




Preface

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Editor

The academic library has for many years been at the heart of universities and by and large managed to develop in tandem with their parent institutions. They have always had an essential role in supporting teaching and learning at higher education institutions. However, since the 1960s, there has also been constant predictions that libraries will become redundant and lately, that they will be changed beyond all recognition. None of these predictions about irrelevance has come true, as libraries, and especially academic libraries, have had to change and adapt to new circumstances and especially new technologies at an ever-increasing rate. The fast rate of change and development started with the digital age or the Third Industrial Revolution and is currently culminating in the disruptive wake of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), fuelled by the even more disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is actively engaging with the challenges and opportunities inherent in the 4IR, and in 2018 the UJ Library embarked on a series of international conferences on this topic to facilitate discussion between academic libraries.

The 2019 conference, **The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Library Practices**, explored the role of academic libraries and how they needed to adapt to the advent of a new era of industrial development, based on interconnectivity and smart automation.

Towards the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic started to disrupt the world and it hit South Africa in full force by March 2020, forcing the country, like the rest of the world, into lockdown. Academic libraries had perforce to close their physical spaces and rely on providing access to information and learning support by means of their digital collections and services only. The UJ Library continued its engagement with the changing world of work and hosted a second international conference, **From Zero to Hero – Rising to the Challenge in a Time of Crisis**. The conference was hosted in partnership with the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). The focus was on sharing stories of difficulties, disruption, and failures, and how these challenges were used as a means of growth and development.

A third conference in partnership with the ACU followed in 2021 and this time the focus was on **Conversations about the Journey of Change: a “New Normal.”** Contributors told the story of how academic libraries became fully integrated virtual and physical spaces in a very short span of time.

Academic Libraries: Reflecting on Crisis, 4IR and the Way Forward

They managed to build additional capabilities, and develop new services and innovative ways to support their users during very unusual circumstances.

The chapters included in this collection are based on a selection of papers initially delivered at these conferences. Contributors are from South Africa, Uganda, Mauritius, and the West Indies.

The importance of this volume cannot be overemphasised. It reflects on how academic libraries are moving from traditional and hybrid academic librarianship to participating actively in the academic environment created by the 4IR and the COVID-19 pandemic. Robots are coming to libraries, Google can find ‘anything,’ while social media is already widely used by technology smart students. Academics and academic libraries are engaging with these developments and harnessing it to ensure a relevant and productive future for themselves.

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