GETTING IN BED WITH OUR CUSTOMERS: HOW DID WE EMBED OUR SERVICES TO PUSH THE LIBRARY MISSION AT VAAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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1. Introduction

- The technological changes in higher education have brought threats and opportunities in academic libraries.

- These changes have transformed education and forced re-examination of the roles of the libraries and librarians, as well as faculties, and additionally forcing upon both the need for collaboration (Chang and Chen, 2011:425).

- Responding to these changes academic libraries have realized that they do not exist in isolation, as privileges that they used to enjoy as gate-keepers of information are no longer the same.

- Academic libraries are now part of the educational process and have a mission to play.

- They exist to support students and staff in their research and teaching by acquiring and making the best information available (Tachill, 2008:1).
To keep VUT’s mission alive we embarked on a benchmarking exercise to determine what other academic libraries did to keep their missions alive.

We discovered that academic libraries were practicing embedded librarianship.

The concept was introduced to the team of us in 2010 but we started playing around and practicing this new approach of making ourselves more visible in 2011.

We further enhanced and embraced library’s mission (which is to contribute to the creation of knowledge and development of lifelong learning) by training the customers to be independent learners and to be able to help themselves.

We are no longer using the library-centred approach to learning. Instead we are now using a customer-centred approach. We are of the view that customer-satisfaction is the major indicator of our success.
Understanding embedded librarianship

- I came across with various definitions of embedded librarianship during the literature review. Some of these definitions were developed based on how academic libraries have embedded themselves in their institutions.

- We are still using the traditional methods at VUT, hence supporting the author below because the definition fits well with what we do.

Embedded librarians are **librarians that focus on the:**

- Needs of one or more specific groups,
- Building relationships with those groups,
- Developing an understanding of their work,
- Providing information services that are highly customized, and targeted to their greatest needs (Kvenild (2012)).
This paper is going to explore on how VUT librarians stayed relevant in these trying times, redefined their roles, embraced technological changes and later embedded themselves in faculties to support teaching and learning.

The paper will further discuss the challenges we faced while promoting this mission.

Lastly, the paper will discuss the embedded practices and methods that worked us; how we enhanced those chosen methods; adopted them and left a visible mark to both students and staff.
2. Tried and tested models

As part of educational process academic libraries have a role to play and a mission to fulfill in supporting teaching and learning in higher education. It is therefore important for us to grab this opportunity with both hands.

❖ To stay relevant we decided to get out from our comfort zones and became pro-active.

❖ Our aim was to know what was happening outside our traditional premises rather than just sitting in our offices and wait for customers to come to us.

❖ In 2012 we decided to formalize and implement the concept and practice of embedded librarianship and piloted this new approach by using various models.

❖ The reason for piloting this was to get a buy-in to the concept, and to see how it will be received by the VUT community, and come up with strategies and implement models that will work for us.
We collaborated with the faculties by trying and testing the following six models:

- Tablet e-reader project
- Departmental visits and faculty collaboration
- Social media technologies
- Class visits
- Collaboration with the Dept. of Communication
- Owning Turnitin software
2.1 Departmental visits and faculty collaboration

- By being pro-active we started visiting lecturers just to introduce the concept, showcase our skills and competencies.

- The departmental visits enabled us to know what was happening on the ground.

- Our additional aim was to collaborate with them in their teaching and learning activities.

- Some lecturers welcomed this new approach and started inviting us to address and offer training during their lecture periods.

- Others were negative. I will discuss this later when talking the challenges we experienced as we were embarking on this new journey.
2.2 Class visits

- The class visits enabled us to talk directly to students and focus on their information needs.

- A worldwide trend and the phenomenon observed by Owens (2008:8) also supported by the author is that some students are still doing research using Google only.

- In addition, there has been several episodes of plagiarism.

- Plagiarism is worsened by lack of understanding of the purpose and use of referencing than the intent to cheat, hence the need of library instructions as Owens further explains.

- We embedded ourselves by sharing with the students the services they were not aware of.

- This included online databases, printed journals, reference sources and other sources that they can use for their academic work.
We also emphasized that Google should not be the only source they need to rely on for their information needs.

There is a belief that when students see for themselves what is available, rather than just hearing from the librarians, they will choose to use the library resources more often (Owens, 2008:10). Our show and tell presentations proved to be the best method in supporting the latter.

Students who were not aware about these services were left more informed.
2.3 Collaboration with the Department of Communication to Incorporate Information Literacy

- The new population today is technologically advanced.

