

Back from the Brink: Saving the Queensland Department of Agriculture Library

ABSTRACT

This is the survival story of the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Library. On 29th of August 2012, the Director-General of the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry publically announced the closure of the Department's Library. Five days earlier, the fifteen staff within the Library were told privately that the service would close; the premises were to be vacated and the collection decommissioned, ending a ninety-six year history of Departmental library services. This was the first Queensland government library casualty, as part of a wider program of contestability and reduction of non-frontline services from a newly elected government seeking to fix the budget deficit; more library cuts were to follow.

As the news of the closure spread, the Department's senior scientists ignited a campaign to save a core-science component of the former service, stating that "a modern, relevant and accessible library service is essential for us to conduct RD&E to benefit Queensland's economy through increasing agricultural productivity". The proposal was successful and just twenty-seven days later a new 'Research Information Service' (RIS) was launched and collections and staff moved to the existing Library space at the EcoSciences Precinct, a collaborative facility where Queensland Government and CSIRO scientists are working to solve some of Australia's biggest environmental challenges.

This paper will describe the RIS client-stakeholder model and will briefly detail how it was established, amid the decommissioning and closure of the Departmental

Library. It will address the challenges of operating a service with reduced staff, loss of expertise and budget, and how these issues were overcome. Cancelling resources, streamlining delivery (both electronic and physical), and reducing administrative workloads helped to generate initial cost savings and reduced the operational burden on a small team.

After three years of operation, the success of RIS is the ability to adapt the library service to match stakeholder requirements. We CAN do more with less, by focussing budget to essential online resources, seeking cost savings through new consortia deals, firmer negotiations with vendors, targeted marketing and branding initiatives, and upskilling in specialist roles to maximise the delivery of existing valued services. There have been opportunities too, collaboration with government science libraries, co-location with clients, and engagement with stakeholders, who not only understand and appreciate our service, but were prepared to stand up to save it. This strategic-partnership generates flexibility to respond to changing client needs, and creates a desire for continuous improvement and innovation. Ongoing success now lies in our ability to annually demonstrate our value as a cost-effective, fit-for-purpose research and information service.

PAPER

Introduction

This is the survival story of the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Library. On 29th of August 2012, the Director-General of the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry publicly announced the closure of the Department's Library. Five days earlier, the fifteen staff within the Library were told privately that the service would close; the premises were to be vacated and the collection decommissioned, ending a ninety-six year history of Departmental library services. This was the first Queensland government library casualty, as part of a wider program of contestability and reduction of non-frontline services from a newly elected government seeking to fix the budget deficit; more library cuts were to follow.

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This paper will describe how a client-funded model was proposed and launched, amid the decommissioning and closure of the Departmental Library. It will address the challenges of operating a service with reduced staff, loss of expertise and

budget, and how these issues were overcome. After three years of operation, we are in a position to reflect on the challenges and successes, and to declare that engagement with clients, vendors, consortia and government colleagues is essential to our ongoing survival.

The role of advocacy in saving a library

The quick actions of Departmental scientists and the wider outcry from the public ensured the survival of the library service. The response from library users was swift. Just one day after the internal announcement of the closure, senior scientists were already building a case to reconsider the decision and to explore alternative solutions. The Department's Science Leaders called on scientific staff to supply statements as to 'how the library supports your work and why simple access to the web will not meet your needs'.

To the dismay of library staff and users, the Queensland Minister for Agriculture John McVeigh was quoted by the ABC in regards to the closure that "more farmers are accessing material online" and that "staff will be able to use other departments and university libraries" (ABC, 2012). The statement perfectly demonstrated the hurdle in front of us – a misconception as to who the Library served (internal Departmental staff only) and undervalued the high quality, specialised information services and collections that had been curated and developed to support the research interests of the Department.

Statements from Departmental staff clearly indicated the value of maintaining library professionals within the Department and warned of the impact on the research output and competitiveness of the Department.

“Library staff now play an integral role in the entire research process – from initiation of a research concept to dissemination of the outcomes of research. The disappearance of the uniquely skilled library professionals will significantly damage the research capacity of the Department” – Research Manager, Poultry CRC.

