



The Soul of the Search: Why People Still Matter in the Digital Age

By Sarah Howard

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Conference Keynote Address

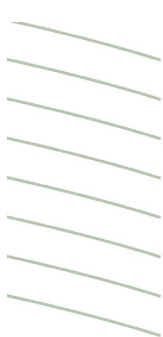


Every night, before I go to bed, usually earlier than the rest of my family, I ask Google Home¹ to turn off the bedroom lights. I have installed Google Home speakers in the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen to help me access information anytime I need it. I suspect my poor next-door neighbours are tired of hearing me say "Hey Google, turn off the lights". "Hey Google, what is the weather like tomorrow", "Hey Google, play a Dolly Parton song".

Google Home almost always does what I ask. Without me lifting a finger. When it doesn't, we then have a little back and forth banter with me usually wondering why I just didn't do the task myself in the first place. I always say "thank you," and Google Home always acknowledges me for doing so. I think this is important.

When I wake up each morning, my phone and watch are fully charged. If not, it's going to be a frustrating morning. A day without digital devices? Almost catastrophic. My

¹ https://home.google.com/intl/en_au/welcome/



smartwatch tells me I need to push harder during my morning workout, and it is correct because now I don't even get out of bed to turn the lights off at night. Throughout the day and night, it logs my steps, heart rate, and sleep. Honestly, I really dislike how it tells me to exercise more; however, it has improved my fitness and keeps me on track. I also appreciate how my watch and phone can discretely advise me when my next meeting is and enables me to pay for groceries without needing to use cash.

Before leaving home for work, I usually activate our robot vacuum cleaner, hands-free of course. I can ask Google Home or use an App. The sound of the vacuum usually awakens the rest of the family to get moving, so, helping me in more than one way. If I forget, I can activate the vacuum from work, and have it clean the floors without anyone home. Love it.

I use my electric car to get to work. Each time I jump into the car it recognises me and adjusts the seat, sets the temperature, turns on the wind screen wipers if raining, and displays the battery range. Nothing like my old Toyota Corona could do. Hopefully I charged it overnight. If not, it's going to be a frustrating morning. Especially if I also forgot to charge my phone and watch.

On the way to work, Waze² finds the best route to whichever campus I'm heading to that day. We have six libraries at Griffith University³ and Waze also warns me about speed camera locations. For people like me who need some extra navigational assistance, it is wonderful. Occasionally it makes some odd decisions and takes me on some interesting journeys, but Waze is a great direction application.

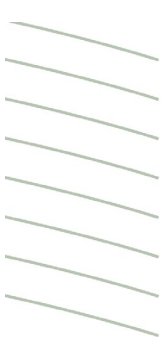
On the way to work my podcasts usually kick in, giving me a chance to sneak in some professional development. My current favourite is *Indigenising the Curriculum in Practice*⁴ with Professor Tracey Bunda and Associate Professor Katelyn Barney from University of Queensland (UQ)⁵. I highly recommend it. Tracey and Katelyn have conversations with a variety of UQ academics sharing how they are changing their curriculum to embed Indigenous Knowledges. I have learnt so much from them. Although I haven't tried it enough yet, I also love that artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as Google's

² <https://www.waze.com/>

³ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/campuses-facilities>

⁴ <https://indigenisingcurriculum.podbean.com/>

⁵ <https://uq.edu.au/>



NotebookLM⁶ can create podcasts. Turning documents into verbal discussions to help save time and prepare for meetings that day is fantastic.

In addition to podcasts, my car can also remind me of calendar entries and what my day looks like on my way to work, helping me prepare. When I arrive at work, I swipe in with my phone and open my laptop. AI even helps me to manage my emails. Eighty percent of my meetings are now online, due to flexible work arrangements. AI can even transcribe the meeting notes. There is nothing worse than note taking. Within minutes, I can share the notes with colleagues. Live captions also make meetings a lot more inclusive.

