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Quo Vadis

A comparative study of Vision statements from 17 Academic Libraries

Wien, Charlotte

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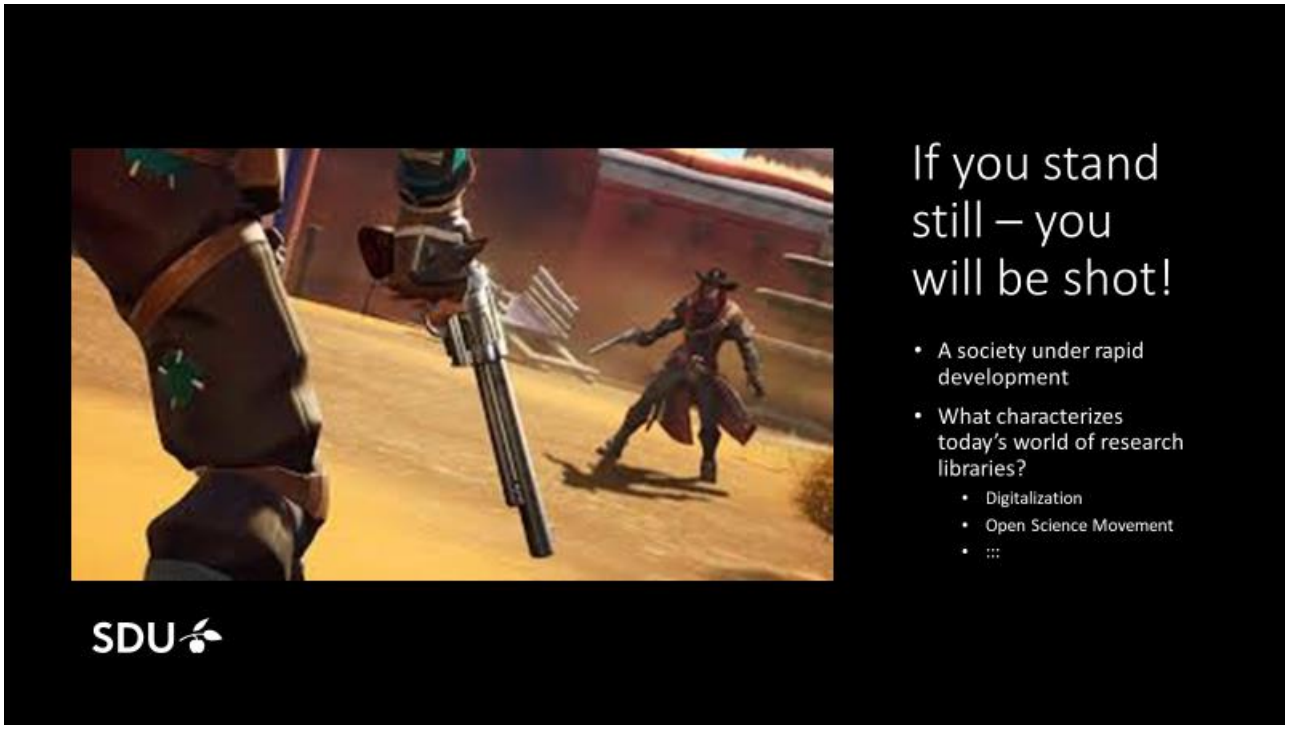
Presentation from QQML Workshop on Library Strategies, EUI, Florence, May 28th 2019

By Dr. Charlotte Wien, Professor, SDU

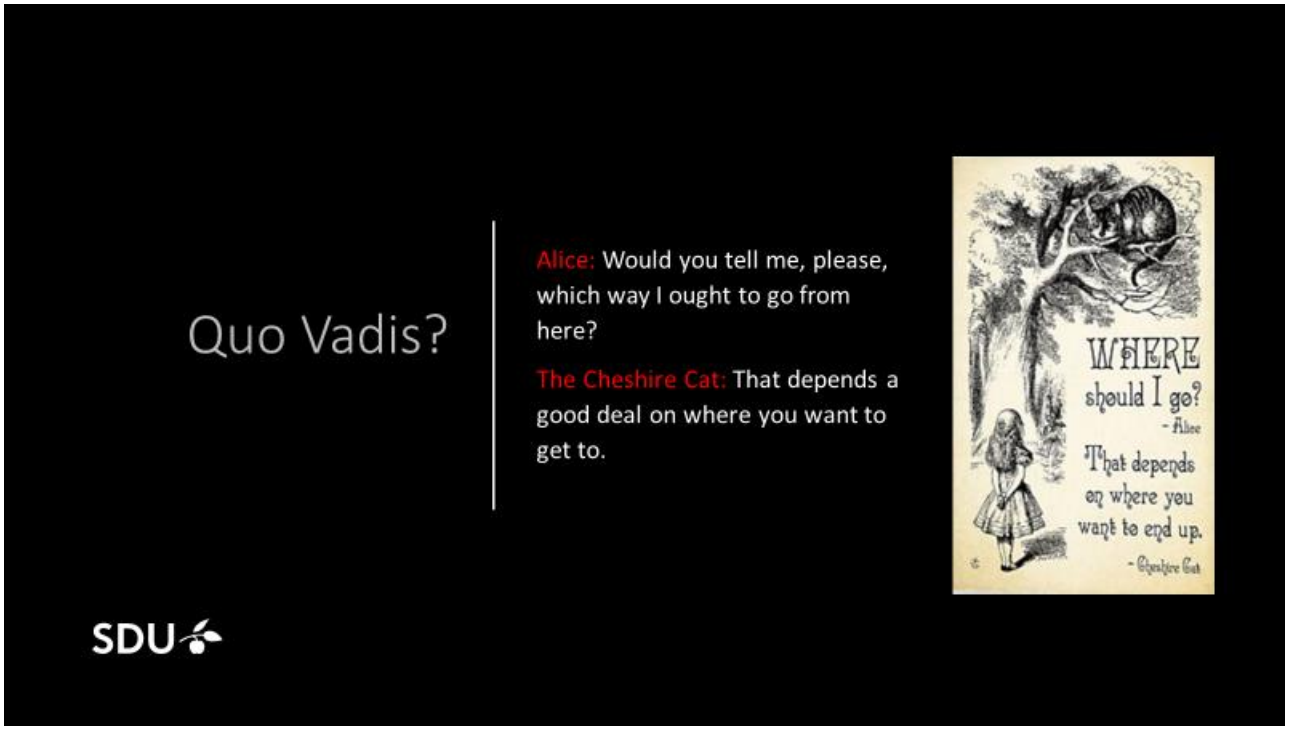


In the Wild West survival among gunmen was a matter of moving. Standing still would increase the probability of getting shot. In a world of rapid change, being on the move also increases one's chances of survival. We – the research libraries - live in a world of rapid change.

You probably know these compagnies. They are no longer among us or play very different role today. Do you remember Kodak. The biggest player in the market became a nobody in just a few years. Kodak stood still. Kodak didn't believe in digital cameras.

Nokia had a global market share of over 50 percent in 2007. In 2013 it had plummeted to 3 percent. Nokia did not believe in touch screens.

