

Looking for ways to improve service

Bill Linklater, University of Newcastle library

Established in 1965, the University of Newcastle is a medium-sized institution with two campuses: Callaghan in Newcastle, and the Central Coast at Ourimbah (halfway between Newcastle and Sydney), which caters to the educational needs of a growing region. The university also has a presence at the Conservatorium and Faculty of Music, in the heart of Newcastle. There are currently more than 17 000 enrolled students undertaking over one-hundred-and-fifty programs offered by eleven faculties.

The university library system comprises the Auchmuty, Huxley and Conservatorium libraries, plus a rapidly developing Information Resource Centre at the Central Coast campus. All technical services are centralised on the main campus. The collections exceed one-million items and include print materials, microfilm, audiovisual materials, computer software and datasets. As the major research collection between Sydney and Brisbane, the university library provides services for the local and Australian research community through active inter-library cooperation as reflected in its long term status as a net lender.

Academic libraries in Australia have always assumed that they focussed on providing a high quality service to their users and most have had a 'package' of strategies in place that were designed to ensure that the library needs of the university are addressed and met. It is, however, in this area that the University of Newcastle library has in recent years placed a particular emphasis, and developed and tested a variety of new strategies.

In the early 1990's the Federal Labor Government instituted a process that lasted for three years whereby it retained about one per cent of Australian higher education funding each year to provide a sizeable pool to be allocated competitively to those universities able to demonstrate how well they met a range of quality criteria.

These so-called 'quality assurance' initiatives provided an impetus for many libraries to assess and review their practices and procedures. In the case of Newcastle we focussed on de-

termining the needs of our various user groups and measuring the effectiveness of library services, resources and facilities in meeting these needs, and, for the first time, systematically surveying the user groups to obtain their input to this process. We had always had a variety of formal mechanisms in place that provided for user consultation [library committees, specialist faculty librarians, representation on faculty boards, and departmental (academic) library liaison officers] and a variety of methods by which we monitored our performance, but we had not attempted to systematically measure the range, appropriateness and quality of our collections and services through user consultation.

This quality process, that forced us to focus our activities and commitments against a set of formal criteria, has now finished, but it has created and reinforced an ongoing environment that is much more consultative than in the past.

Over the last two years we have developed and carried out three extensive surveys of our user groups, academic staff, undergraduates and postgraduates and we plan to continue these surveys on a rolling basis. These surveys have given us excellent feedback on the range of our services, where we were succeeding and, more importantly, where we could do better. These surveys were followed up by purpose designed meetings/workshops with every faculty and with the undergraduate and postgraduate representative bodies — which have resulted in significant feedback and some trial services — and this liaison will continue. We also take very seriously the suggestion facility on NEWCAT (the university's Innopac public catalogue) where users can make comments or suggestions about any aspect of library service — and do! We check the suggestions weekly and reply a week later — on average about fifty printable suggestions are made in that time.

In conclusion, we take our users feedback very seriously — we can not always implement what people suggest but we are constantly looking for ways to improve our service. ■



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By Peter Symonds

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