



Library spaces and reference services¹

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to chart a future vision for academic libraries which recognises the fundamental shifts in the use of information resources, library services and buildings over the past decade. It offers a perspective on how libraries are used today, and how researchers prefer to access information. It then considers how these shifts impact upon one of the traditional cornerstones of an academic library – the reference service.

Much of the work reported in this paper has taken as its starting point a model developed by David Lewis which depicted a compelling vision for academic libraries over the next 20 years². In seeking to protect the Library's role as a vital part of scholarship, Lewis argued that a number of strategies were available to those charged with library funding and administration. Broadly his thesis recognised that libraries would continue to be heavily used by students, but largely independent of print collections, and that librarians' roles would become much more grounded in teaching and research enterprises, frequently outside the confines of the Library building.

For this to be realised, a number of steps were identified as being necessary. Firstly, libraries should continue the migration towards electronic collections and leverage the resulting efficiency gains. This trend reflects a wider shift from print to electronic collection use, and increasingly unused print collections can be relocated to off-site storage for optimum storage and on-demand retrieval. In turn, this process allows the balance of library space use to be shifted, from collection storage to learning spaces for

¹ This paper is based in part upon Keith Webster, *The Library space as learning space*, *Education Review*, 45(6) 2010 and in part upon Keith Webster and Heather Todd, *Next generation reference for the next generation library*, presented to the IFLA satellite conference in Boston, August 2008

<<http://www.library.uq.edu.au/blogs/general/2008/08/28/rethinking-reference-bostonIFLA>>

² David W. Lewis, *A model for academic libraries 2005 to 2025* <<http://hdl.handle.net/1805/665>>

use by students and in partnership with faculty members and other campus units. This process of development, including a reconception of services offered by librarians will, ultimately allow two further developments: the closer positioning of librarians into teaching and research activities, and a broadening of the Library's curatorial role from purchased (and licensed) materials to the management of locally produced research outputs, data sets and learning objects.

Many of us who work in academic and research libraries can relate immediately to the vision and actions proposed by Lewis. We spend increasingly large parts of our budgets on electronic resources, we see huge student demand for access to a variety of learning spaces, often in response to changes in teaching and assessment, we see rapid reductions in the use of print collections, and we face increasing demands for repository development to support research funders' accessibility frameworks. What may be missing though is a more systematic assessment of the situation: can we be sure that our observations are part of a more systematic and enduring shift in client behaviour? And what can we say about the value that library services contribute to the university enterprise at this time of seemingly profound change?

The University of Queensland Library, a major research library in Australia, sought to explore these in greater detail, and undertook, or participated in, a number of studies which sought to explore client behaviour more deeply. These studies are grouped around two themes: the demand for and use of library space by students, and the use of library collections and services by faculty members and the subsequent return on investment and impact on research outputs and quality.

The role of the library as a learning space was explored through a series of studies conducted during 2008 and 2009. These studies³ sought to explore how the use of space relates to research and learning activities, how space is used in association with "traditional" library services and print collections the balance between self-directed study in quiet spaces and group activity in active spaces, and how technology is used in all of these. One particular study involved 1500 respondents indicating how they used one of four Libraries on a particular occasion. Participants were asked to keep a record during their time in the Library, reporting why they had come to the Library and what they hoped to accomplish, what they actually did, where and with whom, and, on exit a review of their achievement during their time in the Library. Much of the survey was of a tick-box nature, although floor plans were provided for annotation, and free-text feedback and suggestions were encouraged.

The key findings, as reported by Jordan and Ziebell, were:

1. Most respondents visited the library to undertake individual study-related activities and they accomplished this.
2. Respondents also visited the library to undertake social or group learning activity

³ Elizabeth Jordan and Tanya Ziebell, Learning in the Spaces: A Comparative Study of the Use of Traditional and 'New Generation' Library Learning Spaces by Various Disciplinary Cohorts; Keith Webster, "I love you my dear Library" or The Research Library as Learning Space - new opportunities for campus development. Both presented at The University of Queensland Next Generation Learning Spaces Colloquium <<http://www.uq.edu.au/nextgenerationlearningspace/proceedings>>

3. In all but a few instances, respondents actually did less of what they had intended to do.
4. In all but a few instances, respondents actually did more 'other' things that they had intended to do.
5. Most respondents chose to work in the library because it is conveniently located and provides good study spaces.
6. All cohorts put location, atmosphere, study space, and finding what they need above the social reasons (group meeting or meeting friends).
7. Most respondents visited the library after they had been at home or at a class.
8. Most respondents planned to stay in the library for between 30 minutes and two hours
9. Respondents were regular library visitors.
10. Students spent most of their time in the library using computers and quiet study spaces.
11. Students also used email in the library, used the Internet, met or chatted with their friends, ate, borrowed books, and used Facebook.
12. Students wanted the library to provide more computers and more quiet areas.

In broad summary, students came to the Library to work on their own, with fellow students or with friends (providing a distinction between group learning and social interaction). They had little intention of working with or consulting members of library staff, and made more use of computers than of library print collections. Students often reported doing less overall than they had intended to, but often did more "other" activities, often as a result of unplanned encounters with friends.

