Surfing the waves of organisational change through calm waters and riptides

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Abstract

Within the last eight years, Bond University Library has experienced many changes which reflect those occurring in the wider library community, including a Library and IT amalgamation (which resulted in a new integrated service delivery model), new and refurbished physical spaces, staffing reductions and budgetary issues. During these events our priority was always to maintain quality customer service.

The focus for this paper is how the information professional’s role at Bond University has evolved as a result of these changes, together with a discussion on how we developed new service models whilst maintaining the student experience.

In particular, the paper will examine the challenges and our responses, using case study examples, in the following areas:

- the issues associated with managing a 24x7 study space outside the physical library building (Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre)
- maintaining a positive student experience within a changing environment

We will report on how these challenges were met in the face of staffing and budget reductions and describe the new methods of operation that were developed and incorporated into the library’s routine. Our discussion will draw on evidence from customer surveys and service statistics analysis.

The library environment is in a state of flux, but as library technicians we show how a positive approach and forward thinking have helped us to meet the Library’s clear vision of “delivering reliable and responsive services through innovative technology and information resources to enhance the Bond experience” (Bond University Library, 2013).
Introduction

Established in 1989, Bond University is Australia’s first private, not-for-profit University. In its short history, Bond has experienced many challenges in consolidating its place in the Australian higher education landscape. Recently, the impacts of the global financial crisis, the strong Australian dollar and changes in the higher education environment have resulted in a downturn in student numbers at Bond. This in turn has required a tightening of the budget and reductions in staffing levels and resourcing.

The first part of this paper will describe how staff roles have evolved in response to the changing environment. Factors affecting the changing Library Technician’s role include the Library and Computing Service Desk (LCSD) integration, reduced staffing levels, expanding roles and responsibilities and streamlining of tasks.

The second part of the paper will cover the issues associated with managing an unstaffed 24x7 study space outside the physical library building (the Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre) and in particular, the issues and considerations that needed to be taken into account to maintain the student experience.

Background

At Bond University, the Library has seen many changes which reflect those occurring in the wider library community, including:

- A Library and Information Technology Services (ITS) amalgamation in 2006, which resulted in a new integrated service delivery model in 2009
- New and refurbished physical spaces opened in 2008-2010
- Staffing reductions and budgetary issues in 2012
- Introduction of a 24x7 access space
- Changes in customer needs
- De-amalgamation of Library and ITS in late 2012, with continuation of the integrated Library and Computing Service Desk model

Bond University profile

Bond University has four faculties (Business, Health Sciences and Medicine, Humanities and Social Sciences, Law) and the Institute of Sustainable Development and Architecture. There is a focus on face to face teaching and Bond has one of the lowest student to staff ratios in Australia. Bond also has a three-semester academic year, which is aimed at allowing students to finish their degrees and enter the workforce at an accelerated rate.

With enrolments of 6500 full time equivalent students in 2012, Bond University aspires to a 50/50 ratio between international and domestic students, with the international students coming from 80 different countries evenly weighted, so that no nationality dominates. There is approximately 65% undergraduate to 35% postgraduate students, as well as an even gender balance.

Library Services profile

The Library’s service points are the John and Alison Kearney Main and Law Libraries and the Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre.
The Library’s customers include undergraduate students, postgraduates, academic staff, alumni, and customers from groups with which the University has formal links, such as other universities in the region and the local community.

The Bond University community and external organizations recognise the Library as a highly customer focused support service. This reputation is due to the friendly and approachable professionalism of its staff and its innovative services.

1. Changing staff roles

1.1 Literature review

The Library Technician’s role is constantly changing, influenced by a number of factors. Whether it is reduced budgets, reduced staffing levels, technological advancement or the changing needs of our customers, Library Technicians have to adapt to changes in our environments to provide a quality end product for our customers. The libraries in which we work are continuing to evolve and as Library Technicians it is our responsibility to gain the required knowledge and experience to be able to provide “excellent services to the most important people of all: our customers” (Jones, 2009, p.13).

