

Salad Days for an Academic Library

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Margaret Ruwoldt manages strategy, planning and quality initiatives for the University Library at the University of Melbourne. She has enjoyed a variety of professional roles in the higher education sector over the last 23 years. Though not herself a librarian, Margaret does own several stylish cardigans.

A qualified archivist and records manager, Donna McRostie is Director of Information Management, one of four organisational portfolios in the University of Melbourne Library. The Information Management program has a University-wide brief to support improvements in all aspects of information management, develop new lines of business for the University Library, and contribute to the professional development of non-academic staff across the University

“One size fits all.” Does anybody really believe that? Every person is different in some way from everyone else in the world. Every university has its own strategic direction and values. Every academic library is affected by profound change in the higher education sector, in the library and information science (LIS) profession and in its own parent institution. Those changes affect every library in a different way.

In 2005, through an extensive consultation process, the University of Melbourne community – academics and professional staff, student representatives, alumni, business partners and other stakeholders – chose to remake itself as a new type of institution that would be unique in Australia. The academic curriculum was completely revised; new investments confirmed a commitment to excellence in the broadest possible range of academic disciplines; engagement in public discourse and partnerships for social development were actively encouraged. A new management model, based on the principle of subsidiarity, was introduced to support these changes and is gradually being refined and improved.

For most of its 150-year history, the University of Melbourne Library fulfilled the traditional role of an academic library: accumulating collections, making reference works and journals available to researchers and students, offering scholars a quiet place to study, to write and to think.

Changes in the broader University have also wrought profound changes in the Library. Its scope of operations now goes far beyond traditional library services and touches on all aspects of the University’s core activities. New strategic directions and stakeholder expectations require new ways of organising and managing the Library’s activities. Academic libraries world-wide are facing similar challenges. Their business drivers tend to be closely linked with the strategic direction of the parent institution. Because every university has its own culture and values, because change has been so rapid and profound, there is no clear roadmap for managing and improving academic libraries. While some experiences and solutions can be shared, each library must find its own way to deliver value to its clients and stakeholders.

The University of Melbourne Library has adopted a pick-and-mix approach to applying frameworks, methodologies and theories to its operations. This case study reviews recent literature about strategy, assessment and management for academic libraries. It examines the successes and setbacks of the Melbourne University Library’s blended management style and concludes with some practice-based observations about how a culture of continuous improvement can be developed and sustained over time.