The data I need each day is available through Microsoft Power BI⁷ dashboards. These visual tools help me to understand trends such as service usage, space occupancy, and digital access. Digital does the counting, I do the interpreting. It helps me to see opportunities. Do we need more quiet spaces? Earlier or later opening hours? More support for researchers to publish Open Access articles? The Griffith Read and Publish Agreements Journal Finder (GRAPA)⁸ Power Bi dashboard and was built by Ryan Weymouth, a Griffith University librarian. Ryan brought multiple data sources together into a single screen to help researchers and librarians locate high quality journals to publish in that support Open Access. Over 10,000 journals are listed.

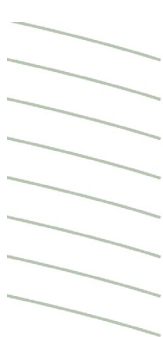
Griffith University is opening a new Brisbane City campus in 2027, complete with a new library. We are very excited. This campus will focus on law, business and information technology (IT). We won't have lots of books on the shelves, mainly due to the resource needs of the law, business, and IT students and academics, who prefer digital. We will, nonetheless, provide a help desk service and lots of space for learning and research. As we get closer to our opening, my Team and I are working closely with the architects and facilities Team. Mapping out details such where all the in-demand power points and USB ports will be located. Instead of multiple site visits to do this, I can use a virtual tour of the construction zone via my laptop or virtual reality headset to view the 360 images. When we open, please come visit, I'd love to show you around. It's going to be special.

Throughout my workday, I am grateful for the digital options I that assist me. I use Generative AI to enhance and fine tune emails and documents. It is time I can spend thinking strategically instead of

⁶ <https://blog.google/technology/ai/notebooklm-audio-overviews/>

⁷ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/power-platform/products/power-bi>

⁸ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/library/research-publishing/publishing/open-access-publishing>



hunting for commas and typos. One day I will no doubt have a digital twin that will help me keep up to date with the ever-changing higher education and library environments. It will look after many of the digital parts of my life, so that I can focus on the important parts.

But...

As much as I love the digital tools, I also love switching off my laptop, arriving home, and relaxing with a great book. Hardback, of course. The robot vacuum has already cleaned the floors. So, I am guilt free.

Libraries have been technology rich for some time. Cataloguing systems, databases, RFID, online resources etc. etc. Librarians have remained relevant and needed. Around the time I commenced my career, Google entered the world. Many people were concerned about the impact search engines would have on libraries and librarians. Turns out, it made us more relevant. We help people navigate algorithms, synonyms, evaluate content and sources. I could go on and on. Librarians are still here.

Our large print serial collections have disappeared, becoming new student study spaces, as online journals exploded. In 2024 the Griffith Library⁹ community downloaded almost six million articles from the databases we subscribe to. Thanks to the complex and unethical structure of publishing articles and books, librarians are still here. It is becoming more complicated for our communities, with AI tools now assisting predatory publishers to create editorial boards, websites, fake peer reviews, all to confuse authors and researchers. Librarians are needed more than ever.

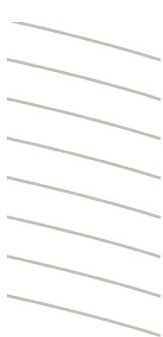
Very recently the Council of Australasian University Librarians¹⁰ (CAUL) announced that our negotiations with the publisher Elsevier¹¹ had paused. This was due to a "pricing, agreement structure and inclusion of gold open access journals" disagreement (Universities Australia, 2025). The impact for university libraries, such as Griffith, means that we won't have online access to the Elsevier journal content within the ScienceDirect¹² platform from January 1, 2026. As one of our biggest journal content providers, you can imagine there is a lot of work happening behind the scenes, as Griffith Library prepares for the impact on our current program and trimester one commencing in March 2026. We are collaborating with

⁹ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/library>

¹⁰ <https://caul.edu.au/>

¹¹ <https://www.elsevier.com/en-au>

¹² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/>



both the library and university communities to explore all options to ensure we continue to support our students and staff; and we will.

