

UQ Library enriching the experience of Indigenous students



A Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) grant gave The University of Queensland Library the opportunity to enrich the library experience of Indigenous Australian students by enhancing the existing liaison and information skills program and also the library staff development programs.

There were a number of drivers underlying the extension of the library programs:

- The University of Queensland in mid 2007 recognised the importance of Indigenous knowledge by developing an education policy that aimed to improve the understanding of students and staff of Australian Indigenous issues. The UQ Senate has adopted a Statement of Education Principles on Indigenous Australian Matters - principles that will begin the process of challenging our preconceived notions of knowledge creation, transmission and recognition. This foundation policy will impel and guide actions and plans across all aspects of the University's activities: teaching, learning, research and community and social activities.
- The impact of the initial experience during the first few weeks of university on the retention and overall performance rates of students is significant and well documented in the literature. Universities have responded by offering a range of transition or orientation programs either before or during the first few weeks of semesters. The library wanted to refresh its involvement with the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit's own targeted orientation program.
- Library surveys, anecdotal feedback and the research experience of several other academic libraries' experience with their Indigenous students has indicated the library is perceived as a 'scary and daunting place', both physically and psychologically, and a significantly underutilised resource.
- With the full collaboration of The University of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit, the library negotiated a number of implementation strategies for 2008 and targeted the new Indigenous students – more particularly the students gaining entry under the Alternative Entry Program – and the staff of the Library.

Indigenous Students:

To ease the transition into their university library experience, a 'First steps' training opportunity called IT and Library Essentials @ UQ was scheduled into an afternoon of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit Orientation camp organised a week before the main University Orientation week of activities. This included a casual afternoon tea and tour of the Social Sciences and Humanities Library to personalise and contextualise the 'First steps'.

In addition, from the first week of Semester 1, an AskMe,TellMe Librarian @ home in the Unit was available. Drop-in advice, assistance and training at one-to-one level

occurred during nominated sessions each week. This 'face in their place' strategy aimed to support the existing liaison librarian structure and enhance 'relationship' building by being there developing trust, respect, dialogue and reciprocal two-way conversations on how the library can add value to their learning.

The library also saw an important leveraging opportunity in collaboration with the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) tutors by offering a library resource discovery Update Session.

This program is going over both semesters and an interim evaluation will be done at the end of Semester 1. Feedback thus far has been positive, in particular the partnership and relationship building in their place.

Library staff:

The University of Queensland Library is cognisant of the complexities of interactions at the cultural interface and dissonance between Indigenous and other ways of knowing and has devised a number of strategies for library staff to more fully engage with Indigenous perspectives.

To provide a useful starting point, the library invited the Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, Mr Michael Williams, to give a presentation on Indigenous knowledge to library staff as part of the Library Future Focus Program in November 2007. This was well received and generated a lot of discussion.

A Working Party of interested library staff members, including those who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, has been established to develop a workshop for library staff to raise the level of awareness of Indigenous cultural issues and perspectives. Indigenous staff from other areas of the University also joined the group. The workshop will be presented by a number of Indigenous speakers. Areas to be covered include cultural protocols, an historical overview, activist campaigns and movements, health, education, and the experiences of Indigenous students utilising library services.

The Library Staff Induction kit given to all new staff will now emphasise the importance the Library places on diversity and the services it provides to Indigenous students. Posters acknowledging traditional ownership will be placed in library foyers to send a positive message to Indigenous visitors and build a perception of the library as a welcoming place for Indigenous students.

The library is committed to enriching the Indigenous students' library experience and will keep this momentum going by anticipating further learning, discovery and engagement.

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