And from our world: Yahoo! Once the top choice of every librarian teaching search strategies. Celebrated for its manual indexing and for operationalizing advanced IR theory like Rangenathans. But suddenly Googeling became a verb meaning throwing randomly selected search terms at the robot retrieving tons of more or less relevant documents ranked automatically by more or less sophisticated ranking algorithms, but giving the users what they wanted: Simplicity. Yahoo is still out there but it is no longer famous for its search engine. Yahoo has transformed into an investment company under the name Altaba Inc. It moved and is still alive.



We too must move and change. But will random walk save us? Hardly

When wandering Wonderland Alice meets the mysterious and philosophical Cheshire cat, whom she in a very famous quote asks for directions.

Alice asks: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?
The Cheshire Cat replies: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.
Alice says: I don't much care where.
The Cheshire Cat replies: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.
Alice – realizing the weakness of her statement – stumbles back into the conversation saying: ... So long as I get somewhere.

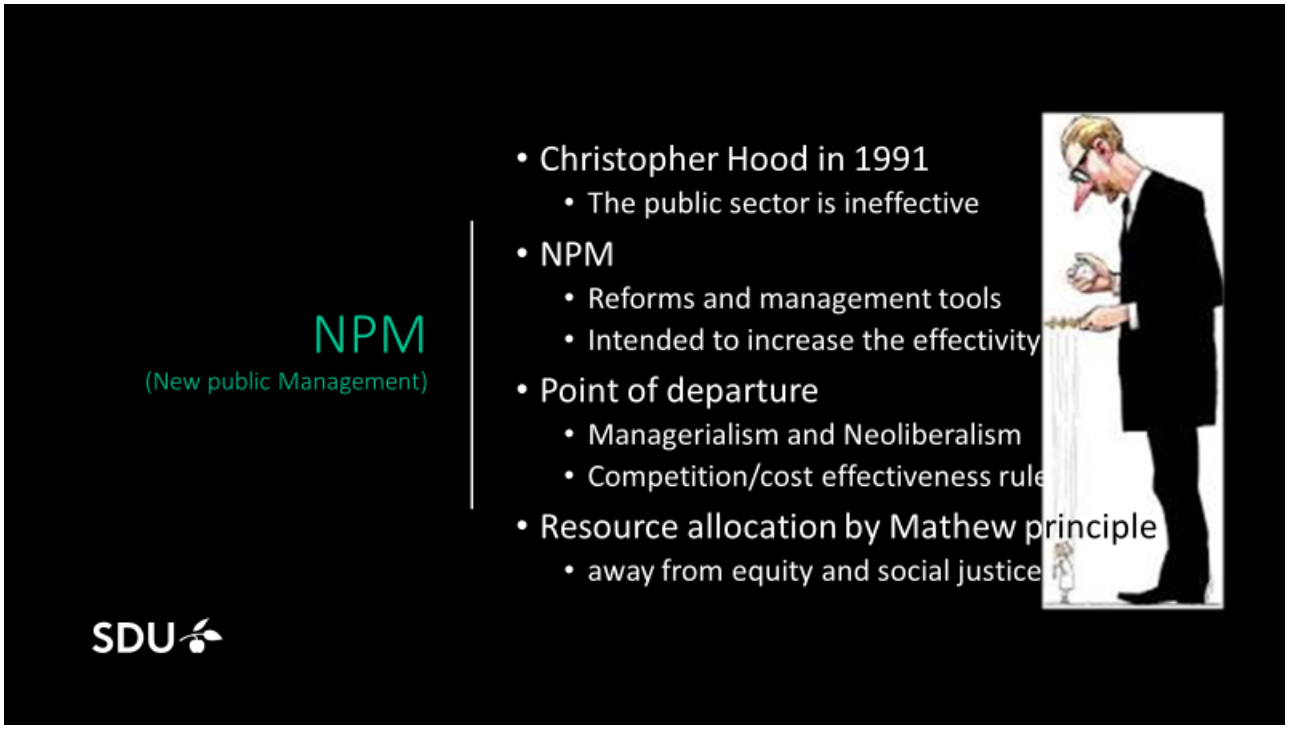
Random walk may work for lonesome cowboys and for Alice, but for organizations, management must convince staff to head in the same direction towards a goal shared and understood by all members.

Therefore, we need a strategy to guide us. We – as library leaders – must set the target and convince our staff that the course we have set will bring us 'somewhere' and not to a 'dead end'. We must agree with them on our raison d'être, and we must have a clear vision of where we want to be in say 5 to 10 years. We must identify the actions to be taken to reach our goal and seek means of organizing the efforts of our organizations.

We have suggested this workshop to QQML, since we believe that more attention should be directed towards strategic work in research libraries. We believe that sharing and comparing our strategies across institutional and national boarders can foster more cooperation and professionalization of strategic planning in our sector.

I will present an analysis of the vision statements of 17 European research libraries. My research question is 'what characterizes current vision statements of European research libraries?' But before seeking the answer, I will challenge the assumption that a Strategy is a 'must have' for a modern research library. I will do this by seeking the raison d'être of strategic work in research libraries identifying the historical roots of the phenomena.

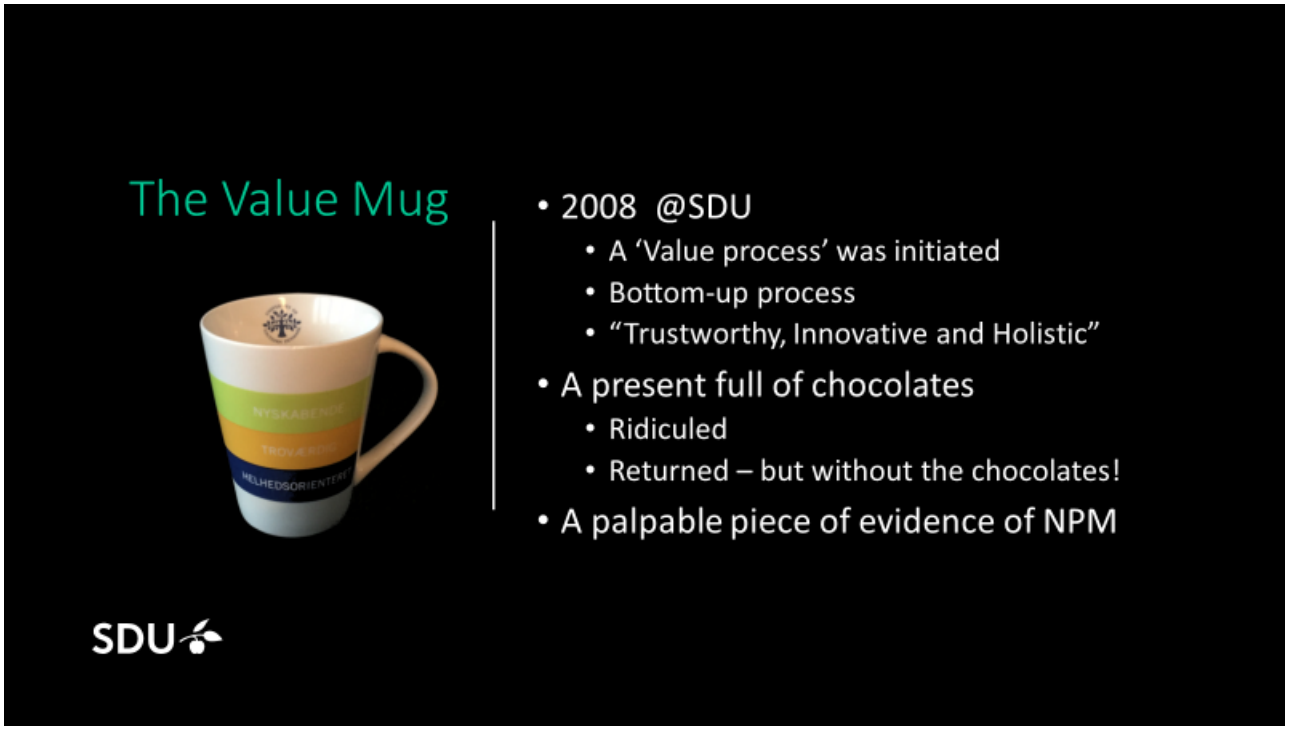
The student revolts in the late 1960s had introduced democracy as governing principle at the universities in many European countries. Consequently, university leaders were elected among and by faculty and students. Democracy has many advantages; but swift decision-making is not one of them. Over the 70s, 80s and 90s the universities had become ineffective, malfunctioning, anarchistic institutions populated by professors working more for themselves, than for their institutions. There were no shared values and goals across the departments. Change was necessary, and it was coming.



