

Partners in Pathways to Success: Subject Librarian Support to the University Learning, Teaching and Research at Victoria University of Wellington

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Abstract

Research and 'learning and teaching' form two of the eight key goals of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. To align the Library services with the University's core values and future directions, a Library Services Review was undertaken in 2010 to re-purpose the library's services and resource delivery. The review led to the Library Services Change Proposal in 2011. The changes set out in the proposal are now being implemented. This paper looks at the changing landscape in the Library at Victoria University of Wellington. It also discusses the support provided by the subject librarians for research, learning and teaching in the changed structure, working in partnerships with faculty, students and other units in the University.

Keywords: research, teaching, learning, subject librarians, academic libraries

A changing landscape

Libraries are changing. They need to if they wish to survive. For some years, the Victoria University Library remained fairly stable. Change was incremental and sat comfortably within existing structures. However it became increasingly apparent that external forces from both within and without the University were requiring a fundamental shift in how the library was positioned and perceived in terms of its collections, space and delivery of services.

Marked changes have occurred in how users access library collections. Wide use of technology has led to the transition from shelf-browsing to remote online and desktop delivery of information. Librarians are no longer perceived to be gatekeepers of information. Libraries may still be perceived as gateways, but users have found it less necessary to interact with librarians. It would appear that users' needs are therefore being satisfied although they may not be getting the optimal help that librarians are capable of providing. In common with other academic libraries, Victoria University library has experienced precisely this situation.

Fifteen years ago the Victoria University library collection was dominated by its print books and journal holdings.

In spite of a shift from print to electronic formats in the years since, the print collection has continued to grow. Indeed, between 2005 and 2010, the library doubled its investment not only in e-resources but also in books and periodicals.

The continuing growth of the print collection has inevitably led to significant space concerns. Two years ago, the University Librarian reported rather soberly that it would require one additional floor to be added every three years to accommodate the growing print collection. (Roberts, 2011).

A two fold challenge

The challenge for the library is thus twofold. It has to manage its print and electronic collections, attempting to achieve optimum use of finite space within budgetary constraints. It also has to ensure that its users make the best use of both its space and its collections.

Users who physically use the library space are almost as likely to be queuing for computers as they are to be browsing shelves. Of course, users still go to libraries to find their books and journals but increasingly it is the place where the computers are located! Users are redefining their own use of the library. The library at Victoria University has recognised that it is the library's responsibility to ensure that user expectations are met and to be proactive in meeting user needs. And it is prudent for the library to ensure that its users recognise the benefits of collections, spaces and services derived from library initiatives.

The recent campus redevelopment project at Victoria University, which has included its library, has given an opportunity for the library to redefine its space, reconfigure its collections, and repurpose its service delivery.

Technology has taken over roles traditionally occupied by librarians. Many researchers do not now use the physical library and some are not even aware that they are accessing material courtesy of the library. Some years ago a Victoria doctoral student remarked to one of the authors of this paper that he graduated without using the library, failing to recognise that he was accessing the library resources via his desk top. A former University Librarian at Victoria was so upset at hearing similar stories that he requested vendors to include the Victoria University logo. Branding was an early attempt to establish the library's identity and connect with the users, but much more is having to be done to make the invisible librarian visible and valuable to researchers.

The way forward - the library's response

Changing user behaviour and evolving learning, teaching and research needs of the University led to a Library Services Review in 2010 to re-purpose its services and resource delivery. In the light of this, the Library Services Change proposal in 2011 saw major changes in how the library services were to be organized and delivered. These changes are now being implemented. Library staff are clearly a valuable asset and an important resource in meeting the challenges. Amongst the library staff, subject librarians have been expected to play a significant role in strengthening relationships between the library and the University community - the academic staff, students and other stakeholders, both internal and external. The subject librarian therefore has a key role to play in ensuring that the library users make the best use of its space, its collections, and its services.