- This is caused by emerging trends in technology.

- In dealing with these changes universities have been forced to review their operations and revised their activities, and thus creating new opportunities (Smidt and Gulcin (1998)).

- Lifelong is one of the major graduate exit-levels or attributes that any institution of higher learning is striving for.

- Supporting and enhancing life-long learning is also another major role of librarians working in institutions of higher learning.
Academic librarians have been embarking on library orientation and library instruction programmes for years.

But the advent of the Internet has made information to be available everywhere.

This influx of information made institutions of higher learning worldwide to adopt information literacy standards.

These standards and other aspects of information literacy are not taught to students by their lecturers.

VUT libraries too, have followed the suit to enhance these information literacy standards further.

In 2006 I developed an online credit-bearing information literacy module called “Introduction to information literacy skills”.
The module was incorporated into the End-user Computing.

The course ran over two years and was phased-off due to logistical issues.

I’m extremely passionate about information literacy. When I saw my trial effort going down I knew I had to do something. We all go our way out when we want to reach a certain goal and leave a visible mark or a lasting impression.

In 2010 I registered for Advanced Diploma in Higher education. This two year diploma helped me with the necessary teaching, facilitation, assessment, module development, e-learning skills etc.

Empowered with these skills I then developed a new information literacy programme in 2012.
This time I managed to speak the language that academics understand better.

For example:

- Outcomes of the course - (what the students will learn after completing the course)
- Intended learning outcomes - (how the students will benefit from attending the course)

I presented initiative to the library staff for their input.

This initiative was taken to the Senate and was given a stamp of approval.

A committee comprising academics and library staff was formed to find ways of incorporating the programme into the university curriculum.

It was agreed that the course will no longer be incorporated and offered under End-user computing; instead it will be incorporated into the Department of Communication in July 2013 as all first year students are required to do Communication irrespective of the course they have registered for.
2.4 Owning Turnitin software

I know plagiarism is part of information literacy but I have a reason for discussing this separately.

- As indicated earlier the paradigm-shift in higher education has brought exciting opportunities for librarians.

- I also noted in this paper that students use Google as their first stop to look for information rather than going to the library to get credible information that they will never find on Google.

- I also shared with you that students copy and paste.

- Some do that intentionally.

- Others lack knowledge on referencing.

- And some are not aware about the consequences of plagiarism.
What is the role of academic librarians in combating this?

Our role is to sensitize the students about the dangers of plagiarism and about the services that we have that might help them.

- In 2007 VUT bought an anti-plagiarism software (Turnitin) to be used by lecturers to check students’ assignments to determine whether the assignments were plagiarized or not.

- And for students to check the percentage of plagiarized content before submitting the paper to be marked.

- This software was managed by the Research Department but it never fulfilled the outcomes it was intended for.

- We helped the university from wasting money when this was handed over to the library in January 2012.

- We did not know how to use it because we never received any formal training.
I decided to play around with the software. After putting more effort I managed to master the basics.

We promoted this service and invited both students and lecturers for training on how to use this software.

The response was good; students and lecturers came in large numbers. I remember panicking on day I was to offer the first the training. The room was full; all eyes were on me.

My role and objective was to show students and staff that this service should be provided by the library. Furthermore my role was to put the library on the academic landscape.

I was satisfied with the results because my extra efforts helped both students and lecturers to know how to use the software and also to be aware about plagiarism.

The ownership of this software was also another example where we demonstrated our key and strategic role in supporting teaching and learning.
2.5 Social media technologies

In the digital age librarians cannot shy away and be reluctant from using social media. Studies have proven that these tools have a huge impact in all aspects of life.

- They are also becoming essential for accessing library services (Matos, Matsuka-Motley and Mayer (2010:133).

- Information goes viral when posted on social media.

- To further fulfill our strategic mission and getting in bed with customers, the library took advantage of these tools and created Facebook and Twitter accounts.

- We continuously improve our services by taking suggestions from what our customers have posted or suggested, although they sometimes suggest or ask for information that is not library-related.

- To further strengthen our mission we also sensitize our customers about academic social media that they can use, for example (www.mendeley.com, www.academia.edu) and (www.researchgate.net) during our training sessions.
2.6 The tablet e-reader project

Information today comes in various forms and packages. This means customers are longer forced to come to the library to view what is available.

- Library catalogues are now web-based.
- Databases come in electronic format.
- Libraries have books that also come in electronic format (e-books or digital books).

