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Keeping our Academics on the Cutting Edge: The Academic Outreach Program at the University of Wollongong Library

Suzanne M. Lipu

University of Wollongong, suzannel@uow.edu.au

Elizabeth H. Peisley

University of Wollongong, elizabet@uow.edu.au

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Academic Outreach Pilot Program

In 1999 the University of Wollongong Library introduced the Academic Outreach Program. This information literacy program for academic and research staff was designed to help them explore the myriad of electronic resources available from their own desktop and foster skill development in using these resources

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In the higher education sector, developing students' information literacy skills has been a hot issue in policy making and program development for almost a decade. But how do academic staff develop and maintain their information literacy skills? How do they cope in an increasingly electronic environment? In 1999 the University of Wollongong Library introduced an ambitious program coined Academic Outreach which targeted 100% of academics campus-wide. Identified as a strategic initiative of the Reference Services team, the program was designed to keep our academics on the cutting edge of information sources in their field. The aim was to help them explore the myriad of electronic resources available from their own desktop and foster skill development in using these resources. A systematic approach was adopted which involved: developing promotional strategies; setting a timeline and targets for actual visits; allocating human resources and undertaking in-house training; creating a content checklist; Faculty Librarians venturing out to the academics' offices to provide individual, tailored instruction; regular communication and review. A comprehensive evaluation from the perspective of both the academics and Faculty Librarians was also undertaken. This paper traces the program from its inception to its evaluation and highlights the enormous benefits gained by everyone involved.

Fulltext

During the last decade developing students' information literacy skills has received significant attention in policy making and program development. The rapid growth in information and communication technologies has in part fuelled this. The growing number of electronic information resources has certainly contributed to the changing nature of teaching, learning and research at universities. Those of us working in academic libraries have a responsibility to develop awareness and provide training in using those resources effectively.

The University of Wollongong's Information Literacy Policy and Procedures states that: 'The effective use of information and information technology is recognised by higher education institutions as essential to the development of lifelong learning skills.'¹ Other Australian universities have also recognised this importance and in 2001 the Council of Australian

University Librarians published Information Literacy Standards - a revision of the US Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education. This document encourages the 'Endorsement and promulgation of the standards by policy makers, education institutions, professional and educational associations.'²

At a practical level many universities have adopted this philosophy and developed ways to foster students' information literacy skill development. At the University of Wollongong we offer generic workshops, faculty-based classes and have also developed two specific programs to suit particular student groups. These are ILIP100 - a compulsory, non-credit point information literacy program for all new undergraduates and Research Edge - a more advanced program for postgraduate students. They are both very successful. It is not only students that need information literacy skills however. A series of events reinforced the notion that academics too could benefit from a program targeting their information literacy needs; a program to keep them on the cutting edge of resources available in their discipline and foster skill development in using these resources.

Background to the Academic Outreach Program

Between 1995 and 1999, the number of electronic databases at the University of Wollongong Library increased by a massive 122.22%, from 54 to 120. While this was a positive development in terms of access to full-text journal articles, many academics remained unaware of the amount and variety of information resources available to them. Various methods of communication to spread awareness of these resources - such as email and newsletters - seemed to make little impact.

This problem is certainly not uncommon in the academic library environment. Electronic resource promotion has become an increasingly significant role for reference librarians. A study at the Utah State University in 1998 revealed that 'university libraries need to work harder to publicize the available electronic resources, how to access them, and what each database has to offer.'³

In 1998 the fall in the Australian dollar, combined with dramatic increases in subscription prices, necessitated a significant number of serials cancellations to remain within budget allocations. The Science Faculty was one of the hardest hit. To identify titles to cancel the Science Faculty worked with the Library to profile the Faculty's serial requirements. A survey, based on a US model⁴, was conducted to identify journals needed to support teaching programs and research needs. Each academic completed the survey individually. The collated information and reports were used by the Faculty to identify essential teaching and research journals and those to be considered for cancellation.

Collection of information to this level of detail had not been previously attempted. Library management decided to broaden the parameters to do this for all faculties. The survey results - along with data such as faculty population, teaching and research areas, information resources and computing infrastructure - was being collated to form individual Faculty Profiles. The Academic Outreach program provided an ideal opportunity to support this project - especially collecting information on computing infrastructure as this would enable the Library to plan from an informed viewpoint. Rather than base actions on broad assumptions, it ensured the best possible match of resources purchased with faculty teaching and research needs.

In February 1999 the Library conducted a focus group to explore issues relating to access to electronic information. All academics on campus were invited. Seventeen attended representing eight of the nine faculties. A number of issues and concerns were identified and related to topics such as library messages, database trials, general access issues, difficulty in keeping up to date and the need for individual or small group training. A number of recommendations from the focus group were implemented including what became known as the Academic Outreach program.