In 1991 the British social scientist Christopher Hood had named the new wave of reforms seeking to increase the efficiency of the public sector through performance management 'New Public Management'. The hypothesis behind New Public Management is, that the public sector institutions can become effective if run like a private sector company. Competition and cost effectiveness are the guiding principles. Under NPM the allocation of resources is oriented away from principles like equity and social justice towards pursuit of greater efficiency. In Britain NPM was introduced quite aggressively under Thatcher, Major and Blair. This is probably one of the reasons why it was far easier for us to identify Library Strategies from British research libraries than anywhere else. For this reason, UK does not provide an average case in this matter and I will therefore continue my argument using Denmark as my case.

The Danish universities being notoriously anarchistic and resistant to management were not 'hit' by NPM before the mid-00s. But in 2003 a new university law turned the universities into self-governing institutions with a board of directors as top management. They would hire a Vice Chancellor, who would hire the deans, who would hire the Heads of Departments and so on. Students and faculty boards were only advisory, all major decisions should be taken by the new class of managers – who in return – was supposed to document increased performance. Notice how the private sector management lingo is everywhere: Contracts, Top Management, Board of directors.

One of the biggest problems facing the new class of university managers was how to stop faculty from being resistant to management and to work towards achieving goals set by the ministry and management. The solution to this problem was to introduce Strategic management in academia.



On this slide you see the first palpable piece of evidence from my university of the processes that started. It is the so-called Value Mug. The value mug was the result of a bottom-up process initiated by the Vice Chancellor in 2008. The purpose was to distill three key concepts reflecting the values of the organization. All faculty were invited to participate the process. After many meetings and expensive consultancy hours three words were agreed upon: Trustworthy, Innovative and Holistic. The Vice Chancellor had the three words printed on a mug and all faculty received it as a present.

Most of us were cracking jokes about it, we found it ridiculous and a waste of time: Over the lunch tables we ridiculed this 'corporate style management' and the introduction of the same incentives that were found in the private sector. We considered ourselves far above and beyond this: We were the self-governing, anarchistic, freedom-loving, and absolutely-100-percent-resistant-to-management-faculty. This arrogance reflects how little we understood of the significance of the mug.

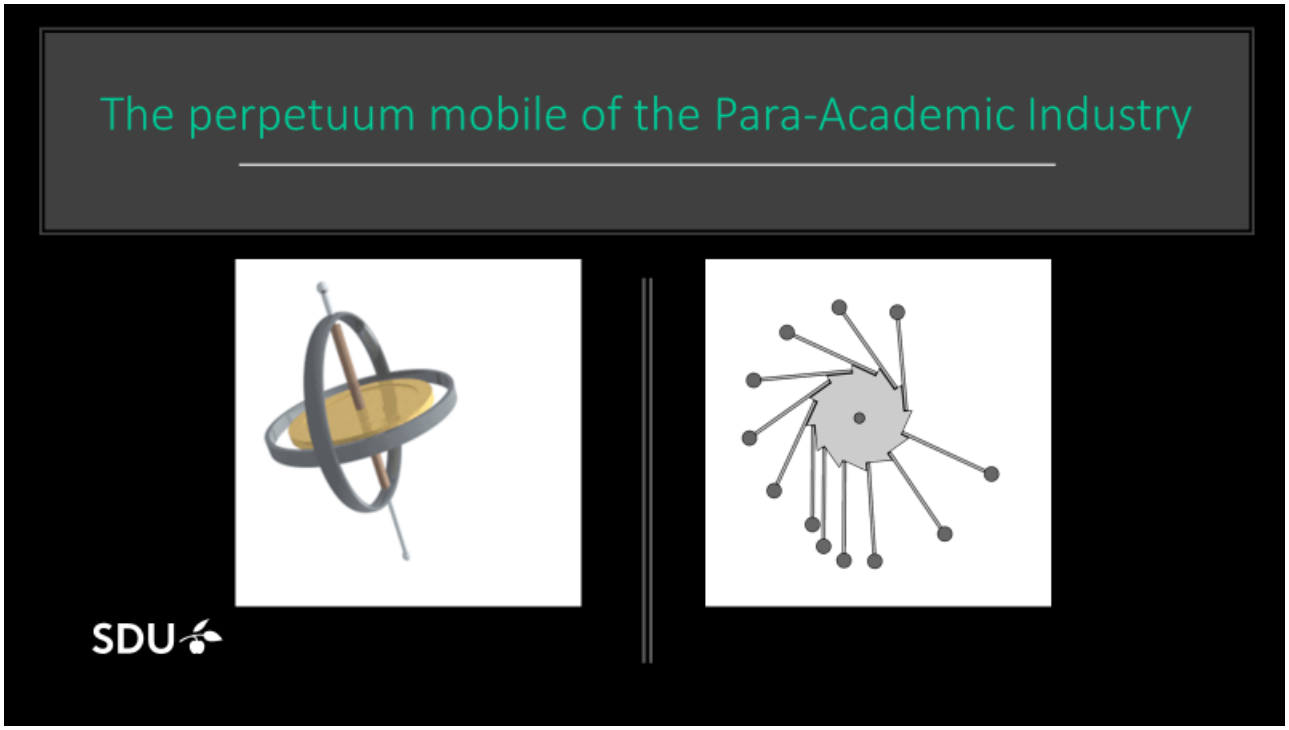
Nevertheless, the value mug signified the start of a maelstrom of changes in academia. Suddenly the universities had core values, management teams, merchandise and a of course 'a strategy' and was fighting inefficiency by aligning itself with the corporate world.

In his famous book 'The Fifth Discipline' Peter Senge presents 11 laws of Systems thinking. The 1st one is: Todays problems come from yesterday's solutions. Aligning academia with the corporate world seemed to make the sector more efficient but created a series of new problems. One of them was a monster which I have named 'The Para-Academic Industry'.

The Para-Academic Industry provides different types of services to academia. They can be targeted either the researchers themselves, the university management or both. They include publishing companies, social media for researchers, reference management software, database hosts, professional conference organizers, ranking bureaus, various metrics brands and so on.