The brave new world of the Library Technician’s role, if embraced, is all about new opportunities, diversity, different skills, increased knowledge and improved career paths. The new Library Technician can also expect greater job satisfaction and enjoyment from the new positions and tasks that they are assuming. It will also mean Library Technicians will be able to be more flexible moving between the different areas of the Library, ultimately increasing their appeal for job advancement in the future (Pilarski & Picasso, 2011).

To remain current and viable, libraries will have to evolve with their users and the environments that they demand. Libraries, our workplaces, will continually be moulded by the demands of our customers. So it stands to reason that the role of the staff that work in the libraries will have to change along with the places that they work in. If not, we cease to be needed by the customers that we are providing a service for (MacWhinnie, 2003, p. 254).

1.2 The Library Technician’s role at Bond University

As a result of reduced staffing levels and budget reductions, the Library Technician’s role at Bond University continues to change so that the Library can continue to provide quality service to all stakeholders.

New roles and responsibilities have been assumed, meaning extra skills and training are required for the Library Technicians. Although there have been challenging times, numerous benefits for the role of the Library Technician have been gained from the changes.

1.3 Library and Computing Service Desk integration

The Library and Computing Service Desk (LCSD) amalgamation was initiated in 2009 and facilitated by the refurbishment of the Main Library, which created an appropriate service space. The integrated services were considered to be a good way of combining the knowledge of three separate areas (Faculty Librarians, Information Technology and Lending Services staff) and providing a one stop shop for students and staff of the University. Despite the separation of ITS and Library in September 2012, the LCSD continues to operate as an integrated service point staffed by the same three areas.

Core skills
The project team that was responsible for designing the integrated service model decided that all three areas represented on the desk would be able to complete a set of core skills that went across all areas. These were identified through meetings of the project team that began in 2008 and which involved the three teams represented in the service integration.

Some of these core skills were:

- Student IT account activation and password resets
- Staff IT account collection
- Wireless laptop issues (quick resolutions and dropping laptops off for configuration)
- Loans transactions
- Borrower registrations
- General enquiries
- Photocopying and printing assistance
- Searching for known items using Library search engines
- Database password allocations
- Re-shelving (reserve items and DVDs).

Library and Computing Service Desk staffing model

The staffing model on the LCSD has evolved since its integration in May 2009. Based on experience, it was agreed that a member of each team was not needed on the desk at all times and that the utilisation of different areas being on call would be a better use of the staff members involved (depending on the time of semester and the types of assistance being required). This freed staff up to devote time to their other non-desk duties.

Based on statistics taken at the LCSD, it was observed that in the early part of the semester the enquiries needing the faculty librarians were fewer than they were in the middle of the semester. So during this phase of the semester, the faculty librarians are on call while lending services and ITS are scheduled to work at the desk. In the middle of the semester there are fewer IT based enquiries, so ITS are on call while the faculty librarians and lending services are scheduled for the desk. The one constant is lending services, as their enquiries are steady over the whole semester.

This has resulted in expanding the skills of the lending services staff. Across the lending services staff, their IT and searching skills have developed, which will help these staff members to assist the users of the Library in the future. It will also benefit them in meeting requirements for job advancement.

1.4 Staffing roles and responsibilities

Library staff numbers were reduced as a result of budget reductions and redundancies in late 2012, meaning that library staff needed to take on new roles and responsibilities, which are constantly evolving as the workflows are monitored. Over time, new and updated tasks are introduced, with certain jobs being prioritised so as to achieve a seamless result from the customer’s point of view.