The University of Wollongong Library's Academic Outreach Program

The Academic Outreach program officially began in Autumn session 1999. Faculty Librarians were to visit each academic in their office and to tailor the consultation to their needs. The aim was to help the academic explore the myriad of electronic resources available from their own desktop and foster skill development in using these resources. The uniqueness of this program was that we resolved to contact every academic to ensure that they had at least had the opportunity to become capable users of all the resources the library had to offer them. Our target, included in the Reference Services Team Action Plan for the year, was to contact 100% of the academic population and to visit 70% by the end of 1999.

Extensive planning and preparation played an integral part in the success of the Academic Outreach program. The preparation and support documentation ensured that all Faculty Librarians involved adopted a consistent approach and presented a professional image. The program had the endorsement of the University Librarian and the Library Executive Committee. For the program to achieve its aims, the Executive recognised that support was essential. Additional resources were identified and made available. Casual staff were employed to assist Faculty Librarians with the larger faculties, reference desk hours were reduced for those with the heaviest loads, and in-house training was conducted in new areas such as plug ins and checking computer memory.

Further support for Faculty Librarians was the creation of an Academic Outreach Kit. The kit included three broad types of documentation covering: preparation for the visit; forms to be filled in during the visit; and, support material. Preparation material for the Faculty Librarian included a telephone script, coloured promotional flyers and an outline of the Program's purpose as well as specific instructions for the visits and hints on timing. For example, it was anticipated that each visit would take approximately an hour with follow up visits organised as appropriate. Forms included: a Librarian's checklist, a form regarding the academic's computer system requirements and a database searching profile. Support materials included: the Serials Survey and information about it, loading plug-ins (such as Adobe Acrobat Reader), Document Delivery Services registration forms, Faculty database guides, an Off-campus Library Resources guide, Subject related information and information about available alert services.

The visit

The content of each visit was to be directed by the academic and tailored to their individual needs. However, we used the visits as an opportunity to promote new library services and to collect data on each faculty's computing infrastructure to feed into the developing Faculty Profiles.

To support the push towards electronic desktop access, the Library needed to establish the campus community had the necessary software and hardware available. We believed that two pieces of software were essential to access most of the available electronic information resources. The Academic Outreach program aimed to establish that academics had access to an Internet Browser (Netscape) and that the Adobe Acrobat Reader was loaded and connected to the browser. We were to discover that many academics had the software but did not know what it was for or did not have the skill to connect it to the browser.

The blurring between information literacy and information technology skills was very evident here. We often found that we were providing detailed technical assistance that was vital if we were to support academics in their transition from print to electronic resources. At the California State University, Sacramento a program to assist their faculty also found that some academics did not know how to get started using a computer.⁵ We found that providing this type of assistance was highly valued. One of our academics commented via the Library's Compliments, Comments and Complaints feedback system: '.thanks again for your guidance this morning, makes me feel secure to have my hand held like that - a rare experience and a welcome one!'

To provide access to resources off campus the Library was moving towards an electronic preferred serials policy. To access the electronic titles, academics needed to be aware of our journal database called JournalSearch, as electronic title holdings were not reflected on the Library catalogue. If the academics were not aware of this access point then the new resources would be lost to them. Mozenter et al reinforces that communication and instruction during the transition from print to electronic resources is vital.⁶

During the time of the Academic Outreach program the Library was also moving from paper to a web-based Interlibrary Loan request service. The uptake of the service had been slow. The visits were used as an opportunity to promote, demonstrate and register academics with this service. Partly as a result of the program, requests submitted electronically increased by 105% in the first quarter of 1999 - leaping from 260 for the same period the previous year to 532.

Marketing the Program to the Academics

To get the Program underway, the Faculty Librarians first needed to determine who they needed to see. The Library's Information Access Coordinator provided this information through lists of faculty members that she had obtained in the process of putting together the Faculty Profiles.

Advertising consisted of a flyer, which was put into academics' pigeonholes or handed out at department meetings. The flyer alerted the academics to the program and promoted that it was available to them at their desktop. Faculty Librarians also sent emails to the Faculty and contacted individual academics via phone or face-to-face to arrange appointments. All participants in the focus groups were notified of the Program in advance. In Autumn session 1999 it was also advertised in our newsletter, News@library. It was not always easy to make contact with the academics however; they are busy individuals who are not always available. Some did not believe that they needed assistance and/or were reluctant to participate. If an academic refused an appointment outright it was not challenged but non-respondents were pursued. In these cases, persistence was necessary to persuade them to arrange a consultation. One such participant later commented in the survey that followed the program: 'Excellent!! I

put off taking the offer of assistance because I didn't think it would be terribly helpful but I was quite wrong.'

