

# Practice-based research in a learning organisation

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**W**e will become an exemplary learning organisation' is boldly stated in the latest *Plan for 2000–2005* of Curtin University of Technology's Library and Information Service (LIS). Curtin LIS felt confident in stating this as a strategic objective for the next five years, based on recent experiences and success.

An underlying tenet of any learning organisation is that learning from past experience is a vital component of planning for the future. At Curtin University we believe that not reinventing the wheel is important and we use research to inform our current and future professional practice.

Acquiring appropriate knowledge through research and interpreting this as useful information are critical for organisational survival. The following examples illustrate how we put this into practice.

The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (<http://john.curtin.edu.au>) with its development of new and innovative products and services is an example of how research has informed our thinking. We have gone further and developed new models and products, such as the Electronic Research Archive at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/era/>, which allows online access to images, text and audio.

Learning organisations are adept at building a skilled workforce, and staff training and development are important to ensure that staff possess the capabilities to perform at maximum potential. Fortunately, Curtin University has a policy of supporting staff undertaking formal award courses, through the payment of Higher Education Contribution Scheme fees and through study leave. This means that library staff are often engaged in relevant research and bring this knowledge back to the workplace. It also means that staff are well qualified — we have two with doctorates, and many with postgraduate qualifications.

Curtin LIS is involved in several major research-based projects, both nationally and at state level. These projects normally come with external funding, which enables us to release staff to engage in the research and development work in-



*The Curtin LIS Systems and Technology team responsible for much of the development and implementation work on the Electronic Research Archive.*

*From left: Peter Green, Tom Tallon, Steven Mosiejuk, Gary Brennand, Noel Dawson and Libero Parisotto.*

involved. The spin-offs are not only in the product outcomes, but also in enhancing learning and knowledge for individuals and for our organisation.

An example at the national level is the Australian Digital Theses program at <http://lisweb.curtin.edu.au/theses/>. This started as an Australian Research Council Research Infrastructure Equipment and Facilities (RIEF) grant to seven universities in 1997 with the aim of developing a database of Australian theses. The project is now operational and Curtin's LIS and Office of Research and Development are working together to make available on the web as many Curtin theses as possible.

The Australian Digital Theses project is also a good example of learning from the experience and research done by others. The project drew heavily on work performed in the United States, particularly by Virginia Tech. The usefulness of partners of this standing is significant.

We have also established a useful relationship with North Carolina State University (NCSU). NCSU is one of the pioneers in portal developments for libraries and Curtin LIS is one of the development partners. Through this productive arrangement we are using their

expertise rather than starting from scratch and will soon be launching our own version of a 'My Library' portal, <http://hegel.lib.ncsu.edu/development/mylibrary/>.

Gaining access to external research funding is a highly competitive but often necessary process, occasionally requiring competition with other units in one's own institution. At times there is a requirement to collaborate with other universities. To be successful, applications require vision, together with a fair bit of negotiating, proposal writing, lobbying and good fortune.

A final example of our current practice-based research is the use of senior (in terms of academic progress) students in conducting a variety of surveys covering areas like client perceptions and collection use. These partnerships benefit students, who gain valuable experience, and benefit staff, who keep track of changing research methodologies and theories. The outcomes of these joint projects inform our annual planning cycle.

Hopefully these exemplars of Curtin LIS experience will prove useful to those considering embarking on practice-based research. For further information, e-mail [john@boris.curtin.edu.au](mailto:john@boris.curtin.edu.au). ■