When ITS was separated from Library Services in August 2012, there were some generic responsibilities that needed to be filled by Library staff. The roles of Safety Support Officer and Facilities Coordinator were previously undertaken by a staff member from ITS, and are now allocated to Library Technicians. While this means an extra workload, it also allows the responsible staff members to gain new skills that will advance their career prospects in the future. In these new roles, staff are becoming involved with the University through various University committees and training sessions.
Generally across the board the workload for staff increased, with some of the main examples being:

- Additional hours on the desk per week
- Additional office duties for circulation staff
- Additional responsibilities for staff involved in acquisitions and cataloguing roles

Other efficiencies were gained by centralising circulation duties that had previously been done in both the Main and Law Libraries. As a result, the volume of work in the Main Library increased.

The Library Technicians’ roles in acquisitions and cataloguing were adjusted to continue to meet the needs of the end users, both staff and students. With some team members taking on extra roles as a direct result of staff redundancies, some adjustment of responsibilities also took place. Staff continue to prioritise their daily tasks so that the Library users do not experience a change in service levels.

1.5 Task streamlining

In the lending services area, there were a number of tasks that were processed, mapped and streamlined, including:

- The number of warning letters sent to borrowers with overdue reserve items was reduced.
- Customers are charged replacement costs sooner than was previously the case.
- The number of steps in the charging process for long overdue items has been reduced.
- The Document Delivery Access database and email system have been networked on all lending services staff computers. This means that staff can work more efficiently from their own computers rather than one shared computer.

1.6 Benefits

Although there has been a certain amount of change and uncertainty over the past year, staff have found that there are a lot of benefits gained through the development of the new processes. As previously mentioned, the skills acquired by staff have expanded, which not only benefits the University but also enhances staff members’ career prospects.

Library Technicians have taken on extra responsibilities, giving them the opportunity to develop leadership and project management skills. This has provided the Library with a stable core of staff that can better support the Library management team.

Being a relatively small academic library, it has been possible to quickly implement the changes and new responsibilities. The reorganised work teams have pulled together to form a tight knit group that is moving forward in a positive frame of mind.

2. Managing a 24x7 study space outside the physical library building (Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre - MLC)

As a result of persistent requests from students for extended opening hours and study space, Bond University Library investigated and put forward a proposal for a trial to extend the opening hours of our two main service points; the John and Alison Kearney Main Library and the Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre (Balnaves MLC). Following a
successful trial, the Balnaves MLC was opened 24x7 for busy times of semester, i.e. leading into exam periods, ultimately opening as a 24x7 study space for the whole of semester.

2.1 Literature review

There has been much popular discussion amongst librarians, administrators and students in the literature about the perceived decline in the use of libraries. Scott Carlson argued in 2001 that the use of physical libraries and traditional reading rooms was in decline due to the rise of electronic access to library materials. Geoff Hanmer in his opinion piece in the Australian Financial review 05 August 2013 also stated the same ‘fact’, advising that “universities and their librarians need to accept that knowledge is moving inexorably to an online format”.

While it may be true that libraries are increasingly moving towards electronic access, evidence has shown that student demand for 24x7 access to physical spaces has become a popular and increasing theme over the past few years. ‘Students want to use the library, “now more than ever before” (Freeman, 2005, p. 4): as they live in a 24-hour culture’.

University libraries have become a refuge for students wanting to get away from noisy dorms, noisy neighbours and noisy flatmates. MacWhinnie (2003, p. 243) states “in addition to offering quiet study space, libraries are natural gathering places for groups to study and provide social space for students to meet between classes. These features will be more important in the future as remote access to information isolates users and students seek learning and social spaces where they can interact with others”. Curry’s survey shows that 20% of the respondents came to the library during the late-night hours because it was more peaceful and quiet during these times (Curry, 2003, p. 381).

Access to quiet study spaces is not the only reason students want 24x7 access. Other reasons include “safe and comfortable environments conducive to research and learning (Albanese, 2005, p. 43). Smith (2008) noted that the library offers many other services that students need access to around the clock. Some of those services are computing, printing, and copying (p.70). Freeman (2005) discusses “an increase of academic support services housed in library spaces, such as tutoring centres and computing support” that are bringing the students to the library outside the normal hours. As Huwe comments, “space and place still matter” (2013, p. 23).