The number of eBooks has replaced the number of print books in most libraries. Griffith Library has over two million digital titles. Librarians help our communities connect to eBook applications and eReaders, troubleshoot, technical support, explain digital rights management restrictions, and turn on accessibility features. Librarians are still here.

In December 2022, I was the acting University Librarian at Queensland University of Technology¹³ (QUT). A few days before our Christmas break, all printers across the university (including all the printers in the library) began printing a ransom message. We were under a cyber-attack. Within hours we had shut down the QUT Library¹⁴ website and all online resources to prevent the hackers accessing content. The next couple of months, including the Christmas and New Year period, was tough. Digital was not an option, although we were very grateful to the State Library of Queensland¹⁵ for providing an alternative access option to many of our students, and we were very grateful for our print resources and those of other libraries. But we got through it, and QUT Library is stronger than ever.

I don't know about you, but I am constantly asked (even by colleagues), "will artificial intelligence replace librarians?". I asked Microsoft CoPilot¹⁶ this question, and it shared "AI can assist with repetitive tasks, cataloguing, data analysis, changing workflows. AI can summarise, draft, count, classify, predict" (Microsoft, 2025). Impressive!

Interestingly, when I asked ChatGPT¹⁷ the same question, it shared "AI is another revolution. Librarians are designed for revolutions" (OpenAI, 2025). I can't agree more, especially digital revolutions. We survived the online catalogue, Google, eBooks, cyber-attacks... Bring it on, AI.

ChatGPT did, however, also state "AI will not replace librarians. But librarians who use AI will replace those who don't" (OpenAI, 2025). This is important to note. Just as we have updated our digital skills to

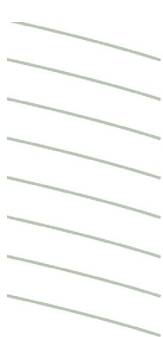
¹³ <https://www.qut.edu.au/>

¹⁴ <https://www.library.qut.edu.au/>

¹⁵ <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/>

¹⁶ <https://copilot.microsoft.com/>

¹⁷ <https://chatgpt.com/>



help our communities with emerging online environments, we need to also keep up to date. The AI landscape is constantly changing and perhaps overwhelming to keep up with. My suggestion is to join or form a community of practice with colleagues to share information. Griffith Library has an AI Microsoft Teams Channel¹⁸, and we share learnings, good and bad.

Let's not, however, forget what AI can't do. It can't build and nurture a library team culture, mentor staff, or create belonging. AI may replace tasks. But not trust. Not judgment. Not empathy. Not leadership. It can enhance us. It can augment what we do. But it cannot be us. When we automate the repetitive, when AI takes care of the background, we get time back to listen, support, anticipate, imagine, and create.

ANZLTA has always been a reminder to me of how special a library community is. I especially remember the 2011 Brisbane conference. I learned so much from my ANZTLA colleagues. Information and humanity that I share with my library community to this day. The ANZTLA EJournal, a wonderful open source of information for the world to access. The ANZTLA Scholarship opportunities to connect with colleagues outside of Australia and Aotearoa; and of course, the Australasian Union List of Serials in Theological Collections. I learnt to index thanks to ANZTLA.

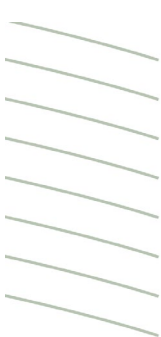
Don't get me wrong. AI is exciting. But technology has not made my work less human. It has made it *more* human. Because when automation removes the repetitive, technology gifts us time for relationships, creativity, critical thinking, and vision. That is the work librarians want to do. AI clears the administrative fog. It gives us what librarians never have enough of. Time. Time to listen. Time to think. Time to connect.

There are numerous AI tools to choose from, aren't there? I am currently using Copilot, Claude, ChatGPT, etc.; but these tools and algorithms don't know when people are uncertain, or anxious, or stuck. They don't notice the spark in the eyes when something finally clicks. They don't gently encourage people to think critically, or to pause and reflect. Librarians do.

