The M25 Consortium Conference was a great opportunity for me to learn and engage with the evolving landscape of academic libraries. The conference explored the evolving landscape of academic libraries, focusing on the tensions between technological advancement, equity, environmental sustainability, and the wellbeing of library staff. Across keynotes, lightning talks, and panel discussions, the central idea behind the theme “Shaping the Future” emerged: libraries have a responsibility to prioritise humanity. I left the conference with a more tangible idea on how to adapt to rapid digital shifts while remaining human-centred, inclusive, and environmentally responsible.

The opening keynote speakers for this conference were a welcome interruption to the “race to imbed AI” that has taken place across higher education institutions. This presentation reminded me that libraries can and should be the leaders in their academic institutions for implementing new technology. Librarians are uniquely equipped to address concerns about widening equity gaps, the dehumanisation of education, and other unforeseen challenges raised by hastily purchasing and adopting digital alternatives to traditional formats or existing resources. Additionally, as our sector makes decisions about the future of subscription models, library management systems, and other library information software, the speakers presented valuable language to aid librarians in injecting a much-needed slow thoughtfulness that reintroduces the reality of student and staff needs. I also appreciated the nuanced exploration of the tension between expediency and meaningful progress. Tech companies operate with a "move fast and break things" mentality – often at odds with the careful stewardship values of libraries.

Continuing the prevailing human-centredness theme of the day, library sustainability was another key topic that garnered a lot of attention. A presentation on the environmental impact of data storage presented more context for growing concerns over whether technology is truly a “greener” alternative. In addition to the missed opportunities for human-centred learning and sharing posed by the use of AI in educational settings, wider concerns surrounding the environmental impact of data centres and the resources needed to keep them operating properly provided another valuable consideration for libraries as they decide the ways in which to imbed AI in their service provision. It is evident and encouraging to see the potential cessation of relying of previous attitudes on the “greenness” of technology without fully considering the environmental danger of hosting and storing seemingly endless amounts of data. This aspect of the conference gave me a new awareness of the *physical* storage of digital data and the environmental impact of generative AI, digital formats of books, journals, and other media. It will be interesting to see how HEIs in the UK continue to commit to a greener future while simultaneously pushing the adoption of AI, EdTech, and digital-first learning “solutions”, knowing the present and growing strain on the environment and the communities in which this data is stored.

Simultaneously, it was interesting to hear about the experiences of academic libraries who have either just completed or are still in the process of building an “E-Only Library” or working to further imbed and promote AI tools through their library instruction. At my university, there are several distance learners who benefit greatly from the large collection of titles that we offer digitally. While we are grappling with the environmental effects of collecting and keeping such large volumes of digital data, this topic was thought-provoking and sparked interesting conversations about ways that libraries can contribute to organisational commitments to sustainability while also meeting the needs of students and staff who are undertaking their learning at a distance.

The availability of activities and presentations addressing the responsibility that libraries have on their campuses to reflect the diverse needs of all library users was another reiteration of the human-centred messaging of the conference theme. In the midst of a “Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA)” world, libraries are presented with an opportunity and the responsibility to keep human-needs at the forefront of university planning and decision-making. Libraries are uniquely able to imbed services that are disability-conscious and designed to meet universal needs. The presence of conference posters detailing sensory library mapping, sessions highlighting the importance of “Kindness Culture” in the workplace, and information shared on the safety of the library workplace all reinforced the prevailing importance of keeping library staff and library users at the central focus of decisions about library service provision.

This day inspired me and gave me a bit more courage to question library or organisation-led decisions that seem antithetical to our goals of educating students. Not only was it encouraging to hear powerful stories about making choices that keep people and the planet at the core of our individual choices, but it was also impactful to visualise the quantitative outcomes of mindful choices that can be made at the department-level in the context of organisational commitments to EDI, carbon neutralisation and using technology to bridge educational gaps. I was inspired by the range of viewpoints on the topics that were presented that upheld the central messaging of the conference.

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