Structuring for strategic partnership - a new focus for library learning, teaching and research services

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Abstract:
In 2015 the La Trobe University Library implemented a new structure that is more closely aligned with the university aspirations for the future of learning, teaching and research. Central to the University's future vision is a shift to blended learning and increased emphasis on research. To match this future direction the library now has distinct teams aligned with learning and teaching and with research. Bringing related activities into focus in expert library teams and has resulted in new ways of offering library services in partnership with stakeholders.

The new library structure is designed to strengthen strategic partnerships and facilitate collaboration between the Library and other areas of the University. The new teams work side by side with university colleagues to develop and deliver services. The best of past collaborative ways of working have been formalised in the new structure, making such practice part of a new norm. Two frameworks; the Library learning and teaching partnership framework, and the Library research partnership framework are the strategic overlay for the new teams and provide lateral ways of working within these new focus areas to add value to the client experience, student learning, and research outcomes.

The new library structure is more than just reorganising how services are delivered; it is the beginning of a new identity for library staff that is more closely aligned with learning, teaching and research. This paper will explore the challenges and successes in implementing the new learning and teaching team. What has it meant for professional development, communication and navigating new service boundaries? In particular the paper outlines how a structure focussed on strategic partnership is changing our approaches to information and digital literacy, blended learning, and frontline services.

Keywords: higher education; strategic partnership; learning and teaching; collaboration; academic library organisational structure; new service models
1. Aligning library structure and university vision

In 2015 the La Trobe University (LTU) Library implemented a new structure that has been intentionally designed to be more closely aligned with the University aspirations for the future of learning, teaching and research. The university strategic plan *Future Ready 2013-2017* [La Trobe University, 2013] was the starting point for the process of reimagining approaches to library services and programs and then redesigning the LTU Library organisational structure so that it is responsive to changing institutional needs and expectations. A multifaceted design and change process over more than six months has resulted in a structure that is intended to strengthen partnerships between the library and other areas of the university. The emphasis is on partnership and collaboration.

The suite of documents that articulate the university’s vision, make clear La Trobe’s ambitions and direction for students and staff of the university - central to this vision is a shift to blended learning and increased focus on research. To match this future direction the LTU Library has clearly articulated strategies for both learning and research that position the Library as a partner in these endeavours. The *Library learning and teaching partnership framework (LLTPF)*, and the *Library research partnership framework* speak directly to university strategic documents and are the strategic overlay for our new teams. The frameworks are the starting point for teams to “deliver our services in flexible and innovative ways, be creative and take risks” [Peasley, 20014]. They pinpoint where the library can add value to the client experience, learning outcomes and research outcomes.

Our new structure classifies key services and functions according to their relevance to learning or research outcomes and then organises these activities into distinct expert teams. It is an alternative taxonomy that brings into focus new ways of offering library services in partnership with stakeholders. The new structure formalises the best of past collaborative ways of working, making such practice part of a new norm. This paper focuses specifically on the *LLTPF* and on how the new library learning and teaching team (L&T team) operates to contribute to student learning outcomes and the student learning experience.

2. A refreshed library focus on learning and teaching

Structuring for strategic partnership means devising a library organisational structure based on the parent institution’s mission and not on internal library functions. In other words the structure needs to reflect what is essential to achievement of university goals [Nutefall & Chadwell, 2012]. Shifting a library’s organisational structure to emphasise institutional strategy is a declaration that the library values a focus on clients and their needs more than a focus on library functions [Franklin, 2012]. Deliberate alignment with institutional needs lays the foundation for partnership across the university [Giesecke, 2012] to flourish. This shift is essential if academic libraries are to remain viable in the coming decades [Abram & Cromity, 2013].

At La Trobe University the library has shifted from a structure largely organised around internal library functions to a structure organised for scholarly partnership in the learning, teaching and research domains. We have moved from a structure based on traditional support functions, for example, client services, resources, technical systems and infrastructure, to a structure reflecting our university’s priorities. There are three teams in the new library structure: learning and teaching; research and collections; strategy and planning.

The purpose of the new library L&T team is to work with university colleagues to contribute to university goals in the *Learning and Teaching Plan*. The aim of the university *Learning and Teaching Plan* is to develop a distinctive educational experience across a range of curricular and co-curricular activities using new and creative approaches to educational delivery. The challenge for the library is how to differentiate ourselves so that we are contributing to our university’s aims for learning and teaching in a more visible way and with more impact. The establishment of the library L&T team is a response to this challenge that makes an overt

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1 These include: *Future Ready* (La Trobe University, 2013) strategy; *Learning and Teaching Plan* (La Trobe University, 2013); *Research Plan* (La Trobe University, 2013); *Digital Learning Strategy* (La Trobe University, 2015)
statement to the university community about our focus on creating a distinctive educational experience for students.