2.2 Balnaves Foundation Multimedia Learning Centre

In 2008, The Balnaves Foundation (a private philanthropic organisation providing support to charitable enterprises in Australia) generously funded the development of the award-winning Balnaves MLC, a technology rich educational environment which exemplifies the student experience at Bond. It provides all students at Bond with access to collaborative-friendly study spaces and the latest audio visual and computer technology in a spectacular location.

The Balnaves Foundation is committed to ensuring the Balnaves MLC continues to be at the forefront of technological advancements and generously supports ongoing upgrades and the introduction of new interactive technologies. For further details on the technology features of the Balnaves MLC, consult the website:


2.3 Extended hours Proposal
Until 2012, the weekly opening hours of the Main Library were 90 hours, and for the Balnaves MLC 150 hours.

An ARL survey on extended hours in academic libraries revealed that in 94% of cases, “student requests” led to a decision to extend hours (Steele and Walters, 2001). Students of Bond University had long canvassed for 24x7 hours in the Library and The Balnaves MLC as stated in the position paper prepared by Matthew McLean (President of Bond University Student Association) [2012], p. 7), “the two of these facilities regarded by students as state of the art and home to the ultimate in multi-media equipment are the same two unavailable to student’s 24-hours a day 7-days a week. Millions of dollars has been invested by generous trustees….to best take advantage of these facilities students should be granted access to them 24-hours a day 7-days a week”.

In early 2012, it was appropriate to consider a trial of extending the hours of operation for the Library and the Balnaves MLC during semester, due to the growing number of requests from students. In 2012, Library Management was given approval to extend the opening hours in the Balnaves MLC to 24x7 (an additional 96 hours per week) for later weeks of the semester and to extend the Library’s opening hours by an additional 23 hours per week. We were given a three week turnaround to have the Balnaves MLC and the Main Library ready for extended hours.

In order to get a better picture of the needs of all the students, the Library conducted an in-house survey of students during the trial of the extended hours. Responses in the free comments section of the survey indicated that the majority of students wanted more extended opening hours. As with other university libraries, students are particularly sensitive about library hours when exam pressure is high.

The most significant findings of this survey were:

- 63% of survey respondents intended to stay longer than 4 hours in the library
- 66% of survey respondents were undergraduate, 32% were postgraduate and 2% from the local community
- 81% of survey respondents lived off campus
- The top reason for visiting the library during extended opening hours was to use ‘quiet study space’.
- The top ways the library was used during extended opening hours was to ‘read/study alone’. The least popular reason was to ‘watch a DVD or video’.
- Most survey respondents (76 in total) preferred to use a ‘Single study carrel or small table with power’
- The lowest preference for use in the library was ‘Large open table shared with other users’
- The results of the survey can be obtained from the authors.

With the results of this survey, the goodwill and the positive feedback received during the trial of extended hours in exam periods, Library Services decided that a permanent change for the opening hours was needed. The Balnaves MLC would be the most appropriate location for a permanent change to hours, as the “Multimedia Learning Centre is designed to operate as a 24x7 study space” (Abbott & Sutherland, 2008, p. 10). In January 2013, we extended the Balnaves MLC opening hours to 24x7 access for the second half of the semester. From September 2013, the Balnaves MLC is open 24x7 for the whole of the semester. This keeps the Balnaves MLC open 24x7 for 42 weeks of the year.

2.4 Issues and considerations
To staff or not to staff

Extending hours is not without its concerns and challenges, and the detail of preparing for extended hours is the primary responsibility of lending services team. One of our main concerns was how the increased hours could be accommodated in an already stretched staff budget.