“The library staff, like so many “non-front line” staff, provide an expert, high quality, important service to research staff. The loss of these services would mean, in simple terms that we are able to do our jobs less well and less efficiently.” Principal Scientist - Aquaculture

“I believe that if the library were to close this would be a major impediment to our ability to deliver high quality R&D as a credible research organisation into the future.” Principal Research Scientist

ALIA President of the time, Vanessa Little, expressed the situation perfectly as part of the ‘Dumb Idea’ Campaign. Without highly qualified library information professionals government decision making will be based on light weight, glib answers to complex questions that affect the lives of all Queenslanders (Little, 2012). ALIA CEO, Sue McKerracher (Executive Director during 2012), provided vital support and a boost to staff morale; visiting with library managers to strategize and speaking out to media (Johnson, 2012), (Armstrong, 2012). “The razor gang will say

people can find their own information online, but closing libraries exposes government departments to a higher risk of ill-informed decision-making” (McKerracher, 2013).

ALIA’s “call on the Queensland Government to halt the cuts and to renew its investment in these essential library and information services” (Little, 2012) was going to be difficult to achieve, when services with higher profiles were being closed in the arts, health and community sectors. Internally, those close to the proposal suggested a more pragmatic approach. Rather than a head-on challenge to the decision, continue with the closure of the Departmental Library at 80 Ann Street, Brisbane, and keep the science library service going in a cut-back and streamlined way. This approach proved successful and approval was granted for a client-funded ‘Research Information Service’ (RIS), for the core-science groups of the Department, with funding for four Librarian positions.

A new model

As the service launched in late 2012, library users were funding library services, with four scientific groups contributing budget to fund library staff and resources. During the information technology boom of the 1990’s, government libraries often found themselves grouped within Information Technology divisions. At the time, this correlation with digital technology and online library services seemed appropriate. Library services were a valid corporate service, however in practice, corporate services staff and management (Information Technology, Human Resources and Finance) were not high users of library services, and were therefore unlikely to be advocates.

The new DAF model has organisational aligned library services within a research, development and extension arm of the Department; staff are researchers, published authors, and technical specialists in their field. As experienced library users, from research, publishing and study, they understand library value and more often, have the skills to independently access resources and services.

Adoption of a client-stakeholder model was possible due to the following factors:

- An already established relationship with users.
- Usage metrics that demonstrated current and historical demand.
- Client understanding of the value of professional library services and the impact on research capability if this service was lost.
- Willingness of client groups to sacrifice budget to fund their own service.
- Availability of physical library space at existing government facilities; space for both staff and resources;
- Completion of the decommissioning and closure of the Departmental Library at 80 Ann Street, Brisbane.

Changes to client base & staffing

Entering into a strategic-partnership with the scientific staff of the Department has meant a return to a core-group of 1,100 full-time equivalents (FTE's), from a department of 2,200 FTE's. In comparison, the former Departmental Library had been servicing a user base of 5,000 FTE's across a multidisciplinary collection (science, business, trade and mining) as part of the mega-department 'Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation'. In establishing the new

model, the science groups agreed to fund four Librarians. Job positions from the former service were transferred to the new business area and five current employees moved across (three staff accepted part-time agreements in order to share the positions). The remaining nine Departmental Library staff had the option to redeploy within the Department (and wait for a suitable offer) or take the redundancy on offer. The loss of positions and expertise would need to be absorbed or resolved quickly.

Launching

The Department announced “PIB Library closes - Research Information Services (RIS) commences” via the Department intranet less than one month after the original closure announcement. Behind the scenes, decommissioning tasks ran alongside launch tasks as staff worked diligently to meet the tight timeframes and exit the building by a six month deadline. The collection of books and print journals at the Primary Industries Building were evaluated to meet the Department’s future research needs and the available space at the Precincts; EcoSciences Precinct at Dutton Park, and the Health and Food Sciences Precinct at Coopers Plains. Duplicate materials and superseded titles were offered to other institutions. Client groups within the new service were invited to borrow items on permanent loan, in some instances large collections were rehoused with business units to save space in what would be a reduced collection footprint at the new locations. Library staff worked in teams of two to evaluate the aging book collection, and working in shifts, quickly identified which items would be relocated. Moving contractors were engaged to relocate the collection, University Alumni groups accepted donations for second-hand book sales, and items no longer relevant were discarded via a steady stream of wheeled skip bins, as staff emptied the library space and basement archives.