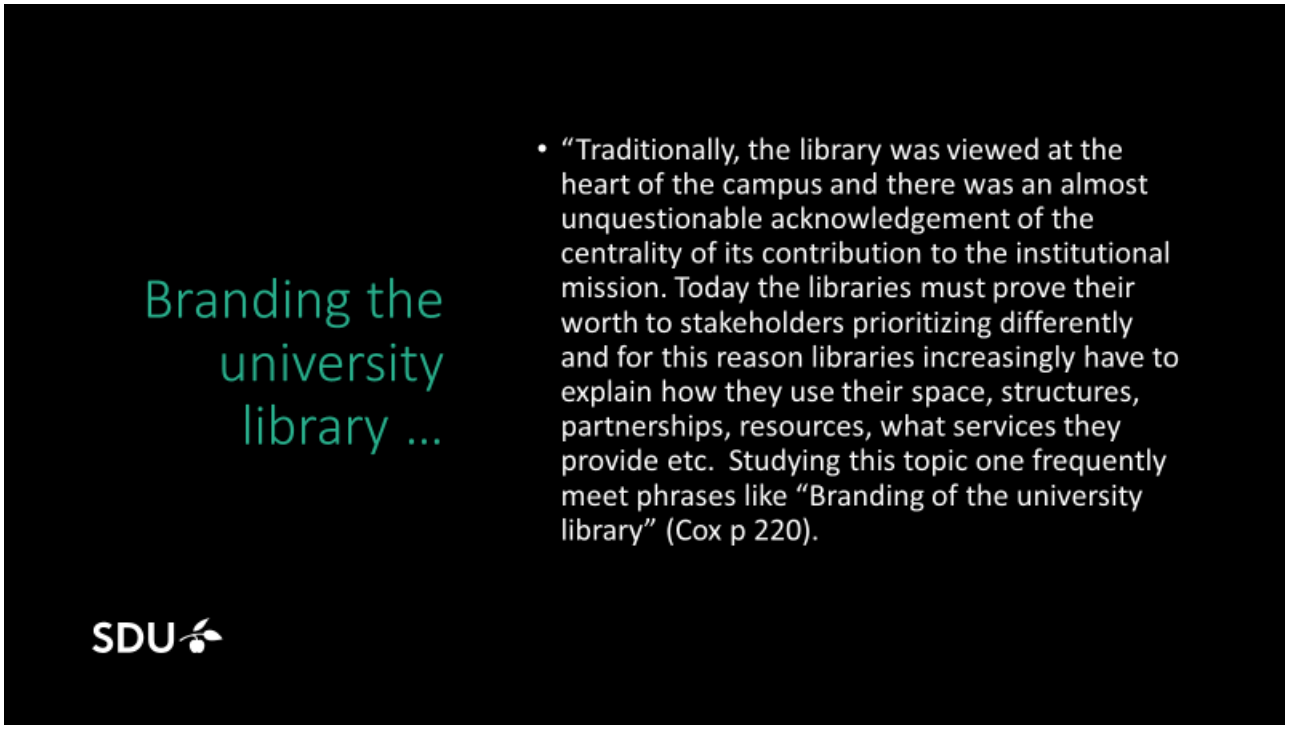
Many of these new services sprung out of the academic publishing industry which had struck gold with it's amazing business model: Getting its raw material for free, making the people refining the raw material into the final product work for tax-payers money and selling the product back to the university libraries – who would pay for it with more tax-payer money.

The Para-Academic Industry market many of these new services directly to university management or to individual researchers claiming to be able to ensure higher impact and productivity. In the name of competition, they provide university management with a series of performance measures against which researchers increasingly finds themselves being weighted. Which is why researchers themselves needs to optimize against these measures and to be present on all kinds of digital platforms.



In this way the para-academic industry has created its own 'perpetuum-mobile' where both management and individual researchers are becoming increasingly dependent on their services.

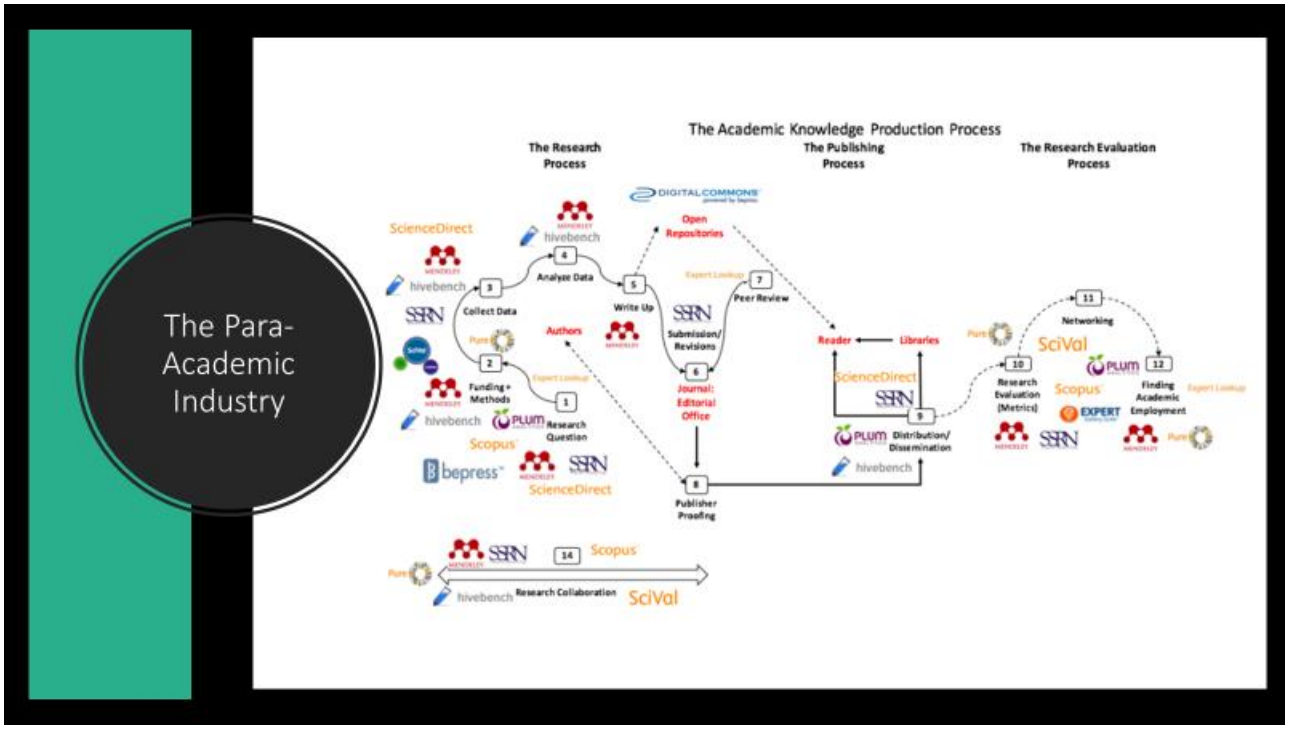
Now where does that leave the academic libraries?



My point is that before NPM the traditional university library had monopoly over providing services to researchers and to university administration. Cox pin points the new situation with great accuracy in this quote "Traditionally, the library was viewed at the heart of the campus and there was an almost unquestionable acknowledgement of the centrality of its contribution to the institutional mission. Today

the libraries must prove their worth to stakeholders prioritizing differently and for this reason libraries increasingly must explain how they use their space, structures, partnerships, resources, what services they provide etc. Studying this topic, one frequently meets phrases like “Branding of the university library” (Cox p 220).

