

UQ's Biological Sciences Library

'The research library is now a learning space' was my (slightly) exaggerated claim at the recent eResearch Australasia conference to encapsulate the convergent trends which have shifted greatly the nature of the university library in the past decade. These include: the increasing availability of scholarly information in electronic format, and the seemingly insatiable demand for desktop delivery amongst academics and students; a steady decline in the use of traditional library activities such as the lending of books and answering of reference enquiries; and a marked decrease in visits to libraries by academics, particularly in the sciences. I argue that in many cases the need for an academic to visit the library reflects a failure on our part to deliver information content or library services across the network.

However, libraries have generally been the leaders on campus in the provision of services and facilities to meet the learning needs of students: we have generous opening hours, large numbers of computers, group study rooms and increasingly we flood our libraries with wireless networks.

We need to consider the future of the library as a container for physical collections, develop an agenda for retiring legacy collections, and repurpose our physical real estate as learning space. Hidden amongst this are a raft of issues, perhaps even battles, but it is important to acknowledge that we are in a transitional period in which our actions will shape our future.

Against this backdrop, and with outstanding support from Brisbane-based Wilson Architects, the University of Queensland (UQ) Library has recently opened its refurbished and extended Biological Sciences Library at UQ's St Lucia campus. The design, layout and interior of the library all reflect the prominence of learning space over physical collection.

The original library was a Robin Gibson design so typical of early 1970s' cultural and public buildings. It supported staff and students in the broad biological sciences areas and prominent research institutes. These have all been growth areas and demand for high-quality library space had grown considerably. After much negotiation, particularly by my predecessor, Janine Schmidt, the university agreed to fund a complete remodelling of the library. The library closed in mid-2005 and reopened at the end of 2006 — library staff and clients deserve great praise for their support and patience during the considerable disruption — staff and services, and collections, were redistributed to other branches and warehouses respectively.

The refurbishment can be seen from two broad perspectives: the architect's design, and the library's response in terms of staffing, services and collections. Wilson Architects sought to maximise the benefits of the Queensland climate, replacing concrete walls with glass and creating an outdoors study area. The library extends over four floors, beginning with a welcome desk, high-use collection and computer facilities on the ground floor. These, and the outdoor study area are all connected to the coffee shop, refectory and courtyard. A wide and open stairwell leads visitors to upper floors containing yet more computers, three connected training rooms, magnificent group study rooms, a graduate study centre and, of course, collections of books and journals. Visitors have also commented on the provision of a parents' room with baby change facilities!

In responding to the opportunities offered by the new space, we have dismantled many of the conventional service points seen in academic libraries. The welcome desk acts as a triage station for many enquiries. Librarians are available on call to handle more extensive or complicated issues, as are the library's AskIT support staff. The reference desk timetable has been replaced with a roving librarian rota. Staff are scheduled to move around



the library, working with students where they are, rather than asking them to move to a service desk — a much-needed development. In the computer era, students do not want to give up their place at a workstation to seek support, nor do they wish to leave laptops and other equipment unattended. We have installed many telephones so library staff can be called upon to give assistance.

Now having supported students through one full semester of study, the new library has received immensely favourable reactions. Student visits have increased considerably. The library has become a hub for study, particularly collaborative and active learning activities, and has also become a vibrant social hub: surveys show that one in eight visit the library to meet a friend. The one notable concern has been the lack of sufficient quiet, individual study space. This poses the next design challenge for us: in a confined footprint, how do we provide much-needed and greatly appreciated group and social space and, at the same time, offer quiet facilities? One option is flexible furnishings which can be reconfigured during the semester. But that, too, will require space. Given the tremendous availability of electronic resources in biological sciences, is it time to relocate extensive back runs of journals and indexes to offsite storage, and repurpose the space for student study?

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