

# Current trends in strategic planning of the UK leading academic libraries \*

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## Introduction

Libraries generally adapt the business concept of strategic management to improve their information services. Strategic planning is a systematic process implemented in most of the UK research-led universities because of its practical advantages such as increase in effective services, user satisfaction improvement, and organizational development (Corrall, 2000). Hence, analysing library strategic plans will help to estimate the existing patterns of planning and to understand various features within them. To clarify overall issues, this essay is divided into three main parts. The first part aims to explore the current positions of strategic plans by examining tools of planning and context from examples of documents published by nine leading university libraries in the UK \*\*\* , consisting of University of Cambridge, Oxford University, Imperial College London, University College London, University of Edinburgh, University of Sheffield, King's College London, University of Newcastle and Sussex University. The next two sections are to compare

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\*\*\* The UK leading university libraries derive from Newsweek's Top 100 Global Universities 2006 because this ranking system focused additionally on library performance. According to its report, ten percent of the score came from measures of evaluating library holdings (number of volumes). Even though many UK universities are ranked by Newsweek, there are only nine research libraries publishing their strategic plans on the Internet and are brought to be the samples of this study.

and to contrast core components of the nine strategic plans by considering issues such as mission, vision, and strategic themes.

### **Library strategic planning**

Considering tools of strategic planning, SWOT analysis (Strength-Weakness-Opportunities-Threat) is favorite technique employed in nine libraries to scan both internal and external factors. Even though there are many other modern tools proposed by policy makers such as data analysis and game theory, they do not provide enough applications for library context (Matthews, 2005). University College London library seems to be the only one library that makes good progress by increasing extensive tools such as success criteria, risk analysis, and impact analysis to guarantee its accomplishment during a strategic timescale.

University libraries benefit from strategic planning by responding the drastically changed circumstances that they face. The strategic plans could give several hints about current trends or new directions influencing library management. Nine research libraries are confronted with the same challenges as business counterparts, for instance, they produce statements about electronic resources because of the impact of information and communication technologies. Another example of this is to offer new modes of information services. They focus on the next generation of users who are accustomed to remote access anytime and anywhere more than are obligated to libraries' office hours (see Table 1).

There are significant issues which have not yet to be dealt with enough such as outcome measurement, income generation, and alignment with larger policies of parent organisations (McNicol, 2005: 509) although the UK university libraries has rapidly developed their strategic planning tools and contexts to create their strategic plans in recent years. Table 2 shows some of academic libraries have been preparing to align with institutional expectations for the next few years.

**Table 1** major context on library strategic planning

<b>Contexts/Trends</b>	<b>Reshaping strategies shown in the libraries' plans</b>
<b>Technologies</b>	Provide an enhanced computing environment for user with reliable and standardised pcs and software, together with an improved and standardised user interface (Oxford)
<b>Competition and turbulence</b>	Using navigation approaches which move beyond simple Google technologies (Newcastle)
<b>Strategic thinking of the complex era</b>	The Library will have to meet the challenge of providing an integrated infrastructure for research, by expanding the digital library and ... safeguarding the print collections (Cambridge)
<b>Redesigning the organization</b>	The Library's current structure must be appropriate to support the Library's strategic aims and make full use of staff knowledge and expertise at all level (Imperial College)
<b>Leadership</b>	Develop managerial skills at all levels within the Library (Sheffield)
<b>User needs</b>	Presenting appropriate resources and services in a manner which is seamless, whether on or off campus, and 24x7 (Edinburgh)

Adapted from Grant (2005)

**Table 2** The key challenges of strategic planning and libraries' responses

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Examples of addressing</b>
<b>Outcome measurement</b>	Develop further benchmarking and key performance indicators especially on value and impact, taking into account the changes produced by digital developments (Newcastle)
<b>Value for money</b>	Ensuring that internal and external purchasing and licensing models provide best value (Edinburgh)
<b>Alignment with universities</b>	Changes in estate, facilities and services will be planned, managed and delivered in order to support to the fullest extent the University of Oxford's aspirations, as expressed in its Corporate Plan... (Oxford)

## A comparison of the library strategic plans

To understand output of library strategic planning, formats of nine plans are analysed as well as their contents are compared with six core components. Those are missions, assumptions, visions, strategies, goals, and resources (Corrall, 2000: 149).

