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MAKING THE TRANSITION TO ACADEMIC REFERENCE SERVICES: A TOOLKIT FOR THE WOULD-BE-INFORMATION LIBRARIAN

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BACKGROUND

Context of reference services

Academic institutions are governed by policies and are answerable to the DHET. The University of Venda for an example has a mandate to transform into a comprehensive University provides for both degree and certificate programmes. Programmes offered are accredited by the South African Quality Assurance (SAQA) and other professional bodies also perform audits and accredit same. Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has also called for the integration of library resources into teaching and learning. In that environment of educational accountability, academic libraries operate in line with the mother institution by aligning their mission and visions with that of the mother institution. So when universities are audited, the library resources and services are also evaluated as the Library forms a very important part in teaching, learning and research activities of the institution. The institutional strategic plan has a section on the library service as one of the key success factors. The Library Business Plan with annual targets is developed in line with the University Strategic Plan. This then forms the basis for structuring activities of the library, as well as assessing/reviewing the performance of the library.

The situation

Librarians from different setting receive the same kind of training irrespective of the type of Library they end up working in. A careful scrutiny of the public and academic libraries shows that there are substantial differences with regard to patron base, collection emphases, and overall service goals. These differences in focus and collection suggest that reference librarians will need a different set of skills and competencies in each setting. Certain skills, however, remain the same e.g., interpersonal, service orientation and communication. Regrettably though, professional librarians may encounter resistance when they try to move from one setting after several years of experience in the other. While such a move is not entirely impossible, it is made difficult by the very nature of how some of the advertisements for the positions are worded. Explicit reference is made to the fact that a minimum mandatory number of years in an academic library are a requisite. In cases where experience in Reference Services is enough the activities highlighted in this paper may be useful. The ‘toolkit’ might be good for awareness and familiarization for those who would like to one day work in an academic setting.

Similarities and differences between public and academic libraries

There are a range of differences that concern users and user need but these 3 are very strong differences and a range of other aspects relate to them.
### The “TOOKIT”

The three major areas of responsibilities for a Reference Librarian can be described as functional, liaison and reference services. Functional responsibilities will include searches, assisting users at the OPAC clusters, giving guided tours of the Library and assisting users in the use of reference material. Liaison services include information literacy sessions, marketing, collection development for specific disciplines, and supporting academic information needs for designated schools. Reference services responsibilities encompass provision of general reference services and staffing the reference desk.

The specific activities performed in a University Library today can be summarized under the ambit of an embedded Librarianship. An embedded Librarian is one who develops strong working relationships with academic departments, achieves mutual understanding with the departments, i.e. their information needs. The departments understand the librarian’s role and value and both parties share responsibility for achieving goals and make customized, highly-valued contributions to the serviced depts. At times, the Librarian is a member of the teaching/research team like any other, just with a unique set of skills – the information and knowledge expert on the team. Typically this practice of embedding is motivated by the desire of Librarians to enhance their services.

**Information literacy**

(Probert, 2008) says the recent, rapid growth and enthusiastic uptake of the internet in education, with the corresponding avalanche of available information, has seen a much wider understanding of the importance of information literacy in the academic community. She goes on to say that the concept is broad and it embraces information skills, ICT skills, and library skills along with the problem-solving and cognitive skills, and the attitudes and values, that enable learners to function effectively in the information landscape. Now more than ever, academic institutions recognize how important it is that these set of skills be imparted to all students for lifelong learning.
learning. This responsibility in the Library lies with information librarians and forms a huge part of their job description.

Course integrated information literacy

The Information librarian can embed in Course Integrated Information Literacy. The UNIVEN Library offers the above course to Foundation Phase Management Sciences students. The course contributes 30% of the total marks for students doing Entrepreneurial course. The course outline is based on the Council for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa’s (CHELSA) Guide for Information Literacy Skills Training and the Information Literacy Skills Framework of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) of the USA. It comprises computer skills, digital literacy as well as academic literacy. The specific units included in this module are:

- Introductory concepts and basic computing skills
- Determination of information needs
- Online databases and effective search strategies
- Evaluation of information
- The internet
- Economical, legal and social issues for use of information
- Communication and presentation of information

Library training

All first entering students are given basic training on OPAC searching. This is done during orientation and is mandatory for all first entering students. Student cards are given a tag to show that the student has attended orientation and if not, they are not allowed to use the Library. The training is necessary to make sure students know how and where to find resources, also helps in maintenance of shelves cause if they are not trained chaos ensues.