In an ironic parenthesis I should mention, that the university Library of Southern Denmark use the same metaphor on our merchandise and brand our library with the same old metaphor as everybody else.

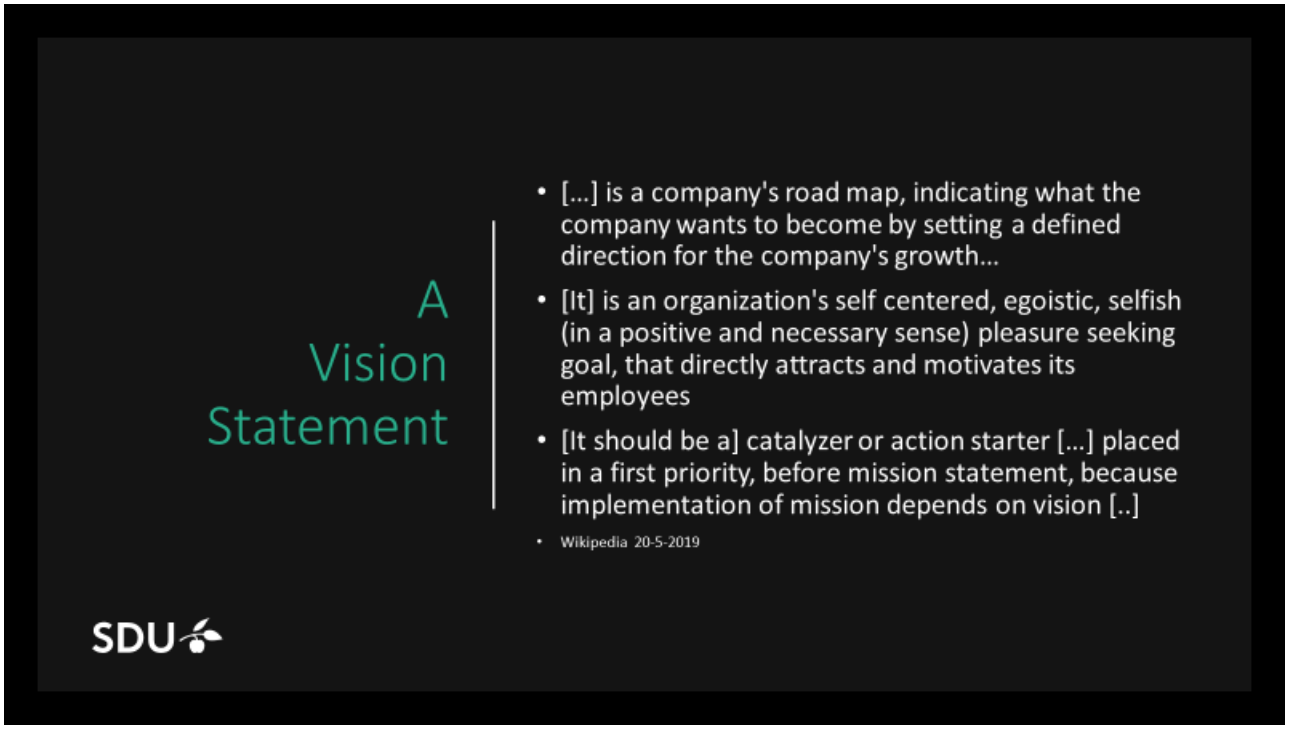


It is evident from this slide how this new industry puts pressure on the ‘old service provider’ pushing us

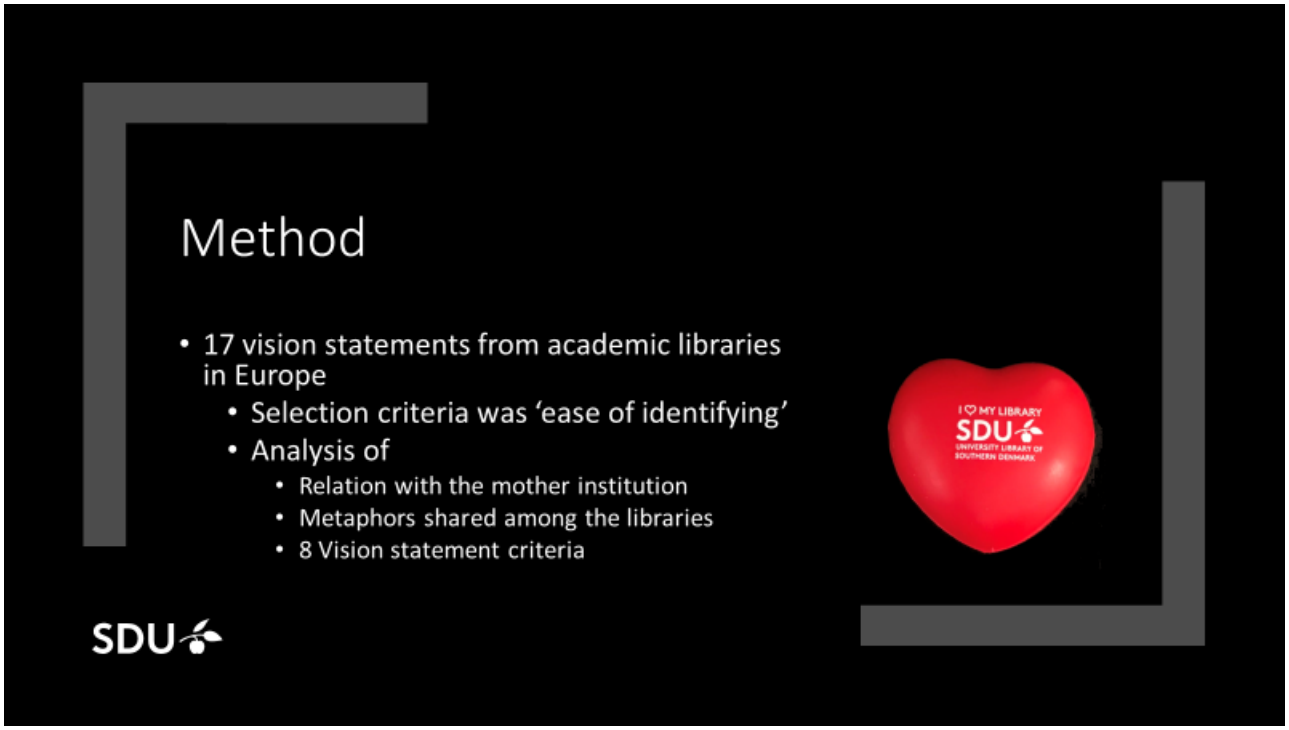
against a fatal heart attack. The only space left for the Library on this figure is ‘Distribution and dissemination’ to the readers … but notice how that can also be handled by others. In fact, I found this chart in an Elsevier powerpoint presentation.

So we are now in a situation similar to that of our mother institutions. Our existence cannot be taken for granted anymore. We must constantly prove our worth. If we stand still – we will be shot by gunmen from Elsevier, SAGE, Wiley!

Therefore, to survive we need to a strategy and a vision to guide our movement.

