Michaud-Oystryk and Speare (2) observe that “the dra-

matic transformation in higher education (...) and the unrelenting advances in technology have had a significant impact on the responsibilities of academic librarians”. Their work highlights librarians’ increasing involvement in research support, information literacy, systematic reviews, and scholarly communication.

Research data services

Safdar et al. demonstrate that libraries now support data across its entire lifecycle, noting that “libraries were engaged in providing different types of research data services such as identification, acquisition, management and preservation of research data” (3). This reflects institutional priorities around transparency, FAIR principles, and open science.

Sustaining innovation

Mathews (4) argues that innovation in libraries is not only disruptive but also incremental. “The sustaining innovation focuses on refining and improving existing services” he writes, emphasising stability and continuous improvement – an essential approach in academic environments where reliability is critical.

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Libraries as partners in research outputs

Okhovati *et al.* (1) describe librarians as “vital partners in the research outputs of institutions” contributing to information retrieval, data management, dissemination, and methodological support. Their extended analysis further notes that librarians support the entire research lifecycle, acting as connectors between academia and industry.

Competencies for the librarian of tomorrow

Nawar (5) envisions the future librarian as a technologically empowered professional who “harnesses digital tools to expand access to information”.

Bhatnagar (6) and Awan *et al.* (7) identify essential competencies, including:

- digital and technological skills;
- information literacy instruction;
- data management;
- communication and collaboration;
- adaptability and lifelong learning;
- trustworthiness and professional ethics.

Together, these studies portray a profession that is dynamic, interdisciplinary, and increasingly central to academic success.

RSU Library: experience and achievements

Institutional context

Rīga Stradiņš University is a leading health-sciences institution with over 12,000 students and more than 70 medical specialisations. The RSU Library functions as a modern academic support unit, integrating information resources, technologies, and user-centred services. It also serves as Latvia’s main medical library, providing methodological support for healthcare institutions nationwide.

The library maintains 37 databases (2025) and tools such as AMBOSS, Scopus AI, and Rayyan, demonstrating its commitment to digital innovation.

Research support services

Research support is a core strategic function. The library provides:

- consultations;
- seminars and webinars;
- guidance on systematic reviews;
- bibliometrics and research visibility;
- publication strategies.

In 2025, librarians delivered 287 consultations and supported 129 researchers. The library also maintains the PURE research information system, which includes over 16,000 publications and 1,400 researcher profiles.

Information literacy as a strategic function

Information literacy has evolved from individual sessions to a structured, accredited 32-hour course integrated into study programmes. The library delivers approximately 400 sessions and 900 academic hours annually, covering:

- information search;
- critical evaluation;
- evidence-based practice;
- interdisciplinary applications.

The uploaded document notes that these programmes support “lifelong learning” and include training for healthcare professionals.

Systematic and scoping reviews

Since 2021, the RSU Library has developed a specialised service for systematic and scoping reviews. Librarians contribute to:

- search strategy development;
- evidence identification;
- PRISMA methodology;
- screening and reference management.

In 2024, librarians contributed to four systematic and six scoping reviews; in 2025, to five systematic and four scoping reviews, including co authorship.

A major initiative is the Baltic German Summer School on Systematic Reviews (2025), organised by the RSU Library and attended by 25 participants.

Contributions to scientific publishing

Librarians increasingly participate as co-authors in peer-reviewed publications, contributing to literature searching, methodology, and compliance with standards. Recent topics include oncology, spirituality, digital competencies, and AI in healthcare.

This reflects the library’s integration into research teams and its growing scholarly presence.

Future directions

The RSU Library aims to deepen its integration into research and education by:

- expanding involvement in systematic reviews and publishing;

- embedding information literacy across all study programmes;
- strengthening international cooperation;
- advancing digital transformation through a new integrated system for digital resources and library management.

These priorities align with global trends in academic librarianship.

Conclusion

The transformation of academic libraries is multidimensional and ongoing. The literature demonstrates that librarians are becoming research partners, digital innovators, educators, and community leaders. The RSU Library exemplifies these developments through its strategic work in research support, information literacy, systematic reviews, and scholarly publishing. Librarians are evolving into “essential bridges between information, technology, and users in an increasingly complex knowledge environment”.

The future of academic librarianship lies in collaboration, continuous learning, and sustained innovation – building bridges to new horizons.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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