In our previous library structure services related to co-curricular programs (e.g. enquiry and research help desks, online chat, FAQs, orientation and generic training etc.) and curricular programs (embedding information literacy activity and assessment, elearning development, academic liaison, reading lists etc.) were split across two different teams – Learning and Research Services, and Collection Delivery and Facilities. Staff members involved in contributing to the student experience within and outside the curriculum were often siloed by functional team or by campus; sometimes efforts were duplicated or not sufficiently coordinated to ensure equality of access to services from the student perspective. The previous library structure didn’t facilitate taking advantage of information and skills transfer between staff contributing to learning and teaching. In considering our future role we recognised the importance of bringing curricular and co-curricular services together to form a holistic view of support for learning and teaching in order to get the best outcome for learners.

La Trobe is a five campus university with the main campus in metropolitan Melbourne and four campuses in regional Victoria. The university has 35,000 students and offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in two colleges – the SHE College (Science, Health and Engineering) and the ASSC College (Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce). The new library approach to learning and teaching is designed to get consistent outcomes for learners at all locations by joining up the services in one integrated team. The L&T team is made up of three cross-campus groups: curricular services; co-curricular services; and training. All groups work across the L&T team, across the library and across the university. There is collaboration at multiple levels – strategic, group and individual - in order to ensure maximum impact on the student experience.

Collaborative partnerships require a sharing of principles and resources to achieve a common aim that may not have been possible to achieve otherwise. To enable collaboration to happen easily, staff in the L&T team has a shared understanding of how collaborative partnerships drive the library contribution to learning and teaching. The set of principles that guide the L&T team in their service understanding and decision making about service delivery is articulated in the LLTPF.

3. Library learning and teaching partnership framework (LLTPF)

For library staff the LLTPF brings together crucial elements needed to enhance learning and teaching. It is both a services directory and service catalogue as well as an accessible gathering of the essential concepts that underpin the LTU Library vision for learning and teaching. The LLTPF clearly communicates the library’s commitment to learning and teaching. It outlines where the library needs to direct its energy to create an environment where all students have:

- the opportunity to develop digital literacies, particularly information literacy within the curriculum;
- support to develop information and digital literacy skills independently of curriculum activities;
- seamless co-curricular support across related university services
- easy and ready access to relevant resources and collections;
- access to a range of library learning spaces.

The LLTPF has the learning journey at its centre [Figure 1]. Surrounding the central learning journey are the stakeholders – library staff, students, and university staff (academics, learning and teaching centre staff, student services staff, IT staff, and other professional staff). Library staff and other stakeholders collaborate on curricular and co-curricular programs and services to improve the student learning experience and student learning outcomes. In the curricular and co-curricular domains the interdependent nature of library programs and services is represented in the diagram by circular arrows.

The curricular and co-curricular domains are encircled by a number of important and fundamental elements; namely the expertise that is required across the framework. First and
foremost is the concept of “digital literacies” (and more specifically information literacy). Learning and literacy are two notions that go together. In a digital society, it makes sense that digital learning and digital literacies are interdependent concepts. The LLTPF connects digital literacies with the La Trobe focus on digital learning that is outlined in Digital Future: Digital Learning Strategy [La Trobe University, 2015]. Digital Future is about providing all students with “high quality contemporary learning experiences” that will prepare them for “an increasingly digital future”. Digital literacies is an all-encompassing concept that covers all the literacies that students need to live, work and study in a digital society.2 Through the development and delivery of collaborative programs and services the L&T team contribute to a process that builds on the students’ existing knowledge and skills, enabling them to develop proficiency and then fluency in the range of digital literacies needed for academic success. This connection between digital literacies and digital learning supports students to interact and engage in the digital learning space at La Trobe.

Another fundamental element of the LLTPF is blended and online learning. Adopting pedagogies that maximise active learning, student engagement and blended and online delivery are key goals for the university in delivering a high quality learning and teaching experiences. Online delivery of programs and services means all students can take advantage of library services. Blended learning is “a mix of face-to-face and online learning. It involves thoughtful, sometimes innovative, integration of face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences”.3 The more tangible and essential resources that underpin support for learning and teaching include the LTU Library’s collections, both print and online, and its managed study spaces. This expertise is also represented in the outer circle of the framework diagram.

