Library Profile: University of Cape Town

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The University

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is South Africa’s oldest university and one of Africa’s leading teaching and research institutions.

UCT was founded in 1829 as the South African College, a boys’ school which also provided some tertiary education. The College developed into a full-fledged university during the period 1880 to 1900, building its first dedicated science laboratories, and starting the Departments of Mineralogy and Geology to meet the need for skilled personnel in the country’s emerging diamond and gold mining industries. Soon afterward the Medical School was begun, as were engineering courses and a Department of Education.

UCT moved from the city to its present site – on the Groote Schuur Campus – a splendid mountainside location on the former estate of Cecil Rhodes on the slopes of Devil’s Peak in 1928, providing an opportunity for rapid development.

Apart from establishing itself as a leading research and teaching university in the decades that followed, UCT was also from 1960 to 1990 a well-recognized center of sustained opposition to apartheid and support for academic freedom. The 1980s and 1990s at UCT have been characterised by a deliberate, planned process of internal transformation to meet South Africa’s new challenges in higher education.

The University has six faculties (Commerce, Engineering and the Built Environment, Health Sciences, Humanities, Law and Science). This structure was recently reviewed as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process aimed at fulfilling UCT’s Mission of being “an outstanding teaching and research university, educating for life and addressing the challenges facing our society.”

Today, the university community comprises more than 16,000 students and about 4,500 members of staff. Particular emphasis is placed on postgraduate studies, and 30% of its students are enrolled in postgraduate programmes. UCT is internationally recognised as Africa’s leading research university, a position confirmed by independent peer review.

The Libraries

The establishment of a library was one of the earliest aims of the South African College founders, but it was not until 1905 that the books, which had accumulated by purchase and gift, were formally organised as a library by a professor of Modern Languages.

In 1920 a University Librarian was appointed — the first in South Africa. Since then there have been six University Librarians at UCT. The present incumbent is Ms. Joan Rapp, who has held this position since 1998.

By 1929 the Library had five members of staff, one branch library (Medical) and a stock of ca. 40,000 items. The foundation stone for the new main library on the Groote Schuur Campus was laid during the centenary celebrations in that year.

The first expansion of the main library took place in the mid-1960s, but the increasing accommodation crisis led to the development of a “linear library,” a fairly narrow building running through several contiguous buildings housing different faculties.

The Main Library has once more changed its shape and now forms a “U” around the campus’s central and most historical building. Now a traditional exterior — in harmony with the architecture of the campus — houses a dramatic and technologically sophisticated interior. Renamed the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library, the Main Library houses a number of information services desks and special collections, along with a new Knowledge Commons, modeled on those of the University of Southern California and Eastern Michigan University.

Today, UCT Libraries consist of the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library and a number of branch libraries. There are 188 members of staff and a book stock of about 1 million volumes; journal holdings of ca. 16,000 titles, of which 5,300 are current; and ca. 100,000 other library materials.

Acquisitions

Since the arrival of a new Director three years ago, there has been a radical organisational restructuring, based on American models. Since April 2000 all acquisition functions fall under one department. The management of e-resources is also done in this section, as is the preparation of journals for binding. There is a strong emphasis in the Libraries on providing electronic access to information. There are 13 FTE staff members in Acquisitions, 3 of whom have library qualifications.

A Web-based in-house system is used to place and receive orders, and process journal subscriptions. No cataloguing is done in Acquisitions.

Over 80% of material purchased comes from outside South Africa. A major international subscription agent, Swets, is used to supply the bulk of the journals. The books are bought mainly from library suppliers in Britain (John Smith and Son) and the U.S. (Blackwell Book Services and Busca).

A particular challenge is acquiring the material for the African Studies Library, probably the best in Africa. Southern African published material is bought from Clarke’s Bookshop and Clarke’s Africana and Rare Books. The range acquired is highly comprehensive. The difficulty is obtaining material from the rest of Africa. The two best sources are the Africa Bookshop in London, the main outlet for the Africa Book Collective, which distributes many African publishers. The other is Hogarth Distribution.
Profile

Encouraged

Digby Sales
Collection Development Manager
Chancellor Oppenheimer Library
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch, South Africa

Born: Born in Cape Town in 1949.
Current residence: Rondebosch, Cape Town.
Education: BA in History from UCT, 1971.
Secondary Teacher's Diploma from UCT, 1972.
Higher Diploma in Library Science from University of South Africa, 1976.
Master of Arts (Librarianship) (by thesis) from UCT, 1981.

Summary of job experiences: I came to working in libraries via teaching and a brief spell in business. Here is a rundown on my career:

1977: Librarian at Johannesburg Public Library
1977-79: Librarian for South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg
1981-88: Librarian and then Head of Acquisitions dealing with purchases, gifts and legal deposit of books and serials, at South African Library, Cape Town (now National Library of South Africa (Cape Town))
1988-2000: Head of Book Acquisitions at University of Cape Town Libraries
2000-present: Collection Development Manager at UCT

Family: I have two boys: Donald, 16, and Andre, 14.

Biggest recent surprise: Despite not having done much exercise for many years, I am not as unfit as I thought. After having recently joined the mountain club, I found I could hike for many hours.


What I do in my spare time: Hiking in the mountains among the fynbos, reading, and watching films. (I am a classifier for the government Film and Publications Board).

What I'd like to be doing seven years from now: I would be on top of my present job that has the potential to be very stimulating. To be able to do the job effectively, the local currency must not have declined to less than R12 to the dollar (presently R8: 1), so the Libraries could still purchase some library material.

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which acquires much of its material by having individuals physically pick up material within Africa.

Collection Development

Collection Development is part of every subject librarian's job description and is co-ordinated by a Collection Development Manager, who approves all orders. Subject areas, rather than departments, are the focus of collection development.

The Library controls the budget, but information on notional amounts is provided to the academic departments. Purchases are based on needs. Requests are encouraged from the academics, but staff, students or librarians can initiate orders. The approval of new journal titles is more difficult because of the problem of an ongoing commitment. The Libraries are facing annual inflation rates of between 25 and 40 per cent due to the weakness of the South African currency and publishers' price increases.

Budgetary control for the purchase of library materials was removed from the academics in 1998. Journals no longer are circulated, including those which were once housed within small and unofficial departmental collections. These changes have brought dissatisfaction from some academics, particularly those from the Science Faculty, who have previously worked with highly decentralized resources.

The Future

The major changes in the Libraries - as well as the major physical renovations and building - are part of the overall plan to enhance UCT's ability to be a world-class African university in the 21st century. Past practices have had to change, so that staff and students can have as wide access to material as possible, within the limited materials budget of about $2.4 million for 2001.

UCT is a very stimulating place to work as the institution tries to deal with transformation and equity issues within a framework of a changing student and staff profile. All of the problems of academic libraries are here. In addition, however, UCT faces a set of problems which are very different: significant devaluation of the currency, providing a first-rate education for a mix of students from different levels of information and language literacy; inability of the public library system to meet the broader information needs of business and the community; and an economic environment in which unemployment runs at 37.3%.

South Africa has made a radical transformation in the 1990s, and UCT and its Libraries are taking the lead in the academic sector in ensuring that first rate education is available to a broad range of the population, as these graduates will be the future leaders of the country.