The fact that it was available at academics' own desktop was significant in marketing the program to our audience. We recognised that some academics may be reluctant to display their lack of knowledge or skills in a public arena.

In tailoring instruction to academics' specific needs we were able to help them on personal research topics and in many cases identify a range of useful material of which they were not previously aware. The relevance of instruction was later commented upon by one of the academics in the post-program survey: 'I think this program is invaluable, especially as it addresses the individual at their skill base. In groups there is a mix of skills, and those who are more advanced become bored whilst waiting for the less skilled to catch up - if in fact they do whereas those with more advanced skills could be building on those.' Another comment was - 'I was very concerned that this was going to be a waste of time. However, contrary to my expectations I found it very useful mainly because it was tailored to my needs and skill base.' Success breeds success. Word-of-mouth between the academics helped to promote the program and reinforce the positive benefits and encourage those reluctant to find time for a visit.

Core Results

As part of the Library's commitment to Total Quality Management, evaluation plays a significant role in all our operations. The Academic Outreach program was no exception and an evaluation was undertaken to capture the results of the program from the perspective of both the academics and the Faculty Librarians.

Throughout the program Faculty Librarians maintained records for all the academics they had contacted and visited so that progress could be monitored, reports generated and communicated to the Library Executive. In May 1999 Faculty Librarians met for a debrief session to discuss the program up to that point and share concerns as well as hints and tips.

It was generally felt that the program had received a positive response from the academics and they were benefiting from the individual sessions. New networking opportunities had opened up. It provided newer Faculty Librarians an opportunity to contact and establish rapport with staff much faster than might have otherwise been possible. Direct feedback to Faculty Librarians at the visits often supported the Library and the program and provided opportunities to promote and discuss a range of Library issues as they arose. The Library was also benefiting from the visits in that the Faculty Librarians were finding the exercise a fertile source of information about the faculties and their needs.

The positive effects of the program at this point were very helpful in motivating Faculty Librarians. We were in the busiest session of the year and trying to juggle Academic Outreach with many other responsibilities, such as heavy teaching loads. Some factors beyond the Faculty Librarians' control caused frustration. These were mainly technology related such as poor faculty computer infrastructure and slow network connections.

This first debriefing session was an example of our commitment to ensuring the aims of the program were being met and incorporating modifications as appropriate. For example, the

session highlighted the need for additional help sheets and instructions to be included in the Academic Outreach Kit.

The program's original target date of end 1999 proved unachievable so the target date was stretched to the end of 2000. At the completion of the program 93% of the targeted 100% had been contacted for appointments and 64% were visited - 410 academics out of 643. The 64% fell just short of the targeted 70%.

To gather information about the Program from the academics' perspective, Liquid Surveys was contracted to develop an appropriate survey. Questions were developed initially by Reference Services Team staff and CEDIR (the University's Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources). The aims of the survey were to determine the success of the program and if it should be maintained in some format. It was also felt that evaluation would help determine how the sessions could be improved if the program were to continue.

The survey had 108 respondents (25% of those seen). Overall, a very high level of satisfaction was noted. 96% of respondents said that they would recommend the sessions to colleagues. 72% strongly agreed that being shown how to use the resources hands-on in their own environment was valuable. 81% agreed that they now felt more comfortable in approaching Library staff for assistance. 68% said their confidence level in using resources had increased. Use of Document Delivery Services since 1999 has continued to increase.

In February 2001 the Faculty Librarians met again to discuss benefits of the program and to determine where we would go from here. The benefits included raising the library's profile and establishing a more proactive culture with spin offs such as extra information literacy classes, more postgraduate contact and academics feeling more comfortable in asking for help. The librarians also developed a greater understanding of academic workloads, research areas and faculty politics.

As an outcome of the Academic Outreach program we have implemented several strategies which demonstrate our ongoing commitment to information literacy skill development for academics. For example, we provide desktop instruction to all new academic staff during their orientation. Moreover, we more actively market new electronic resources and foster academics' skill development in using them through communication, academic-only training sessions and we continue to provide one-on-one instruction in academics' offices, which we still refer to as Academic Outreach.

In the survey one of our academics commented: 'Just when you think you are up-to-date and running, change hits again. The Academic Outreach Program must accommodate for this change. Continuation of the program would appear essential.' We agree. It is not enough to just offer services and training to those who express interest. The nature of teaching, learning and research in universities is changing rapidly. Teaching has become more resource-based and academics are no longer sole deliverers of information but are increasingly facilitating students' learning in how to approach, evaluate and use information resources effectively.⁷ Academic libraries must therefore ensure that we address students' information literacy needs as well as help our academics cope and learn in the changing information environment.

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