Clearly, subject librarians are required to possess a range of skills to perform in this role. This includes a good knowledge of the subject / discipline's specific research tools and the ability to understand the culture of the disciplines for which they are responsible. A sound knowledge of the research and teaching interests of staff, and trends in the disciplines for which they are responsible is obviously required. Knowledge of citation management tools, and skills in designing teaching and learning and instructional tools is a further expectation. And of course, good communication skills, which include active listening skills and empathy, are indispensable for such a role. Finally, the ability to market and promote such skills is itself a crucial skill. There is now a requirement to build on these core skills especially in the use of technology. This involves greater familiarity with online learning management systems and new digital technologies to create online teaching and learning tools. This entails knowledge of the discipline and patron needs to design appropriate tools and resources that clients can use themselves.

In essence, subject librarians at Victoria University are committed to provide targeted support for learning, teaching and research along with the responsibility for collection development and management in their subject areas. The focus is on delivering a client-centred experience.

In order to achieve these goals the library has developed two strategies which focus on supporting teaching, and learning and research at Victoria University.

Reaching and teaching, strategies and engagement

The library's preferred term for information literacy is "research skills development." Information literacy with connotations of illiteracy before one is exposed to such a session may appear mildly offensive! "Research skills development" is deemed to be immediately more meaningful to those on the receiving end. Subject librarians at Victoria have been providing library instruction, ranging from one to one and group consultations, through tutorials and seminars, to workshops on reference management tools. As has been widely observed, research competencies are best taught at point of need and in curriculum integrated contexts. This means that standalone or adhoc research skills presentations at the beginning of the year when students are not familiar with course expectations and class assignments are unlikely to be as effective as point of need engagements.

The difficulty with curriculum integrated skills development however is obvious. It is time-consuming and labour-intensive, it requires resourcing and academic buy-in. The library is considering measures to address this. One approach is to create a generic information competence and research skills tool kit which can be customized and personalized to suit the targeted audience.

As widely observed across libraries, reference desk queries have dropped markedly in recent years. Ross and Seyenny have suggested that this could be attributed to term papers being replaced by exams and group projects thereby requiring less research (Ross & Seyenny, 2008, p.149). This is not however the case at Victoria University library. A better explanation, one also suggested by these writers, is the availability of the Web. Indeed, we all recognise that reference queries which once required librarian intervention, can now be addressed with a few clicks on the keyboard. In addition, the

library-subscribed databases have become increasingly easy to use. This has led to a user perception that librarian mediation is pointless.

But the fact is that although intended for end-user searching, these sources often at least need introduction. So in spite of the plethora of resources, users are not making the best use of these tools. There is some suspicion that certain users launch into these tools confident that because they are getting results they must be using the tools in an optimum way! To address this concern such measures as course related class presentations are adopted. In addition, subject librarians have taken up the challenge of producing online tutorials to connect the library's resources with the users. To give them greater visibility these tools are being made available on social networking sites such as YouTube.

Due to time pressure, a heavy work load and other constraints, researchers and students are often satisfied with an adequate answer than an optimal one - a concept which has become known as "satisficing" (see for instance, Prabha et al). They seek information tools and resources easily accessible and easily used. This is hardly surprising and it does imply the need for personalised, targeted and customised services for them. Subject librarians are committed to teaching information search competencies required for their study and research.

The library learning and teaching strategy recognises that the subject librarian's time has to be freed up to accommodate the new directions and initiatives. The three-tiered service model is one strategy being adopted in this regard. It is currently being developed and will shortly be piloted.

Tier 1 covers self-service and brief face to face encounters. Tier 2 involves up to 15 minute engagements which could involve basic user education but certainly any library-related needs that can in principle be addressed adequately in 15 minutes! Tier 3 involves more significant research consultations with the subject librarians who may or may not also be staffed to serve in tiers 1 and 2.

This structure should not require the student in the tier 2 engagement informing the "desk librarian" that they need more in-depth help. With "library anxiety" and embarrassment, how many users will have the perseverance or resolve to pursue their question further? Rather, this structure relies heavily on the desk librarian being able to recognise that the desired help may not have been provided. But since they may not be knowledgeable in the area, they may assume they have satisfactorily answered the question. To be fair, this was a liability of the traditional reference desk model as well. Even if the query has been adequately unpacked, the reference librarian may perhaps be providing assistance which whilst helpful, falls short of the greater insight which comes from an in-depth knowledge and experience of the subject.