One obvious similarity among the samples is timescale. All libraries set a short span of just three to five years, although planning theorists usually identify that strategic plans and long-ranged plans are similar in duration (Pacios, 2004: 259). Table 3 exhibits the same result as Corrall (2000: 148) who observed published documents and found the libraries have tended to shorten time spans of their strategic implementation in recent years. Maybe rapid changes of both inside contexts and outside environment are one of main reasons affecting on such dynamic planning to have quick feedback.

**Table 3** The timing range of each library strategic plan

Libraries	Due date	Years
Cambridge	2006-2010	4
Oxford	2006-2011	5
Imperial College	2002-2005	3
UCL	2005-2010	5
Edinburgh	2003-2008	5
Sheffield	2006-2009	3
King's College	2004-2007	3
Newcastle	2006-2011	5
Sussex	2006-2009	3

The next similarity is concise description of documents. The samples clearly identify their mission statements which are the bottom line according to Corrall (2000: 148). These include between four and five lines for presenting the libraries' priorities and responding to various users' demands of service provision (see Table 4).

**Table 4** Main focuses of the library strategic plans

<b>Libraries</b>	<b>Main focuses</b>
<b>Cambridge</b>	Service delivery, users' needs and support of the University's mission
<b>Oxford</b>	Service delivery, users' needs and information access
<b>Imperial College</b>	Service delivery, users' needs and information access
<b>UCL</b>	Information infrastructure, users' needs and personnel development
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Information access, library cooperation and personnel development
<b>Sheffield</b>	Information access and users' needs
<b>King's College</b>	Service delivery and information infrastructure
<b>Newcastle</b>	Service delivery, users' needs and personnel development
<b>Sussex</b>	Service delivery and user' needs

Several assumptions, visions, strategies, goals, and resources of nine library plans resemble one another. These involve critical characteristics of contemporary libraries in the twentieth-first century (see Table 5), for example, the libraries set goals to improve existing information services and to create innovations by using knowledge resources and library systems because there are various forms of electronic and digital media in the libraries. Meanwhile, most strategies identify that library staff must be trained in essential managerial skills as well as develop their competencies for providing quality services to users (Pugh, 2005: 98).

#### **A contrast of the library strategic plans**

Despite the abovementioned similarities, each plan has specific aspects which differ considerably in elements of subjects and advanced targets beyond the basic requirements of the libraries.

The Libraries of Imperial College London, King's College London and University of Sussex have completed proportions of strategic plans among the overall samples. Those are introductions, missions, values, key assumptions and strategic goals. However, the plans of another six libraries seem simple and easy to communicate with stakeholders and user groups. For instance, the University Library of Sheffield gives contact address for comments or the Library of

University College London produces success indicators to guarantee its achievement (see Table 6).

Some core components of nine library plans vary evidently, depending on the objectives of their parent organisations and user needs. Key differences in Table 7 reveal that the Libraries' missions and goals of Cambridge University and Imperial College London intend to extend their services and collections towards world-class level. In the mean time, The University Libraries of Sheffield, University College London and King's College London emphasise that their best practices include user instruction, organisation of information as well as technical services respectively. Newcastle University and Sussex University Libraries will develop systems of performance measurement and personnel assessment while the Libraries of Oxford University and Edinburgh University will seek income generation.

**Table 5** Similar issues cited in core components of the strategic plans

<b>Libraries</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Vision</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Resources</b>
<b>Cambridge</b>	New services Digital media	Not Given	Collections Space Partnership & collaboration High quality staff	Improvement Development	Information resources & system Facilities Staff Budget
<b>Oxford</b>	Not given	Best services New access tools	Collections Space High quality staff	Improvement Development Integration	Information resources & system Facilities
<b>Imperial College</b>	New services Digital media Budget	Best services New access tools	Space Partnership & collaboration Support for users Management Access	Improvement Development Integration	Information resources & system Facilities Staff

<b>Libraries</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Vision</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Resources</b>
<b>UCL</b>	Not given	Best services	Partnership & collaboration High quality staff Support for users Management	Development	Information resources & system Staff Budget
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Not given	Not given	High quality staff Access	Development	Information resources & system Facilities Staff
<b>Sheffield</b>	Not given	Not given	Space Partnership & collaboration High quality staff Support for users	Improvement Development Implementation	Information resources & system Budget
<b>King's College</b>	New services Digital media Budget	Best services	Space High quality staff Support for users Management	Development Implementation	Information resources & system Facilities Staff
<b>Newcastle</b>	Not given	Not given	High quality staff Support for users	Development	Information resources & system Budget
<b>Sussex</b>	Budget	Not given	High quality staff Support for users Management	Improvement Development	Information resources & system Facilities