E-readers are required to view these e-books and are becoming significant in higher education. They can store a large collection of books, articles, class notes; students do not need to carry a stack of textbooks in their bags (Educause (March 2010)).
Even though we have these state-of-the-art facilities we still have distance learners who are unable to access these services because some companies prevent them from accessing certain websites.

We had to find solution to enable those customers to access our services.

We bought tablet e-readers to enable them to utilize the e-books and online databases.

**What is an e-reader?**

According to Educause (March 2010) an e-reader “is a portable device, low power, high resolution device which is specifically designed to display digital versions of written material from book, magazines, newspapers, and other printed sources”.
This idea was initiated by our E-resources librarian towards the end of 2012.

The library piloted this project by choosing Biomedical Science students in the faculty of Applied and Computer Science.

Sixteen tablet e-readers were bought for those Master students.

Training was provided to that chosen group.

The aim was to enable them to download and make use of the e-books and online databases the library subscribes to.
3. Successes: Models that worked for us

3.1 Class and departmental visits

- Lecturers who allowed us to visit their classes praised us because they saw improvement in students’ assignments and different types of sources they use.

- Some lecturers are spreading this initiative to other faculty members and the demand to attend classes is slowly increasing.

- Students also praised us because they were not aware about other facilities that were important to them.

- They were also not aware about consequences of plagiarism. Some students even go to an extent of consulting us for referencing before submitting their assignments.

- We also have standing invitations to faculty and departmental meetings just to know what is happening on the ground, and stay informed about possible opportunities for teaching and learning.
3.2 Taking over and owning Turnitin

- Taking over and owning Turnitin did wonders for the library.

- I am getting invitations from all corners of VUT to come and train both students and staff.

- The library has developed posters sensitizing students about plagiarism.

- The trust the library has earned has also enabled the university to give the library a permission to compile a policy on plagiarism. This has been done in collaboration with academic staff.
3.3 Social media

Facebook and Twitter

- These social media enabled us to invade the students’ space and interact with them in their comfort zones.

- Our services are improving because we hear directly from them about their experiences and work on things they propose (Evan (2012:164)).

Academic social media

- Sensitizing both students and academics about academic social media also worked for us.

- Students and lecturers are using these academic social media sites to see what is happening in their respective disciplines.

- Some lecturers have already shared their researched papers with the world.
3.4 E-reader project and collaboration with Department of Communication to incorporate information literacy

I’m not going to comment on the E-reader project and collaboration with Department of Communication to integrate information literacy because:

- These projects are still fairly new.
- The results are yet to be seen.
- But we are certain about positive results and the legacy these projects are going leave behind.
4. Challenges we encountered as we were embarking on this journey

When we knocked at the lecturers’ doors to sell the concept we found ourselves answering questions that were not related to our visits.

- We listened and tried to solve complaints about other library services.
- Some lecturers did not take us seriously and therefore refused us to visit their classes.
- Others complained about time they don’t have hence they were unable to accommodate us.
- The information technology (IT) department sent us from pillar to post when we wanted to have access to Moodle and Sakai; that is course management systems currently used at VUT. This prevented us from embedding some of our services online.
- The shortage of IT skills also prevented us from doing the job well, hence appealing to all library managers that are here to never hesitate to send their employees to acquire those crucial skills.
5. Future directions

We know our strengths and competencies that we can use to support teaching and learning. We should not be afraid to try and experiment with new technological innovations.

- Embedding our services online and reaching more students is one of our future directions.

- VUT will be migrating to Blackboard in June 2013. The university has accommodated us on this course management system.

- Training is going to be provided.

- This will enable us to increase our programme online using this platform and continue posting library customized information for specific disciplines.
6. Conclusion

Staff members, whether passionate or hesitant about a particular technology, are confronted with these changes (Evans, 2012).

- Implementing embedded project is not a library duty alone, but a duty and a strategic goal of the entire institution.
- Building a good relationship with faculties before collaboration is extremely important.
- We must not be afraid to start slow with the intention of growing big.
- Taking a snapshot of our institutional needs and goals when developing an embedded project is also important (Kvenild, 2012).
- Other important lessons to be learned and to be bear in mind when embedding is the need to innovate, cooperate, and experiment (Mathew and Schroeder, 2006:65).
- We are still partially embedded at VUT although our aim is to be sufficiently embedded.

- Constant reflection and evaluation of our services will enable us to reach majority of students.

- We must never underestimate what we can do. We have more opportunities now than before.

- We have a role to play, a mission to fulfill, and most importantly a legacy to leave in higher education and beyond.

Thank you!
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7. References


