

Facing the future – changes and challenges

Discussion session

Topic 1 – Interactions through technology: chatbots and virtual assistants

Staying relevant to our students/users is one of the main priorities for both academic and public libraries.

Demonstrating value for money and cost-effective practices, requires changes like integrating new technologies, upgrading physical spaces and offering new services to improve the user experience.

The [Office for Students survey](#) from March 2018 showed that 85% of students agreed that their fee should be spent on Library resources and according to a 2017 SCONUL report, library managers are also well aware of the necessity of offering new technological services such as voice recognition and artificial intelligence with 8 out of 10 stating they would be adopting such services in some form.

[[Artificial Intelligence in the Library. Advantages, Challenges and Tradition](#). Ex Libris. 2018].

Chatbots

A chatbot is a type of software that can simulate a conversation (or a chat) with a user in natural language through messaging applications, websites, mobile apps or through the telephone.

Chatbot applications streamline interactions between people and services, potentially enhancing customer experience. At the same time, they offer new opportunities to improve the customers' engagement process and operational efficiency by reducing the typical cost of customer service.

Virtual Assistants (smart speakers)

A virtual assistant is able to interpret human speech and respond via a synthesized voice. Users can ask their assistants questions, control home automation devices and media playback via voice, and manage other basic tasks such as email, to-do lists, and calendars with verbal commands. Often known as chatbots as well, virtual assistants are intelligent and are capable of learning.

The capabilities and usage of virtual assistants is expanding rapidly, with new products entering the market i.e. Siri (Apple) first released in 2011 with 500 million devices using Siri by 2018 and Echo Dot / Alexa (Amazon) first released in 2016 with over 100 Million Alexa-Enabled devices sold by Jan 2019.

At least two UK universities are already using this technology i.e. [Lancaster University](#) and [Staffordshire University](#)