What was striking was the extent to which the Library was a prominent feature in students' lives: almost 60 percent visit a Library each day, with around half spending between 30 minutes and two hours on their survey visit, and almost a quarter spending more than 2 hours in the Library. Most make use of computers, and will work either in individual study areas or group study rooms.

Beyond considering current use, a design workshop, facilitated jointly by an architect and the present writer, was conducted to allow groups of students to consider the necessary features of learning spaces located in libraries which supported three broad activities: preparation for a group assignment, working on an individual term paper and studying for end of year examinations.

For group work, students particularly sought access to bookable group rooms with plasma screens and data projectors, coupled with other technology to foster collaboration. Wireless networks and extensive access to electric sockets should be readily available. Presentation rehearsal facilities were increasingly in demand as assessed presentations grow in prominence in the curriculum. In that connection, recording services were also requested.

For individual work, enclosed sound-proof rooms were in high demand, with lockable facilities for the storage of computers, notes and other materials. This is related to observations from the in-library study that students spend prolonged periods of time in libraries, and need to be able to leave their possessions securely whilst taking a brief

break. These expectations were repeated in the context of examination preparation, but enhanced by break-out spaces with soft furnishings, couches, coffee and fresh air.

In broad summary, the consistent message from our various space studies, and our LibQUAL+ feedback, is that place is important. Students are heavy consumers of online information resources – electronic journals, databases and e-books. But they value the Library as a place – somewhere which offers an academic ambience to their work, a forum for engagement with each other, and a flexible space which meets their needs as they shift during the cycle of the semester.

Whilst our studies show an irrefutable demand for library-provided learning space, what is not clear is how best to make this available. In many universities, campus space is at a premium and libraries are required to meet client needs from a static footprint. Library staff accommodation apart, that space is normally allocated to study facilities and teaching rooms, and to storage for print collections. Can librarians reasonably adjust that balance, by retiring legacy collections in favour of learning space provision, as advocated by Lewis? What part does the Library play in meeting the needs of its other core constituency, the research and faculty community?

The needs and opinions of researchers were addressed in part through a collaborative study conducted by Outsell Consultants on behalf of the Group of 8 (Australia's 8 leading research-intensive universities) university libraries, with support from the Council of Australian University Librarians⁴.

The focus of that study was to understand the benefits to academic research of the free provision at the point of use of information resources. In formulating a response to that broad question, the study (which was conducted at three of the Go8 members universities, including The University of Queensland) sought to understand how libraries and their collections are used by researchers.

The survey was conducted using a web-based survey instrument, and attracted responses from all broad academic disciplines. Overall, 30 percent of those surveyed were located off-campus more often than on-campus, and relied upon access to electronic resources to meet their needs. Journal articles were the most heavily used form of content, with 95 percent of respondents using these in electronic form. On average, respondents spent 4.5 hours per week using print resources and 11.2 hours consulting electronic resources. There was overwhelming agreement that provision of information resources enabled researchers to access materials indispensable for research and to maintain a comprehensive overview of developments in their fields.

In general, there was clear signal of reliance on electronic resources, and whilst those in the arts and humanities made greater use of print materials than their colleagues in other fields, their use of electronic resources was at a similar level as those in the life and physical sciences. What emerged, overall, was a situation that supported evidence emerging from library use statistics, client surveys and other studies. These all depicted

⁴ Outsell Consultants, Australian Go8 libraries cost-benefit study. Further details and a summary presentation available at < <http://www.caul.edu.au/caul-programs/best-practice>>

a pattern of information resources use by researchers and faculty members that was overwhelmingly electronic in nature, frequently off-campus, and of immense value.

We have seen a picture of a transformed academic library. The vast majority – student and faculty member alike – seek to access information online, and independent of the physical boundaries of the library building. Many library buildings have become the domain almost exclusively of students, who use increasingly sophisticated facilities to interact with people, place and technology in ways not possible, or permitted, even a generation ago.

We have seen numerous attempts to transform reference, and the professional literature has abounded with articles on rethinking reference, triage models and the like for the past twenty years. Many libraries have made major shifts: reference desks have been closed, or rebadged as welcome, help or information desk, and staffed by paraprofessionals. Those libraries who have maintained their traditional service desk report rapidly declining transactions. This is perhaps inevitable, for at least three reasons:

- a) Clients have more immediate access to information that they consider good enough, which exist I their (predominantly online) workflow
- b) In almost every other walk of life, from airline check-in to supermarket check-out to banking, service has become independent – placed in the hands of the client without any staff mediation
- c) The huge investment in information literacy training has paid off!

Meanwhile, those libraries that have invested in services which integrate with an online working environment, such as online reference chat services, have seen a great upsurge in quality reference enquiries. At the same, time, many have introduced roving services, where librarians meet clients away from a reference desk or deliberately seek to be integrated into the working environment of their clients, in laboratories, lecture theatres and clinical settings. Perhaps that is the future of reference.

Although only one component of evidence to support decision-making, the various studies reported abovedo show that the vision depicted to clearly by David Lewis is achievable. Of course, fundamental change will prove controversial, particularly when it involves the removal of print collections form open shelves. But we know that electronic resources are vastly the preferred format of our major client groups, and we know that we can care for print collections more thoroughly in off-site, environmentally controlled warehouses rather than in hot and humid libraries. We can leverage this shift to free up space and staff to deliver more effectively the spaces and services required in our universities in the future.