The Balnaves MLC was originally staffed by casuals employed by the Library (mostly student casuals) when it first extended the hours to 24x7. Head counts for the 24x7 period indicated high use throughout the day until around 2am. However, from 3am to 7am, usage was consistently very low. As a result of the budget issues in 2012, it was decided that the Balnaves MLC would still open 24x7 in the following semester but would be unstaffed from 2013.

Issues that needed to be addressed included public relations and marketing, security, facilities, and continual use on the technology.

Public relations

Use of any space benefits from effective marketing which is “critical in ensuring that the time, money, and effort going to providing extended services were well spent” (Sewell, 2013, p.18). The Library advertised the change to the opening hours of the Balnaves MLC with posts on Facebook, signs in the Balnaves MLC, emails to student body, emails to staff, posts on blogs and digital signage around campus.

From January 2013, additional signs were placed in the Balnaves MLC notifying students that the Balnaves MLC would be unstaffed and that equipment and assistance would be available from the Main Library.

Security issues

Security was another challenge. It was clear that the Balnaves MLC was considered a comfortable and safe place for students, approximately two thirds of whom lived off campus. There were initial concerns about security and safety for staff, students and the facilities, so Library Services instigated a swipe access system to the Balnaves MLC for after-hours access between 6pm and 7am.

We have great understanding and cooperation from the University’s security department who increased their security presence throughout the 24x7 access hours, patrolling the Balnaves MLC more frequently during the night and early morning hours.

Facilities issues

As a result of the removal of staffing in the Balnaves MLC in tandem with 24x7 opening, we needed to manage the space differently, and to educate and inform the students in how to use the space.

There was a great deal of negotiation and planning with other departments of the University. The University’s Audio-Visual (AV) department had to rewrite software programs for equipment to turn on/off automatically at nominated times including the Video wall, Eye-click, Eye-step, general lighting and under desk lighting. Information Technology Services had to remove equipment from the former service point. The phone was re-directed from the Balnaves MLC, so that phone calls made to the Balnaves MLC are automatically transferred to the LCSD in the Main Library.
The lending services team removed all the equipment that was available for loan from the Balnaves MLC and transferred it to the Main Library. All the items were already barcoded and recorded in Aleph (our library management system), but over 200 items had to have their location changed to the Main Library. Borrowing procedures and loan periods for these items remain the same.

We have found that with the opening of the space 24x7, the usage of the equipment in the Balnaves MLC is naturally higher. Equipment such as X Box®, PlayStation®, and Nintendo Wii™ need replacing at a higher rate than previously, involving work in sourcing, purchasing and re-installing equipment when something is broken.

**Evaluation**

The effort to provide 24x7 access to the Balnaves MLC is one of many recent library initiatives to make the area an even more accessible space in response to student requests over the past year. 24x7 access to the Balnaves MLC, is now the new ‘norm’. What has also been demonstrated is that Library staff and other departments are able to work quickly and effectively to respond to changes and to continue to provide a quality service to students, faculty and other departments on campus. At this point in time the Balnaves MLC will continue to be open 24x7 and will remain unstaffed.

**What next?**

The Library will continue to offer 24x7 opening hours of the Balnaves MLC for the whole of the semester, not just in peak periods or exams.

With the success of 24x7 unstaffed access to the Balnaves MLC, we expect that students will continue to demand even longer opening hours for the Main Library. How we respond to this is something we are already considering.

**Conclusion**

The past two years of significant change have been difficult at times; however the skills gained by Library Technicians in responding to the new circumstances have proved invaluable to Library Services and to the wider University community.

Library Technicians have gained:

- An expanded skill set including leadership and project management
- Skills in process mapping by streamlining tasks
- Confidence in our ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances
- New ways of managing spaces and services
- A wider network of contacts with other departments of the University

…all while maintaining the high quality of the student experience.

The library environment is in a state of flux, but as library technicians we show how a positive approach and forward thinking have helped us to meet the Library’s clear vision of “delivering reliable and responsive services through innovative technology and information resources to enhance the Bond experience” (Bond University Library, 2013).
References