The subject librarians therefore have an important role in training the staff at tier 1 and 2 with a view to making them sensitive to the dynamics that may be occurring in such transactions.

Unfortunately, a number of questions raised at the library's reference desk result from such things as uncertainty or ambiguity over library policies and processes, poorly designed computer interfaces and lack of signage. Interestingly, as the library

successfully addresses these issues, there will be a further drop in such reference queries. Presumably, this should entail a corresponding increase in the ratio of more sophisticated queries. Just how many will fall into that category however is contingent on whether the library is seen to be able to deliver on those kinds of queries. In remarking upon scepticism that librarians can indeed deliver real benefit, Ross and Seyenny (2008, p. 147) have suggested that “information literacy classes are attended only when mandatory and open workshops are ignored. Thousands of students successfully complete their degrees without the benefit of a single information literacy session.”

But of course students graduate! They might however have performed better had they had better support! On a number of occasions the authors of this paper have heard students comment rather wistfully that they had wished they had known of the existence or value of certain sources earlier in their study. These observations reinforce once again the subject librarians’ role and the need to maximise their performance under the new structure.

With a view to this, and in particular a focus on postgraduate students and researchers, subject librarians are increasingly conducting research consultations and sessions tailored to individual and subject specific research needs. In this context, librarians still require consultation spaces for personalized interaction but also instructional rooms with necessary equipment to provide hands on training to give the users satisfactory application based learning.

In the reconfiguration of space, the library is adopting an “integrated service model” as the central hub for key services in the University which includes student health, information technology services, and the learning support centre. If the library is a central place to visit for key information, it will certainly become increasingly visible and central to the University’s activities. This initiative is clearly client centred for it raises the profile of the library and results in saving students’ time (they do not have to traipse widely to get the information they want).

In spite of an obvious benefit, this initiative may lead to concerns that because library space is being occupied by other services, the special identity of the library will be lost, the library will lose its unique identity and become a “legacy asset.” Similar points have been raised by others. (Ross & Sennyey, 2008, p. 150).

When concerns are raised in this regard, they are almost entirely addressed however by the value added assets of the collections and the specific library services as marketed and promoted by the library, in particular by subject librarians.

Relationship matters

Experienced researchers often work on their own and are confident in their use of the library’s resources. Other ‘veteran’ academics find it unnecessary to keep up with the most recent library developments preferring their own time-honoured and tested means of keeping up with the literature. Such people rarely have need to visit the library or they successfully navigate the library on their own, skirting those areas with which they are unfamiliar. The subject librarians are trying to find ways to reach out to these individuals to keep them abreast of such developments as bibliometrics and

citation searching which are vital tools in the context of performance-based funding and scholarly communication. One attempt is to develop a programme for the researchers which focuses on such tools.

Other ways of reaching the faculty are through newsletters, attending faculty and programme meetings, presenting library reports, taking an active interest in faculty activities and organizing library events in partnership with other units in the University. These events include book launches, literary meetings, talks by academics and researchers, thematic exhibitions and celebration of events which are of interest to the wider University community. This proactive approach has the benefit of strengthening relationships.

Consultation, communication, collaboration and cooperation are important when we adopt a client-centred approach. Relationships matter to initiate and implement changes.

Whilst the library undergoes change, the faculty need confidence in their subject librarians. There is a need for librarians and faculty to have a shared understanding of the issues and challenges related to the library. Subject librarians at Victoria University have played a proactive role in these library-initiated changes convincing academic staff that the changes were justified and in the best interests of users in streamlining and rationalising its collections and spaces. This entailed the relegation of material to offsite storage, the reassessment and deselection of the library's video collection, the periodical subscription review, the deselection of print journals with permanent electronic access, the integration of the limited loan and big book collection into the main collection, and the proposed conversion of closed reserve to open reserve.