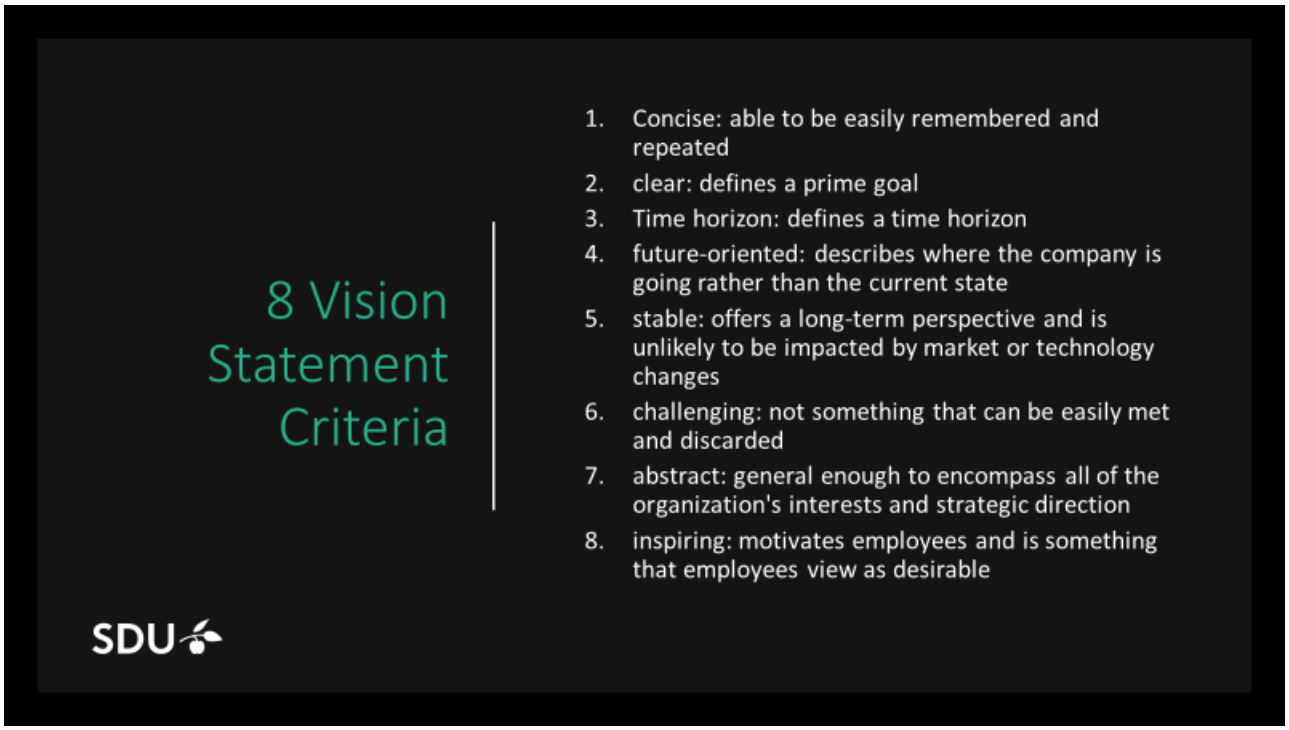


We used the common definition of vision statements found on Wikipedia. A vision statement is […] a company's road map, indicating what the company wants to become by setting a defined direction for the company's growth. [It] is an organization's self-centered, egoistic, selfish (in a positive and necessary sense) pleasure seeking goal, that directly attracts and motivates its employees. And [It should be a] catalyzer or action starter […] placed in a first priority, before mission statement, because implementation of mission depends on vision [..]



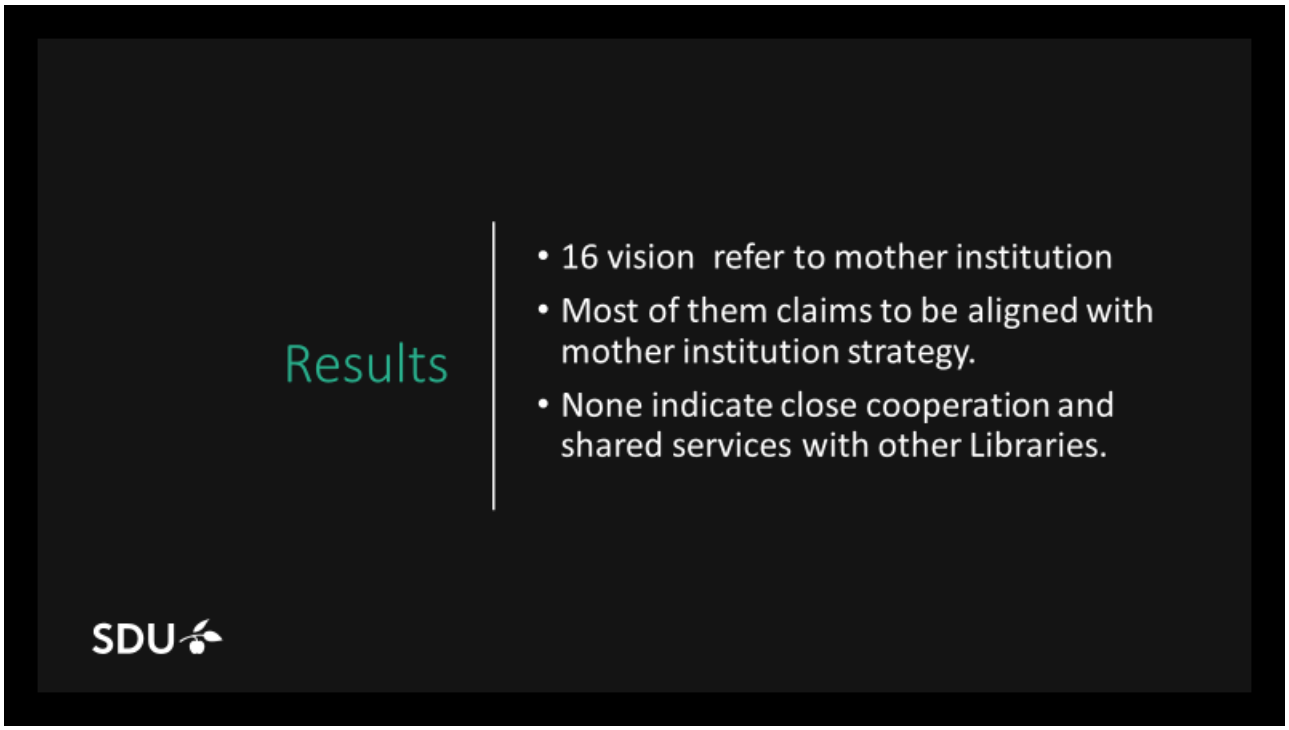
For this comparative study we have collected 17 vision statements from academic libraries in Europe. Their logo's were on one of the previous slides. Selection criteria was 'ease of identifying' more than a 'systematic approach'. Many libraries have not translated their strategies into English, many did not have a vision statement and so on. This has led to an overweight of libraries located in the UK in our sample.

To keep our analysis relatively simple we will focus the relation with the mother institution and metaphors shared among the libraries.