Preparation for the launch of the Research Information Service, later in October, gave staff a two month window to develop branding and identify immediate cost savings before rolling out the new service.

- In collaboration with the Department's creative design team, a new intranet banner with a royal blue colour scheme and images representing the scientific groups of the new service was created. The banner formed the basis for all subsequent branding.
- Electronic databases and journals in non-science areas (business, economics, public affairs and non-science reference) were immediately marked for non-renewal and known users were notified.
- Negotiations with vendors commenced to amend existing institutional licenses to tailored agreements for 'actual users'. Deals were brokered to ensure key scientific databases would be renewed. In some case, capped annual price increases were reduced to ensure ongoing access during our first year.
- Electronic resources that were previously 'nice to have' were cancelled in favour of ensuring essential resources could be maintained. Resource Discovery product 'Summon' was our first casualty. Library users had never warmed to federated searching, possibly due to the sophisticated search techniques of experienced users, or preference for searching a preferred scientific database, therefore the funds could be better allocated.

When the service was launched, so too was a rebranded 'Research Information Service' intranet site. Demonstrating the team's responsiveness and keenness to begin the new service, the 'eLibrary' intranet site was branded with the new RIS

banner, references to the former Departmental Library were replaced, RIS contacts and locations were inserted. While the transition of collections would continue for another four months (and would require staff time at the Departmental Library), RIS ensured that some staff were stationed at the Precinct.

Announcements were posted on Departmental networks and emailed to the new client groups. This worked to welcome staff to their new service, update them on changes, and mitigate any concerns about downsizing collections or access to resources. It was a successful launch, however in respect to the colleagues who were soon to lose their jobs on completion of the decommissioning, any louder marketing or celebration was put on hold.

How to do more with less

Loss of staffing, budget, and expertise, were immediate challenges to operating the new library service at RIS. These losses were in a small way balanced by the return to a core-science library service which staff were experienced in delivering, and a client base with many independent library users. However immediate savings in staff time and funds had to be identified. Engagement with the General Managers, vendors, consortia, and government colleagues, contributed to cost savings, enhanced collections and streamlined workflows.

Acquisitions

Approaching the first renewal period as a new service, it was imperative to engage with the key stakeholders to discuss ways to reduce costs within the subscription budget. RIS presented reports detailing current and historical usage patterns,

approximate 'cost per download' figures for online subscriptions, duplicated print resources, and upgrade opportunities. With a newly vested interest, the General Managers accepted recommendations to reduce the administrative burden on RIS staff, and were willing to encourage their own staff to accept these changes. It was agreed to:

- Cancel all non-essential print subscriptions. If online alternatives were not available, vendors were instructed to mail issues direct to the funding business area. The administrative burden of checking in new print issues and circulating to business groups would cease. The client benefits from quicker delivery and the role of check-in (which had previously been performed daily within the Departmental Library), is now a thirty minute task to be performed weekly.
- Historical problems with subscription agents (subscription errors, pricing discrepancies, inability to activate or update IP changes with some publishers) and the complexity of license negotiations (FTE's versus 'actual users', multiple sites versus a centrally administered library service), and the declining number of subscriptions, led to our decision to move away from agency sourced subscriptions. Although it required an investment in time in setting up the subscriptions directly, negotiating directly with vendors for our unique circumstances and saving on handling fees has been beneficial in both time and costs.
- Presenting users with 'cost per download figures', we were able to encourage the business groups to cancel low use electronic subscriptions in favour of ad-hoc article requests.