Such changes are quite significant departures from previous practice and have occurred in consultation with faculty. The element of trust played an important part in allaying concerns. To be sure, not all academic staff have been entirely won over to some changes but most have seen the benefits.

As an example, there was some concern from academic staff and some librarians that the offsite relegation project would effectively be creating an undergraduate collection of high use but not necessarily research material. This criticism was however offset by the library's heavy investment in electronic resources, in part advanced by subject librarians, which have provided access to research materials hitherto inaccessible.

The library's digital collections, which include the institutional repository, have the potential to raise the visibility of the library and also the research potential of the University. Subject librarians play a significant role in promoting the repository as a research tool. This has created further opportunities for partnership.

“Enticing” the library space

There was an assumption that with laptop technology, users would abandon the library's physical space for their own flats and lounges. This has not happened. Students are coming to the library with their laptops; others are queuing for computers.

Libraries are still attracting users. Why? In part, because students prefer to study among fellow students.

In addition, although postgraduate researchers are virtual users of library resources and the University does provide some departmental space for postgraduates, they clearly require access to content which is not yet electronically accessible. Some postgraduates do however feel that the library is crowded with undergraduates and does not provide an ideal environment for them in which to work. The library is making an effort to ensure that dedicated spaces are provided for researchers in the library building with a postgraduate reading-room being considered along with quiet study rooms and silent zoning.

Precisely what shape the post graduate facilities will take is as yet undecided. But there is some expectation that subject librarians will staff this facility because they are the first point of contact for postgraduates.

The fact is though that because undergraduates do not have dedicated study spaces the physical library is increasingly geared to meeting their particular study needs. A café and social and networking facilities are also being incorporated into the library design along with group study rooms for collaborative group work.

Some academics have expressed concern that the library space is being given over to social space at the cost to bookshelf space. They also prefer a quiet working environment to the click of keyboards. For some the library is therefore perceived to be catering largely for undergraduates.

These observations are in fact testimony to the value faculty and researchers accord the library in terms of its centrality as a research and teaching resource. It is important that the library responds to such concerns and provides a rationale and justification for the direction the library is taking. This justification needs to use concepts that appeal to faculty - the prospect of increased patronage and library usage. It matters little that the student is surfing the net, better that they do it in the library surrounded by scholarship and (positive?) peer influence than in their flat! A failure to pursue this direction means students are increasingly alienated from library space.

The excellent student will usually excel regardless of the environment (although provision must be made for them) but the middling student should be catered for too. A conducive learning and teaching environment facilitates communication, and enables connection and collaboration with student peers. This should not be perceived as an either-or but both-and. The library needs to provide facilities and resources which enable the high achievers to perform at a high level, but also an environment which nurtures the more average student and which encourages them to achieve their best.

Marketing makes a difference

Prior to the arrival of the internet academic libraries had no real competition. Students and faculty relied heavily on librarians to instruct them in seemingly arcane library systems and processes. This situation has demonstrably changed with users comparing such processes with the ease of access and immediate gratification that the

internet offers at the cost of the quality of information. Stiff competition from external agencies requires the library to be innovative, competitive and competent. The subject librarian has a key role in marketing the library as such.

The subject librarian also has a role in soliciting feedback from users. Will the library succeed in pursuing its goals? Evaluation and measuring performance are essential. The library needs to know what is being done well, and what needs to be done better.

Complaints and a remedy

Kroll and Forsman have noted the challenge faced by libraries. They point out that researchers are not aware of the significant transformation that libraries have undergone in recent decades particularly in regard to the provision of digital access. They complain: "Researchers do not realize what expertise librarians have to offer their users, are uninformed about services offered, and have little idea what the library might do in the future.... Researchers require practical evidence of direct value of research tools and services." (Kroll & Forsman, 2010, p.18).

Subject librarians can help to remedy this situation by producing discipline specific tools and resources, providing targeted and personalized services, and getting faculty buy-in. This entails librarians embracing the future and developing skills to make successful partnerships with users in providing pathways to success.

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