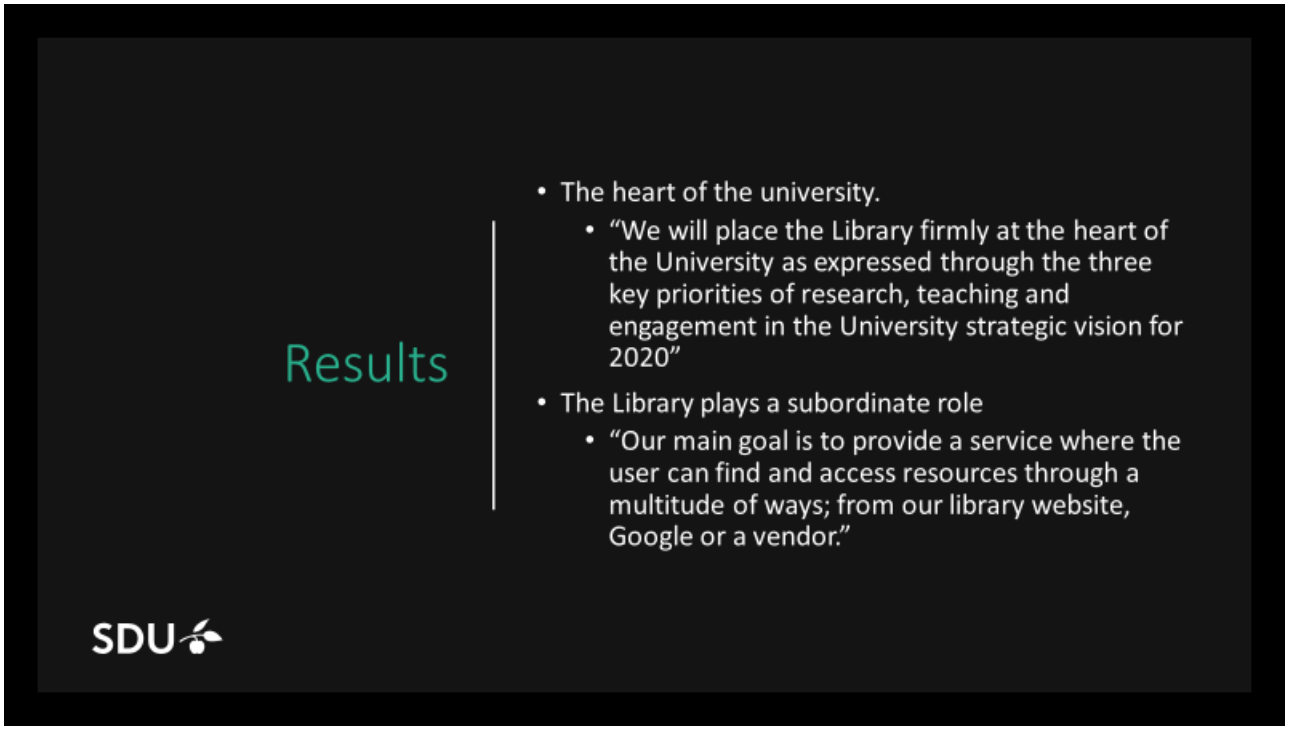


Furthermore, the Literature on vision statements in general agree that a vision statement must meet 8

criteria: It must be concise, have a time horizon, be future oriented, be stable, challenging, abstract and inspiring. We have carried out an open coding of the vision statements to determine to what extend these criteria were met.



All except one vision statement contain a clear reference to the mother institution. Most of them either in the beginning or at end giving the importance of the relation extra emphasis. Most of them also contain a reference to the strategy of the mother institution with which the library claims to be aligned. This is in accordance with the recommendations of literature on strategic work in academic libraries. Only one mentions cooperation and shared services with other Libraries. This is quite surprising as one would think that close ties with similar institutions would strengthen the position of each library and enhance the possibilities of developing new services.



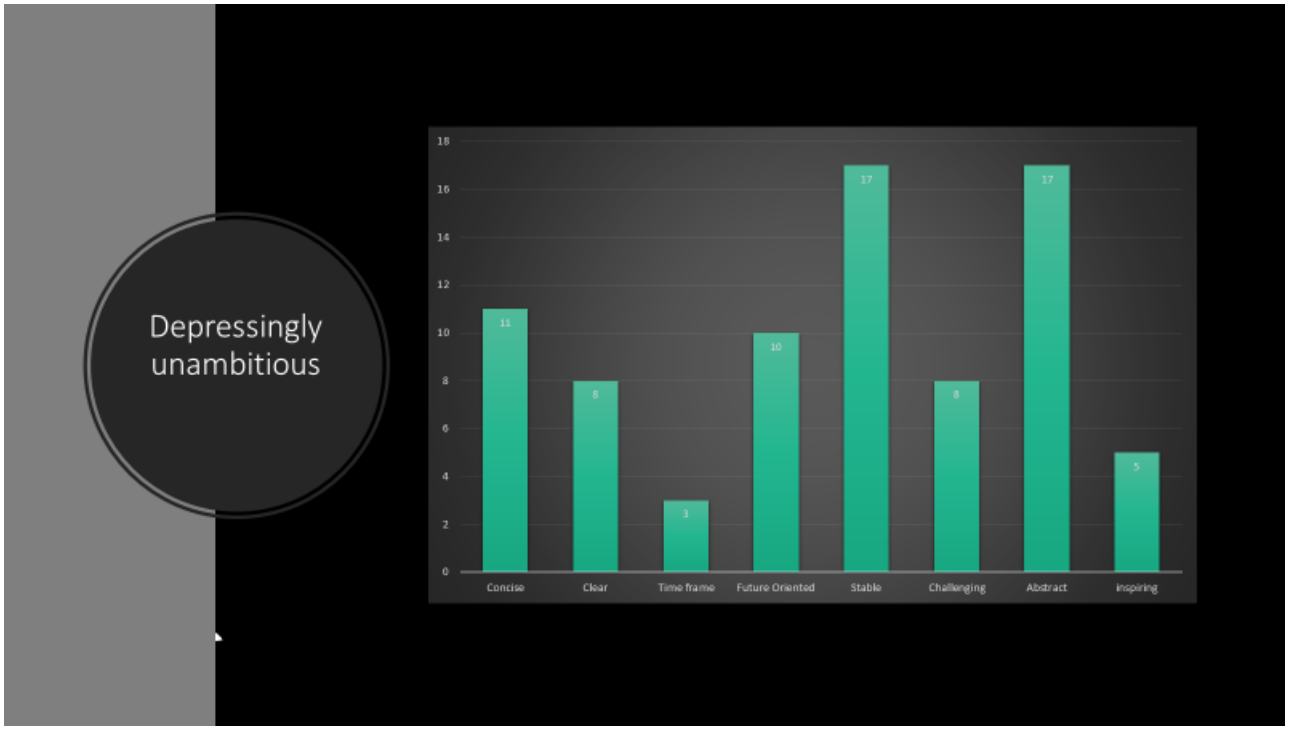
Maybe this has to do with the traditional way the library sees itself: No less than five of the visions are referring to the metaphor of the library as the heart of the university. Lancaster University Library express it this way

> "We will place the Library firmly at the heart of the University as expressed through the three key priorities of research, teaching and engagement in the University strategic vision for 2020"