Vendors

The challenge for government library services is that resource budgets are static and if not, they are declining. Yet the products we subscribe to have capped increases, often 6% plus the library must carry the burden of conversion rates when the Australian dollar is low. In some instances, RIS has faced increases up to 18% (when annual price rises and conversion costs are combined). Engaging with vendors early and allowing time to adequately negotiate licenses has resulted in cost savings and enhancements to collections, ensuring a positive return on investment (ROI). The reality of our predicament became a powerful negotiating tool – price increases had to be managed and without an acceptable cost/per download figure (comparing the total article downloads over the last subscription period against the subscription cost), products would simply not be funded.

In most situations, vendors were willing to engage in these negotiations and work with us to find a product solution and price to ensure our ongoing renewal. Our vendor relationships have been developed over many years, often decades, and by providing a realistic picture of our situation, supported by usage metrics, 'actual' user numbers and sites, we were able to achieve positive outcomes.

Consortia

The former Department Library had been a long-time participant of key consortia groups within Australia and the new service was determined to maintain this connection. The cost savings and bargaining power of consortia groups have been essential in weathering price increases, while increasing the scope and value of our electronic resources. As an external participant to the Council of Australian

University Librarians Electronic Information Resources Consortium (CEIRC), RIS is able to participate in deals that would not be available if we subscribed independently. Likewise, as a member of an Agricultural Consortium, along with our government counterparts in NSW and VIC, we can achieve larger buying power that results in shared resources, enhanced collections, at a price that is cost effective.

Collaboration

Relocating to the collaborative workspace of the EcoSciences Precinct, meant that RIS would be occupying the shared ESP Library space, located alongside the QLD Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (EHP) library and the CSIRO library. 'Key to the success of any library staff is their ability to be able to collaborate; to be able to establish viable and tangible partnerships to work with others' (O'Connor, 2014). Working with EHP colleagues who had also experienced library cuts, it became clear that by working together we could achieve the dual goals of marketing our unique status as government science libraries, while securing consortia arrangements for resources that we were already subscribing to individually. In 2013, the Queensland Government Science Libraries Alliance was formed, to cover seven government science departments, and the Queensland Museum.

The requirement to seek consortia deals for DAF and EHP became more pressing in 2013, when our shared IT provider consolidated networks and both libraries found themselves using the same IP address. To legitimise IP conflict on a small number of platforms, merged accounts were negotiated with two key vendors for online databases. While the negotiation and contract approval process was sometimes lengthy, both libraries were able to extend the scope of their collections and save

budget by asking the initial question ‘is it possible?’ What seemed like an unlikely proposition, ultimately came to fruition and now sets a precedent to encourage other vendors to consider a merger of our accounts. There is further potential to extend DAF & EHP consortia deals, however both libraries must do so without jeopardising the status of each library, as they are still unique services with distinct collections and users.

Co-location

Co-location opportunities have also been instrumental in doing more, with less. Sharing the ESP Library means a shared open plan office with two four-desk pods allocated to each Department. Despite the challenges of working within a smaller open-plan space, there are definite benefits to the immediate availability of government library colleagues to discuss complex matters in person. It has been invaluable to share advice and workflows to resolve problems or issues within each service. Training and promotional events can now be delivered on behalf of all agencies; the burden for preparing, delivering or hosting these events is then shared.

The prominence of the ESP Library at the physical and intellectual heart of the building provides clients with an open, modern, collaborative space (Macpherson & Tobin, 2012). Centrally located on the ground floor, with glassed walls looking out to tropical atriums, it is in stark contrast to our former space at 80 Ann Street, where access was behind a closed, secured door requiring swipe card entry. The communal and adaptive library space makes it ideal to host events, and RIS now participates in more regular marketing activities such as Library and Information Week, Library Lovers Day, database training, and cross-marketing opportunities.

Participating or hosting non-library events, like a 'Queensland's Women's Week Speakers Panel' and exhibitions (ESP staff art exhibition; Exhibition of ESP Curiosities) creates opportunities for RIS to engage with users who may not have ordinarily visited the space. It also generates opportunities for wider media coverage with promotional articles on the Department's intranet.