Training is also conducted on the use of electronic databases. This can be done for a group or can be one-on-one. The Library had a “fully fledged” compliment of staff from only from December 2012. Hence this training was previously offered in a tiered fashion starting from post-graduate students flowing down to 4th and 3rd year. The training is being filtered down the levels as lecturers are also cooperating with the Library by sending students to the library for training. We engage the student parliament to recruit student for training. Each and every school has a Councillor who sits in School Boards, a Minister of Education on Library Committee and another representative in Departmental Library Committees. The Library uses these representatives to garner support to recruit students for training and to make announcements about training dates. This training also takes advantages of the features on databases which keep the users abreast of developments in their respective fields such as alert
services, top 25 articles in a particular field, journal of the week, research in the news and new journals and forthcoming titles. Training also serves the important function of marketing as well.

Training also goes hand-in-hand with the development of on-line and print based guides. There will always be the time when a user does not have the luxury of walking in to the Information Librarian’s office to ask about something they missed during training. It is therefore important to have guides that users can refer to, even more so online guides to assist distance users especially those in experiential learning programmes and part-time students.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Amongst the number of elements that are generally used to evaluate libraries, the size and nature of the collection has always had pre-eminence. In academic libraries, collection development is informed by the Collection Development Policy which lays down the who, what how of the collection. Generally Information Librarians would actively engage in the ordering of most reference materials, irrespective of subject discipline. The same information Librarians would also assist academics in recommending titles for purchase by identifying latest editions of materials included in reading lists of departments and updating the materials on shelves. Catalogues are forwarded to academics to select and recommend materials for purchase. Of course, today emphasis is more on electronic formats as institutions look to beef up their electronic resources. The other wing of collection development is of course weeding. Information Librarians work hand-in-hand with shelving staff to remove obsolete and damaged beyond use materials from the shelves.

SEARCHES

Information Librarians do searches on behalf of users. These can be for a class assignment in which case a single search can be done and the students will photocopy the downloaded article/s and the Information Librarian keeps the copy for other students. In-depth searches are also done as a means to support the research of post-graduate students and academics who do not have time to search for themselves. Users can request searches on a particular research topic and continue to get articles as and when newer articles come out via the alert service of the databases until such information is no longer required.

Marketing

Naikwadi, V.A. and P.M. Chaskar say marketing is not just about developing and promoting new services and products but about bringing awareness to clients of existing services and products and determining their appropriateness. This should not be limited to print resources. Information Librarians have to market even better to users who come to the library digitally. The other objective of training as a marketing function is that when users are equipped with the skills of searching independently, they will be able to access resources from anywhere. Therefore online marketing tools ought to be utilised extensively and effectively. Resources
that the Library wants to bring to the attention of the users should be made visible by placing prominent links on the website, putting links, on Blogs, Library Facebook page and other online tools. Intranet should also be exploited for such purposes of marketing so that all resources are fully utilised by users.

There are many platforms where Information Librarians can market their services and resources including the following: during training, by observing National days (doing displays of materials relevant to those days or functions), participating in different University forums such as open days, schools orientation days, research seminars, new staff induction, school boards, departmental library committees and during research proposal defense sessions.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

To ensure that there is quality in our Reference Services we engage in a number of activities to get user feedback. A short survey is sent out to experiential students to see if they are able to find articles remotely on their own while they are off campus. One of the recurrent recommendations from this kind of survey is that students recommend the service to all other students and wish it could be rolled out during the first year.

Information Librarians are also assessed by students after training. An evaluation form is given to each trained student/staff after training and these are assessed twice a year. The assessment is done in conjunction with the department of statistics which analyses the responses for us. Responses to open ended questions are taken into account when we do our training and influence how we structure our training.

KEEPING ABREAST WITH TRENDS

There are a variety of ways that one can keep abreast with change and new developments. Weblogs, list-serves, web sites, e-mail, newspapers, scholarly journals in library and information science and those in related disciplines all yield valuable information. Similarly, a myriad of techniques exist to help one to develop a better strategy for keeping up, including distributed e-mailed daily reports from news, sources, subscribing to selected web sites, RSS feeds, and news aggregators.

CONCLUSION

Although the public and academic domains have some marked differences, in reality both are concerned about providing quality services that cater to their users’ needs by matching relevant information to specific user needs. To be an information Librarian of note, one needs to keep abreast of developments and trends in areas that are serviced. Making the transition from public to academic should not be that difficult since the basic training is the same. A little on the job
training should take care of the gaps, after all Librarians have been reinventing themselves over the years to move with the times.

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