AI can't see the confusion in a student's eyes when they say they understand but clearly don't. It can't sense the underlying anxiety behind a simple question. It can't recognise that someone is asking for information but needs help narrowing down the topic.

According to Hegarty et al. (2025), almost half of Australians have used GenAI. Most of our communities using AI are in their 20s, 30s and 40s. They are already exploring how AI can augment their learning and research. It doesn't mean, however, that they don't need assistance on how to do so using critical thinking.

¹⁸ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-au/microsoft-teams/log-in>



Those in their 60s and 70s may also need assistance exploring how AI can enhance their learning and research and enhance their digital literacy.

We live in an era of information abundance. There are billions of websites on the internet. Google processes billions of searches per day. ChatGPT can generate an essay in seconds. Students have access to databases containing millions of scholarly articles, all searchable from their phones at three in the morning.

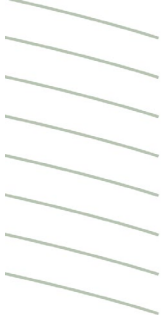
I am slowly completing my Masters in Education and understand the point of view of a student. Sitting at the kitchen table with my laptop on a weekend, the sun is out, whilst everyone else is having fun. Looking at a blank document wondering how to start that 2,000-word essay. Yes, I do use AI to help me explore ideas and augment my learning, and I am grateful for it. But I am also very aware that I can't ask AI to write my essay, create content, and damage my academic integrity. I know that many students, however, don't. They need the guidance and support when using AI.

Over the past few weeks, I have been signing multiple publisher licenses agreeing that Griffith Library won't enable our users to upload the content of the database, such as journal articles, into digital tools such as AI. Although we can't stop people from doing this, we can advise them of the usage agreements. Our current solution is to highlight this with a statement on our website¹⁹. Of course, students may not see this statement, may choose not to follow our instructions, but we are clearly showing the publishers that we trying to get the message across. Easier access to information has not meant easier understanding and deeper critical thinking. Access to information and knowing what to do with it are entirely different things. When someone asks for help with a search and we guide them not to the quick answer, but to the deeper question, that's when the soul of the search reveals itself.

So, what are we doing at Griffith Library to support our community to navigate new digital tools such as AI? Like many universities around the world, we are exploring all options. Griffith Library has partnered with others around the university, and most importantly with students, to create a central resource simply entitled Using Generative AI²⁰ for students (and academics) to refer to. The Griffith Library website is open, so please feel free to explore and reuse it. It includes our Using GenAI as a Study Tool module. A module covering tips and strategies around using Generative AI tools for planning study schedules and

¹⁹ <https://libraryguides.griffith.edu.au/az/databases?q=>

²⁰ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/library/study/digital-skills/generative-ai>



prioritising tasks, brainstorming and idea generation, exam preparation, flash card, quiz questions, memory aids.

We know students are using AI, as the data indicates, but we want to help our students (and academics) use it safely and ethically. My preference, however, is not to focus on AI Literacy but continue the journey of embedding Digital Literacy throughout the university for both students and staff. Critical thinking is essential to higher education.

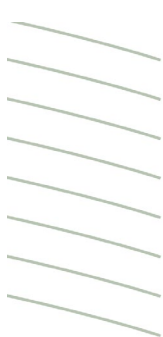
At Griffith, like many other institutions, we have an enterprise license for Microsoft CoPilot, and this is the only preferred tool because it operates as a closed system. Data is protected. Prompts and responses aren't used to train the model. CoPilot is embedded in email, Word, PowerPoint, Excel programs. As we work, it is with us all the time. CoPilot indeed. Sometimes I love it, sometimes I am frustrated by it, but I ensure that I am always experimenting with its capabilities and understand how it might be used by my Team and Griffith community.