The LLTPF is a dynamic document. It was originally drafted by a small working group in June 2014 and then workshopped and revised by library staff. In 2015 it was again reviewed by library staff after the first four months of operation of the new L&T team. It is important that it is a living document that is catalyst for ongoing thinking about the intersection between the student

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2 Digital literacies are “capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society”. The JISC Digital literacies model includes seven elements: Information literacy, Digital scholarship, Learning skills, ICT literacy, Career and identify management, Communications and collaboration, Media literacy. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-digital-literacies

learning experience, student learning outcomes and the collaborative partnerships that will contribute to student learning success.

4. The LLTPF in practice

The LLTPF is based on the assumption that the combined knowledge, expertise and experience of all stakeholders will have the greatest impact on the student learning experience. To this end each group in the L&T team are working on delivering new and improved services in partnership with stakeholders. For the training group this means a focus on generic orientation and ICT literacy training programs for specific cohorts in collaboration with curricular and co-curricular services staff, the library research team and the Research Education and Development unit in the Graduate Research School. The training group has expertise in training for software programs (e.g. Word, SPSS, NVivo and Endnote). In delivering training they have shifted librarygeneric training from primarily face-to-face delivery to a program that includes a mix of face-to-face workshops and a focus on synchronous online training across all five campuses and distance education students.

In our new library structure we have created specialised positions known as learning advisors that connect discipline expertise with a professional focus on learning and teaching. Key attributes for these positions are flexibility, adaptability and communication skills. The curricular services group is arranged into two discipline teams, to match the two university Colleges. Senior learning advisors collaborate with academic staff to embed information literacy learning activities and assessment into the curriculum using a constructively aligned approach to curriculum design. This model is outlined in the LLTPF and has been developed through evidenced-based practice over a number of years [Salisbury, Corbin, & Peseta, 2013]. There is an ever increasing requirement for in-depth knowledge of pedagogy and higher education to enable library staff to engage with curriculum design activity. In recent years the need for “higher-end” specialised expertise has been identified as critical for librarians working with researchers because developing “higher-end” expertise is followed by “deep collaboration” with academic partners [Corall, 2014]. This is also our experience in learning and teaching. As we increase our expertise in learning there is a corresponding increase in our capacity for collaboration and development of more sophisticated and relevant services. A team whose focus is on learning and teaching can contribute more intentionally than a team based on the traditional liaison model where professional attention is constantly shifted across a broad range of learning, research and collection activities, potentially diluting expertise and resulting in uneven attention across critical portfolio areas.

Our new library learning advisor roles also increase capacity for online learning approaches and development of innovative elearning resources for curricular and co-curricular programs. Development of online learning objects and online content is a major focus and learning advisors collaborate with academic staff and La Trobe Learning and Teaching centre staff and the Library Digital Experience team. The Library Elearning blueprint is the documented plan that builds on previous library success. It outlines a methodology and process for developing scalable and reusable elearning objects and increasing staff capacity for continuous improvement in this area.

The co-curricular services group delivers face-to-face and online enquiry services. The new ASK La Trobe service model is a partnership between the LTU Library and Student Services. The model is outlined in the LLTPF and is designed to deliver a seamless service for all student enquiries. ASK La Trobe Help Zones provide face-to-face services and operate in two libraries. The ASK La Trobe Help Zone illustrates the potential of collaborative partnership for service delivery. Staff from four different university operational teams come together to provide service in the ASK La Trobe Help Zone. From the student perspective the advantage of this arrangement is that a range of experts can be accessed in one place. Students are no longer bounced around between service locations. The ASK La Trobe service model was developed collaboratively and this collaboration extends into the governance and operational structure.

4 The ASK La Trobe Help Zone team consists of staff from four organisational units across the University: i.e. Library; Student Services and Administration; Information and Communications Technology; La Trobe Learning and Teaching centre.
The next step is to focus on increased collaboration for delivery of online services (FAQ knowledgebase, email enquiries, online chat). All L&T team service groups are working on renewing and increasing communication methods. Personal relationship building has always been our strength, but this needs to be supported by systematised communication via multiple channels both within the library and with stakeholders.

5. Implementation Challenges

There are many challenges in implementing a new structure – even a purposefully aligned and designed one! Structuring for strategic partnership has the potential to spark a synergistic process of traversing traditional service boundaries in collaboration with other learning and teaching stakeholders. It is a process of combining interests and professional skills to achieve better outcomes for students. For the L&T team the new structure is the beginning of a new identity that is directly related to directions in university learning and teaching. With an intensive focus on learning and teaching activities the new L&T team can work with other areas of the university in new ways. But while collaborative partnership is central to our new way of operating it also presents some challenges.

