How a Unified Research Platform Can Improve the Efficiency of Academic Libraries

An interview with Masud Khokhar, Assistant Director of Digital Innovation and Research Services, Lancaster University

England's Lancaster University is one of the top 10 research institutions in the United Kingdom and among the top 150 worldwide. To maintain the university's status as a premier research institution, the Lancaster University Library supports the efforts of some 1,200 faculty members throughout the research lifecycle, says Masud Khokhar, assistant director of digital innovation and research services.

For instance, Khokhar says, library staff increasingly help faculty design compelling research questions. They write Data Management Plans (DMPs) for grant applications. They help preserve research assets and ensure that metadata are applied consistently to those assets. They advise faculty on the publication of research results. They manage Article Processing Charges (APCs) for open access publications. And they help measure the impact of the university's research outputs.

At the moment, researchers and library staff accomplish these tasks using a variety of tools from different vendors. "One of the problems we face is the lack of interoperability," Khokhar says. "We have a grants management system, a separate costing system, a system to manage research publications, and a system to manage research data. We have a different system to look at the impact of research, and our Current Research Information System is being bent out of shape to do things it wasn't meant to do."

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Having to use separate systems for each of these functions creates operational inefficiencies. The university ends up spending more in licensing costs, and staff must spend more time than necessary in trying to navigate multiple systems and coordinate efforts.

What's more, these various processes are handled separately by different teams—often "without any real understanding of how they work together to form a coherent research support service," Khokhar says.

In one example, open access outputs are stored in Lancaster University's institutional repository, while the data collected during these research projects are maintained in a research data repository. While these systems are the same at the moment, they will become different shortly. This will raise the issue of outputs not being easily linked with the data they derive from. When these objects are stored in separate repositories managed by different teams, linking them together becomes challenging and includes more potential for errors.

In addition, the fund used to pay Article Processing Charges for open access outputs is managed with spreadsheets compiled by different library staff altogether. And yet another team is tasked with validating whether these outputs comply with open access requirements. "This operation is often conducted by the library's metadata team," Khokhar says. "The metadata team is different from the research support or scholarly communications team, and there is no unified workflow between these teams to manage validations, APC payments, or open access reporting."

Having a single, cloud-based platform that ties together the various aspects of the research lifecycle would solve many of these problems. This is what Lancaster University and four other leading research institutions are hoping to achieve in teaming up with Ex Libris to create a new research services platform called Esploro.

"At the moment, there is a gap in the market that is not covered," Khokhar says. "What is missing is a product that delivers an entire ecosystem of services around the research process. Esploro aims to bridge this gap by bringing all of these operations under a single product , which will reduce the management needed with multiple systems, improve workflows and communication, and increase compliance rates."

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Khokhar believes Esploro will improve the efficiency of library operations not only by streamlining research workflows, but also by automating certain tasks. For instance, the software is designed to capture as much metadata as possible automatically from PDF files and other research assets as these are deposited into the system.

"This goes back to the user-centric design of the product," he says. "It reduces the workload on the administration team who are managing the metadata on the back end. They can have confidence that most of the metadata fields will be filled automatically, and there are a very limited number of additional fields they will have to fill."

Improving efficiency will allow Lancaster University Library to support the efforts of researchers in new and more valuable ways.

"The research landscape is changing very rapidly, and there are lots of activities happening that we want to sink our teeth into and start supporting our researchers on," Khokhar says. "The only way we can do that is if we reduce the operational workload on our staff. We're hoping Esploro can help deliver those efficiencies, so our staff can integrate themselves into the research process more fully and provide the advocacy and expertise needed in a constantly changing research landscape."

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