Table 6 Contents found in the sample of library strategic plans

Plan headlines	Cambridge	Oxford	Imperial	UCL	Edinburgh	Sheffield	King's	Newcastle	Sussex
Table of contents		✓					✓		✓
Glossary				✓					✓
Introduction/executive summary/forward			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Mission statement/aims	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vision statement		✓	✓	✓			✓		
Values			✓				✓		✓
Context/environmental scanning			✓	✓			✓		
Key assumptions	✓		✓				✓		✓
Strategic themes/key strategic principles		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Critical success factors	✓			✓					✓
Goals/strategic objectives	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
Rationale							✓		
Objectives/tasks				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Actions						✓	✓		✓
Responsibility									✓
Completion date							✓		✓
Success indicators/performance indicators				✓					
Operational plan/action plan/project				✓					
Appendix		✓					✓		
Channels to send comments						✓			

Adapted from Pacios (2004: 266)



**Table 7** Key differences of details in the sample plans

<b>Libraries</b>	<b>Mission</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Vision</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Resources</b>
<b>Cambridge</b>	Deliver services to international community	A hybrid library service			World class collections	
<b>Oxford</b>			Service staff will have apposite skills Reorganization of the estate	Liaison-communication	Legal deposit	The Library Capital Campaign to provide funding for buildings
<b>Imperial College</b>	World-class information service	Inflation rates on information resources			Contributing to the development of the emerging e-learning strategy	
<b>UCL</b>	develop innovative LIS professionals who can offer leadership to UCL		Provide a clear strategic direction		Cataloguing operations Digitization	Fundraising activities will be channeled through Fundraising Committee
<b>Edinburgh</b>					Value for money	Setting targets for external income
<b>Sheffield</b>				Information literacy	Develop Information Literacy network	
<b>King's College</b>	To be information leaders in cultural communities	Maintain excellence in research collections	Shares the knowledge-enabled university		Evidence-based support service	
<b>Newcastle</b>				Benchmarking & KPIs		
<b>Sussex</b>		Users' expectations		Issues outside the Library's control		Reward system for staff

## Conclusion

Academic libraries have to plan their strategies and operate goal directed activities. The samples suggest that UK university libraries have developed plans to cope with planning framework for changing context. They indefinitely depend on new trends in management approaches. Tomorrow's strategic planning process, therefore, will be more complex. The review of nine documents helps to find out similarities about the timescale, the gist, and the detailed features of the strategic plans. Moreover, the review assesses what differences in patterns and the state of the plans are. The results show that today the libraries widen impact targets to play a key role as an indispensable service agency of universities. It is particularly interesting to follow outcome evaluation after each library fulfils mission in its current strategic plan.

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## Appendix

Library strategy document URLs (Prepared by Sheila Corral September 2006)

University of Cambridge. University Library Strategic Plan 2006/7-2010/11:

[http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/strategic\\_plan.html](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/strategic_plan.html)

University of Oxford. Oxford University Library Services, Vision for 2011, January 2006:

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/lib/vision2011.pdf>

Imperial College London. Information Services and Systems Strategic Plan 2004-2007:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c4/07/82/strategicplan0407.pdf>

University College London. Library Strategy 2005-10:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/libstrat.shtml>

University of Edinburgh. University Library Strategy 2003-2008: Draft for consultation, June

2003: <http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/policy/startegy03-08.shtml>

The University of Sheffield. Your Changing Library: the University Library Strategic Plan 2006

to 2009: [http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/libdocs/strategic\\_pla0609.pdf](http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/libdocs/strategic_pla0609.pdf)

King's College London. Information Services and Systems Strategic Plan 2004-2007:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c4/07/82/strategicplan0407.pdf>

Newcastle University. University Library Strategic Plan 2005-2006 to 2010/11:

[http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/startegic\\_plan.php](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/startegic_plan.php)

University of Sussex. Library Strategic Plan 2006-2009:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/aboutus/startegicplan.pdf>