Streamlining services and workflows

The reality of operating with less staff meant an immediate adjustment to streamline services and our internal workflows. Ideally, if time allowed, users would have been surveyed, workflows would be mapped, but in practice, with just four positions, and launching 'on-the-fly', changes were made as required, with a focus to utilise the systems we already had in place more efficiently.

- RefTracker, our online job tracking portal branded as "Ask Us @ DAF RIS", was amended to reduce the number of online forms (request types), saving time in maintaining the forms and reducing the fields within the forms. Previous manual 'tick-sheets' to track client activity ceased, staff would input directly to the RefTracker system, saving collating and input time at months end.
- Collation and output of monthly usage data was both reduced and re-focused to capture the metrics that would interest the new stakeholders – namely 'how much is the service being used'? This covers usage across online resources, Inter-Library Loans, Endnote, Reference & Research, eLibrary page visits and new items added to the open access digital institutional repository. Monthly reporting of LMS data, cataloguing, circulation, and serials accessioning, is of

limited interest, these are core-tasks and anticipated. Data is available to be retrieved if ever required.

- Staff loan options were simplified to a general 'annual loan', saving time in system reporting and updating.
- RIS eLibrary intranet pages, maintained independently by RIS staff within Adobe Dreamweaver, were overhauled to reduce the content and number of pages, leading to a more succinct site, with less clicks and scrolling for users, and less maintenance for RIS staff.
- Operational library meetings are less formal; agendas and minutes are no longer required and former functional teams for training, marketing, eLibrary intranet and Endnote were abandoned – there were simply not enough staff to warrant it.
- Utilising the expertise of key contacts in the department's IT unit, has led to better partnerships, with more effective access and delivery of systems and software support. Endnote software updates are smoother; packaged by IT but still distributed by RIS to clients. Advice and support from server hosting staff ensures we can independently maintain and develop our intranet site, catalogue and OPAC.

Limitations

There are limitations to what a four person team can deliver and a number of initiatives and tasks from the former Departmental Library were put on hold due to staffing levels. Digitisation of the Queensland Agricultural Journal, a key project of the former library, is partially complete. Retrospective adding of Departmental publications to the 'eResearch Archive' institutional repository must happen as time

allows. Cataloguing donated materials and finalising collection editing from the relocation is also ad-hoc; as time allows amongst core duties. Training staff in databases is no longer scheduled and promoted. Any available time is dedicated to Endnote, as our staff are more likely to require support in this product rather than database platforms, and this is only 'as required'.

As a small team, staff must be adaptive – working collectively during peak periods or staff absences to ensure client requests are delivered on time. With variations in work days and spread of hours, the team participates in informal backing up and job sharing as required, covering both technical and professional duties. A loss of Systems expertise, particularly SQL experience, has been felt strongly. It has taken considerable time to fill this gap – allocating staff time to upskill through training programs, professional reading and engaging with networks for advice and support.

In order to take on further tasks, RIS must establish realistic expectations and represent deliverables in 'staff time' or 'budget' to ensure that stakeholders are aware what additional investment is required in order to deliver a new project. If stakeholders could fund additional staffing, a Library Technician position would free up staff time currently devoted to technical tasks such as Inter-Library loans and collection editing, allowing professional staff to deliver more training, development of the Institutional Repository, or LMS upgrade.

Lessons learned – what we do better

The experiences of 2012, demonstrated clearly, that our future survival is dependent on the perceived value of our service with stakeholders, in order to secure continued

budget allocation. We must aggressively market our services (Fletcher et al., 2009), demonstrate our value and deliver a relevant and adaptive service that meets our clients' changing needs.

Marketing

RIS has a clearer brand and marketing focus that reflects the professionalism of our service and encapsulates the scope of our business. The RIS banner sets the tone for all marketing material - it reflects our collections, crops, fisheries, and the Precinct, and modified versions appear on all RIS output. Including our logo on online resources (database, eBook and online journal platforms, the OPAC, eLibrary intranet, and Article Linker/A-Z Portal), spine labels, stack signage, welcome signs and newsletter, ensures our visibility in a shared ESP Library space, and distinguishes our online content from freely available sources. Marketing materials (flyers, newsletters, web buttons, web graphics and posters) are now developed with free online graphic design tools, like Canva, image apps and button makers. Accessing free online tools fills both a software and skill gap.