The most notable cultural challenge has been in co-curricular services. For staff members in the ASK La Trobe Help Zone one of the biggest changes has been being part of two teams – an operational team that they report to, and the Help Zone service team where they collaborate with colleagues to deliver services. Scaffolded support has helped staff from all areas to adjust to this model. It involves regular review and reflection and ranges from individual mentoring to team meetings, and a weekly newsletter. Working in a shared space can also be challenging. Welcoming staff from other areas of the university to work in the library space may have initially seemed like an invasion of personal space, but has very quickly resulted in collaborative problem solving and operational and service improvements. The key to success has been the staff commitment to making the new “service” team and service model work. The energy and enthusiasm of staff has enabled the Library to take a big step towards our learning and teaching future in a very short time.

Managing the process of change is critical to a successful transition to a new structure and service model. Overall the biggest challenge in such a dramatic restructure has been bringing everyone along. Some staff members haven’t looked back and have embraced change while others have taken longer to let go of past work practices and concepts. Everyone has made this shift at different rates. A consistent management approach to understanding the issues across the L&T team has been essential to implementing a steady building of the new culture. Scaffolded support for the new team culture has been essential as has a new approach to professional learning and development.

6. Professional learning and development

Building staff learning and development into the L&T team routine has been an obvious and natural priority in our first six months. Not only because of the importance of training in transition to a new structure [Chan & Soong, 2010] but because as a “learning” team our own learning will be a continuing focus and priority. Our professional learning program encompasses easily accessible university programs (e.g. customer service training, leadership, and external conferences etc.), however more significant is the prominence given to in-house staff development as a formal part of the program. This makes very visible staff responsibility for guiding the skill development of their colleagues in areas where they have specific expertise. Our professional contribution to student learning is mirrored by a reframing of professional development through collaborative peer learning and greater sharing of skills and expertise in the context of real service issues [Dovey, 1997].

In the first four months of operation the new L&T team the professional learning and development program included over 40 sessions across 32 tailored training programs. It is a robust weekly schedule of activities in which all L&T team staff have engaged. The programs are a classified into; team updates (sharing expertise and innovation), team development (reflection and development of key attributes); search skills (professional skills), and software (technical skills). Sessions are explicitly customised group learning with direct application to
practice. Training is open to all staff in the library to encourage cross team participation as relevant. Training resources are available for staff to revisit via the training database [Figure 2]. Review of the program has revealed the L&T team appetite for ongoing training as part of their weekly routine. Feedback from staff has emphasised the inclusiveness of the program and the practicalities and convenience of being able to easily access learning resources online. Appreciation of having time built into their day to review resources, and an acknowledgement of the inspiration that comes from learning new things together are other outcomes of the program that staff have highlighted in feedback.

The in-house training program has addressed the need to have a deeper learning and teaching skill base and has also contributed to establishing the new team culture and new professional expectations. Working with peers to build skills and reflect on services enhances everyone’s professional perspective. There is never any disadvantage to gaining a richer understanding of student needs. The program has covered a wide range of the skills required for learning focused roles including: elearning development; pedagogy (e.g. constructive alignment); building partnerships; communication and liaison skills; introductory and advanced database searching; discipline understanding and resources; specific subject assignments; content development and writing skills (e.g. scriptwriting and storyboarding); information and digital literacy skills; Help Zone enquiries; technical skills (e.g. Slideshare; LibGuides; Primo; Endnote); presentation skills; and referencing.

7. Conclusion

The LTU Library new structure is a result of a vision for strategic partnership which recognises the importance of linking with other areas of the university to deliver enhanced services. The new L&T team is important because it directly links the library to university learning and teaching. This concentration on learning and teaching distinguishes the library as a key contributor in the learning and teaching space.

For the L&T team the LLTPF is our roadmap, it is a guide to what we do and formalises collaborative partnership as an inherent part of everyday practice. Most importantly it maintains the student learning journey at the centre of that practice. The LLTPF has been the starting point for extending and deepening our collaboration across university curricular, co-curricular and elearning programs and services.

Creating and maintaining collaborative partnerships in a layered institution is complex but it is essential. The new LTU Library structure recognises and acknowledges that now more than
ever before libraries need to forge productive relationships at multiple levels across the university (e.g. institutional, college and individual). Library staff are well placed to create, facilitate and participate in collaborative partnership opportunities and initiatives, and to leverage library expertise for application in other areas. Our challenge going into the future will be to maintain the LTU Library’s visibility in these collaborative partnerships and to cement the library’s relevance and contribution in the ongoing development of the student learning experience and student learning outcomes.
References