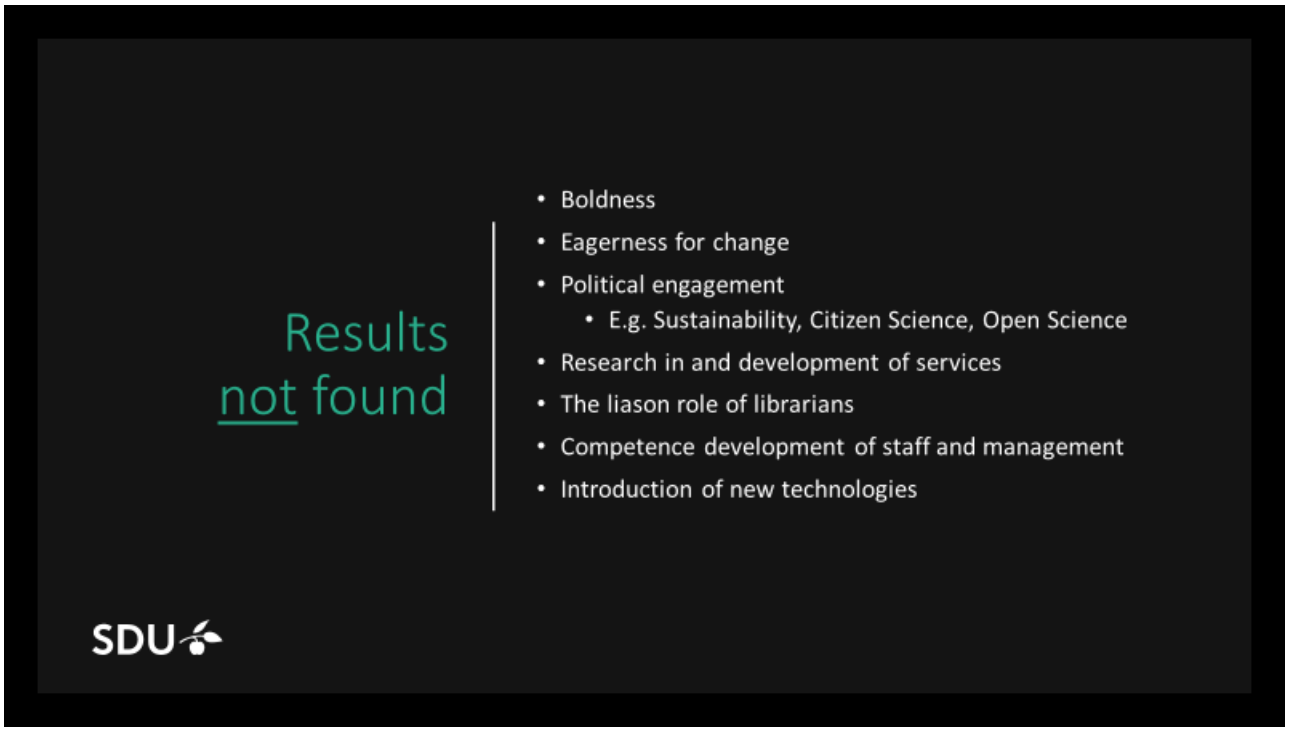
It is a nice metaphor, but it has some connotational difficulties, since sharing your heart with many means that you are heading downwards on the moral slide.

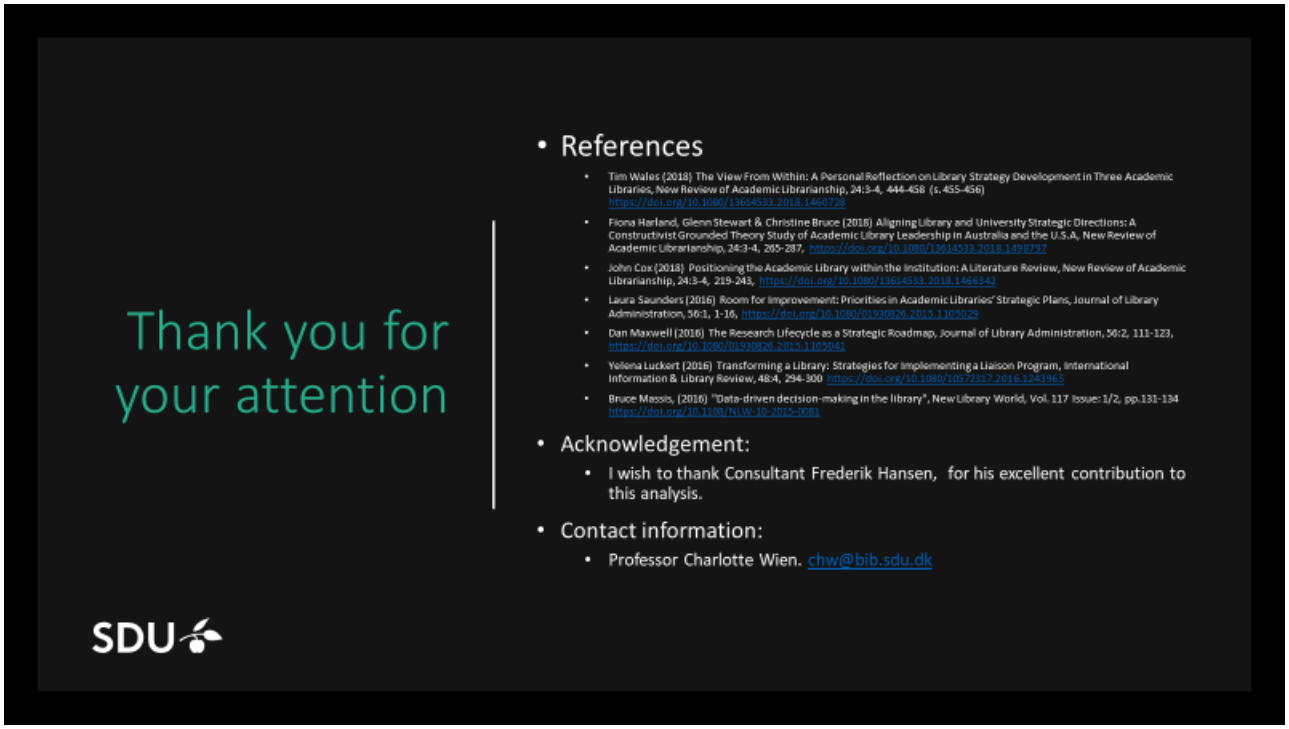
Central to most of the vision statements are terms like service, meeting needs or providing support. All underlining the subordinate role of the library having the purpose of *serving* others. Here is an example of how unambitious some of the libraries are:

> "Our main goal is to provide a service where the user can find and access resources through a multitude of ways; from our library website, Google or a vendor."



Looking at to what extend the vision statements meet the 8 vision statement criteria the result is quite disappointing. Only one – EUI Library – can be said to meet all of them. The only criteria met by all statements is “stable” and “abstract” - which probably is not a good thing in this matter, if only those two are met. Very few has a time frame and less than one third can be said to be inspiring.



Almost completely absent is boldness, eagerness for change, political engagement, research in and development of new services, there is nothing on sustainability, citizen science, the liason role of librarians and only one mentions Open Science. Nor is there much on Competence development of staff and management or introduction of new technologies like robots and gadgets.

In conclusion the answer my research question - what characterizes current vision statements of European research libraries - is in short: Lack of vision, ambition, originality and creativity. No inspiring dreams and nothing for the staff to do a little extra every day to achieve. Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a lot of work to do if we want to be able to make our libraries move. And we must, because standing still will get us killed.