Maintaining an engaged client base is a key part of our marketing. RIS regularly reviews lists of new staff entering the Department and sends promotional 'RIS Welcome Packs' to staff within our client base. The packs contain a welcome letter to introduce and outline our services, brochures for key resources like Endnote, the latest newsletter and some free promotional items from our database vendors. The feedback has been very positive from staff on the ground, which has fed 'up the line' to their management who directly fund the service. A bi-monthly newsletter is also effective in keeping staff and stakeholders up to date with our service. Content is

now geared towards DAF authors with topics on STM research and publishing, like predatory publishers, ORCID and open access, it also promotes key resources, library news, events and Endnote news. All Department stakeholders receive copies electronically via email, from clients to General Managers, and the Department's Director General, who has been a past user and champion of our service.

Demonstrating Value

It is essential for our ongoing survival, to demonstrate to stakeholders that this strategic-partnership can deliver cost savings for the Department. Special libraries deliver outstanding value – Specials return \$5.43 for every \$1 invested, although this is a conservative estimate of their real contribution (ALIA, 2014). We know that staff value us, they were prepared to direct their own budget to maintain a research service. However, when business groups are asked to absorb annual cuts to budget, we need to ensure that our staff and resources budget are not in contention.

As competition has grown from Internet-based resources and outsourcers, special libraries have to demonstrate that they are cost effective in comparison (Hiller, 2012). RIS now presents an annual report on the value of the service, which includes a commercial dollar value, so that stakeholders can see how our service is saving the department money.

- An estimated commercial value, based on current industry rates, is applied to RIS client-services as well as the provision of software and systems.
- Business groups are attributed a commercial dollar value for their past year's usage and a 'cost per researcher' figure. Some staff already budget library

expenditure into their project costings; this may encourage staff to increase their allocation.

- Comparing usage and value across the four funding groups, encourages the stakeholders to maintain an equitable allocation that reflects their usage.
- Identifying 'key staff' who rely on RIS services, helps build a picture of usage and value and identifies advocates within business groups who can help 'sell' our value, if required.

RIS meets annually with the science groups, prior to budget allocation, to discuss issues that may impact the delivery of the service going forward – such as contracted database price increases and the impact of a declining Australian dollar. Rather than the library perpetually cancelling resources to find funds each year, it is now on the table to discuss how to budget for these costs.

Less Risk-Adverse

Trusting and relying on the expertise of fellow team members, creates a less risk-adverse group, who are prepared to demonstrate initiative and implement improvements to processes. "We must be proactive, take risks, expand and strengthen our skill set and invest in ourselves" (Hunt, 2013). Previously the Departmental Library would have used a more consultative process within the team to gather a wider feedback loop, which takes time. RIS now implements intranet, systems and procedural changes quickly with permissions to access live servers spread across the team, so that content can be updated instantly. If the team agrees to the concept and one staff member has the necessary skills to deliver the outcome - let's just get it done.

Summary

A client-funded model, with a core-science user base, has removed the need to be 'all things to all people'. Instead, our purpose is clear – deliver a cost effective, fit-for-purpose, research and information service. With this, comes flexibility and freedom to respond to changing client needs, and a desire for continuous improvement and innovation. Our ongoing success is dependent upon it.

Surviving the cuts of 2012 has changed our professional outlook. Having faced down closure, and knowing that decisions can be based solely on funds, and not on worth, we know what needs to be done. We must be vocal, whether that's marketing our services, selling our value, creating better deals and consortia opportunities with vendors, or connecting with our clients. There is no better time to find your voice – when you are facing annihilation, with your back against the wall. Three years on... we've survived and we're stronger. We demand more, we sell ourselves more, we deliver more.

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