LearnWise²¹ is Griffith University's AI-powered assistant built into our Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas²², and is currently in trial and attached to several courses. In a nutshell, it is a small pop-up chat box that appears within Canvas, when a student needs it. LearnWise helps students by answering questions about course content, assessments, study tips, campus services, and technical support. It can also clarify assignment instructions, explain academic terms, generate quizzes, and translate languages. A wonderful tool for our international students.

LearnWise does have privacy protections in place for students. An academic can't receive data from an individual student level, but academics do receive data such as trends. If, for example, LearnWise receives the same question from multiple students taking a course, such as what the weekly readings are, an academic can adjust the course content to enhance the visibility of the information needed to assist students. LearnWise is the first stop for quick answers and guidance for students. It takes workload from the busy academics. It is available 24/7 and provides support options whilst all other support services are sleeping. If it can't help, LearnWise will direct students to a university service such as Griffith Library for the help needed.

²¹ <https://www.learnwise.ai/>

²² <https://www.griffith.edu.au/vle-help/student/basics/welcome-to-canvas>



It is, therefore, important that all online Griffith Library information is up to date, so that AI agents such as LearnWise share the correct information with students. This is an important task for the Griffith Library Team. We may have some queries taken from us from LearnWise such as simple referencing queries, but we now have the time to ensure information is updated regularly. Otherwise, garbage in, garbage out.

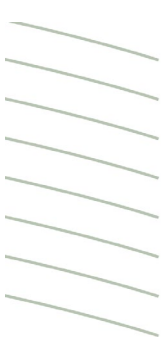
Cogniti²³ is also under trial at Griffith. It is the AI agent created by University of Sydney researchers²⁴, led by Professor Danny Liu. The difference between LearnWise and Cogniti is that LearnWise is a general "shelf ready" assistant, whereas Cogniti is used to develop and build individual AI agents for specific course materials. Cogniti is an augmented tutor for the student. At Griffith, Cogniti is helping both students and academics to complete placement documentation, peer review reflections, and simulate environments. It is currently trialled in 30 subjects across all faculties. With Cogniti, students have the additional support they need to navigate the content they are learning. A virtual tutor. For academics, like LearnWise, Cogniti can provide the 24/7 support to their students, that academics can't. And just like LearnWise, Griffith Library is ensuring our content is up to date and ready for Cogniti to access and share with students.

The third AI agent that is used at Griffith, including within Griffith Library, is a virtual assistant for general tier one queries. This AI assistant is located on all Griffith help webpages. We continue to have Griffith Library Staff rostered for the Library Chat service, as we are monitoring the success of the virtual assistant. At this stage, looking at the data, it will be some time before we even consider completely offering only a virtual assistant; but we do note that some of our tier one tasks will be taken over by the AI agent, and we are preparing our workforce by helping them to upskill in other areas. Griffith Library can then focus on the other services that we don't currently have enough time for, such as more engagement activities within our physical and online spaces.

Although we do have this new digital tool, we continue to offer assistance through channels such as library help desks, phone and email, all of which are healthy. Last year we had 32,000 queries on the help desk alone. When someone comes to us with a question, it's a dialogue, a collaboration. We're not just finding answers, we're helping people discover what they're really asking.

²³ <https://cogniti.ai/>

²⁴ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2025/06/03/cogniti-an-ai-stunt-double-for-teachers-wins-afr-ai-award.html>



In an era of misinformation, disinformation, and AI generated content that can be indistinguishable from human created content, trust is our most valuable currency. Librarians don't just help people find things, we help them think critically about what they find.

Yes, my day is full of devices and data and dashboards and automation, and AI. From the moment I go to bed until the moment I get home from work. But none of it replaces the purpose of my role. Librarians are the human interface between people and the digital world. Our libraries are more critical than ever. Searching is more than finding, it's about curiosity, meaning, and connection.

Echoes of the past...creating stories for the future.

Librarians are the soul of the search, and that is why libraries will not just survive this next evolution of digital. We will lead it.

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