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UCD Library – getting out there!

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BACKGROUND

University College Dublin (UCD) is the largest university in Ireland with some 22,000 students, a quarter of these studying at postgraduate level. The university is currently pursuing an ambitious developmental and strategic path, which includes the challenge of re-aligning itself as a research-oriented institution in line with national economic, social and educational policy.

In 2006 the university was re-structured and the numerous discrete departments – including a medical school and the only veterinary and library and information science courses in the Republic – were reorganised into 5 colleges and some 35 schools. All this has naturally impacted upon the library, now pursuing its own rigorous development and re-structuring programme. One of the many strategic development areas concerns integrating the library service into the university research, teaching and management environment.

ELECTRONIC SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS – LITTLE AND LARGE

Naturally there are some major projects under way to contribute to achieving this, such as implementation of an institutional repository to contain UCD research outputs, implementation of a cross-search tool; implementation of an OpenURL solution; converting the website to a CMS managed system as part of a university-wide project; running some eBooks pilots. All these projects have target live dates in 2007.

Highlighted in this brief article are a whole raft of other smaller-scale developments, many initiated in a bottom-up manner by enthusiastic individual librarians at UCD. We now hope to pull them into a managed e-service framework and take them forward. Many, but not all, come under the broad umbrella of Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 developments. None of them, taken individually, is out of the ordinary and they would be found across many university libraries.

Taken together, they reflect a significant shift in the whole ethos and approach emerging in the UCD library service, an increasing desire to be more leading-edge than trailing-edge. They show what can be achieved even when staff are under great work pressure, if there is enough interest and enthusiasm to keep on moving forward and to explore new possibilities for communication and information discovery. These initiatives also raise interesting issues about the changing skills profile and productivity levels required of the professional librarian as we move into the 21st century.

ROADSHOWS

‘Getting out there’ is not just about embedding the library into the emerging digital campus – there is also the matter of getting out into the teaching and research spaces of the university. The roadshow concept emerged as we started to consider what we wanted to do next with our website. We needed user feedback, but previous efforts to recruit to focus groups had struggled. So we decided to set up a small informal usability study over in the student centre and followed that with a second similar event.

As well as providing the feedback, we became aware that these events also contribute to image-building, but our signage and presence were amateur-looking. We have therefore invested in professional display stands as other units in the university have done. Image is not everything – but then again it is something. The shots below show a ‘before and after’ view of our typical outreach event appearances. We have recently enhanced our equipment further with some additional items – portable leaflet holders and a roll-up banner for the smaller-scale event. This kit is being used increasingly and has proved to be a worthwhile investment, though at £3–4,000 it was certainly expensive.
We make great efforts to take a stand at all open days and similar events, and a monthly programme of roadshows at various campus locations started in 2007, with different services promoted on each occasion. The arrival of laptops, and now full WiFi, across campus has greatly increased the number of potential locations we can use and, despite costs for staff and attractive incentives, we feel these events are worthwhile, bringing both practical and intangible benefits for the service.

EMBEDDING INFORMATION SKILLS INTO THE CURRICULUM – AND GOING ONLINE

We are ‘getting out there’ in various ways to do with information literacy, following the formation of an Information Skills Steering Group and various small teams to develop teaching and learning support, research support, induction support and online materials, each with its own team leader.

We have had considerable initial success in getting academic units to give space to us in the curriculum. Some courses are mandatory; some are stand-alone library modules and have an assessment element for credit; some are a few lectures within a wider school module – we take what we can get! University policy in this area is being developed at present and is most advanced with regard to PhD students, where transferable skills are becoming a mandatory part of each research student’s time at UCD, with a small number of the total credits required devoted to these areas.

Staff have delivered some 400 information skills events of various types over the last six months and we are still only scratching the surface. The big issue for the future is how to shift away from personal delivery of workshops or lectures to an online approach. We have developed an extensive range of web pages devoted to this area. But when it comes to moving beyond that to blended learning we are currently struggling. Progress in getting library information skills materials included in the VLE relies on arrangements being made individually between liaison librarians, and lecturers who own each course in Blackboard, and has been limited. We have produced for the first time the beginnings of an online tutorial in the basics of information use but progress has been slower than we would have hoped and a new strategy is now being followed to re-purpose and adapt existing Open Source tutorials rather than creating new ones from scratch.

We have pushed the boundaries out as to which elements of the information literacy model we feel are part of our remit – we are no longer confining ourselves to a narrow vision of the library remit, seen as being to cover discovery and access to information resources. We are now delivering in the areas of evaluation, storage and re-use of information too – no other support unit within the university is supplying workshops on topics such as citation styles, plagiarism and EndNote and so we have extended our range and taken that on. We offered an extensive and very successful programme of EndNote lunchtime training sessions from September to November 2006 and another programme was to be delivered in March and April 2007, now offering both basic and advanced levels.

The strains on available staff resources that have resulted from all of this extended information skills activity are beginning to tell and discussions are under way (spring 2007) to decide how best and at what level to inject some dedicated support.

CHAT, BLOGS, RSS, MP3, PODCASTS – THE NEW COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

How should the library reach the New Millennials? This is a topical question. We are still using print communications. We make extensive use of individual e-mail and mailing lists and are still initiating new developments in that area – we have recently created a mailing-list of researchers that has been popular with users.

We are also experimenting with the newly available signal ecologies. Reader Services have trialled
an instant messaging reference service and we now have to consider mainstreaming it and the implications of that. We never made any move to implement the elaborate ‘Ask a Librarian’ systems and we are certainly pleased now that we didn’t.

The science librarians began a blog in early 2005; others have followed and there are now at least nine of these either live or planned, providing an informal and very dynamic complement to the website, with RSS or mail feeds available. How to keep track of these blogs, which are after all badged as UCD library services, and to bring even a modest amount of managerial control to bear is the subject of current discussion. Our full range of live blogs at the time of writing can be tried out as follows:

Science @ UCD Library
http://ucdscience.blogspot.com/

Research @ UCD Library
http://ucdlibraryresearch.blogspot.com/

Readers Services @ UCD
http://ucdreaderservices.blogspot.com/

Open Access @ UCD
http://oaucd.blogspot.com/

UCD Library 2 Go
http://virtualstudyspace.wordpress.com/

Alongside the management issue, another, perhaps more important, issue is that these emerging technologies raise very urgent questions about the skills and attitude required of the professional librarian of the future – some colleagues have struggled to cope with basic updating of the website content and now all these new tools need to be grasped. The librarian of the near future needs to have the traditional and academic skills but also to be able to create RSS feeds, blogs and wikis with ease. They most certainly need highly developed multi-tasking skills in order to keep their heads above water.

How these fast-emerging emerging technologies can be successfully prioritised and managed within the library is now a key issue to consider.

Every academic library has to decide where to draw the line on the new technologies. We have so far steered clear of a UCD library presence in Flickr or BEBO –certainly not YouTube! We have tended to feel it inappropriate for a scholarly academic library to get involved in environments that deal largely with inconsequential electronic chatter and leisure – but that perspective could well change as we see how these various social-networking options develop. We are aware that other libraries have drawn the line differently and are developing content within these environments. Indeed we have been persuaded to take the plunge into one of these social environments. And that is Second Life.

**Second Life**

We have made an early move to get involved in collaboration with Talis, who maintain ‘Cybrary City’. A presentation has been made to library staff as a preliminary, and we now have a plot reserved in the TALIS area and have commenced constructing a test environment, involving members of various library teams. We believe that we are the first university library in Ireland to create anything in Second Life, though other units at Trinity College Dublin are already very active. The university portal
Being slow on the uptake can end up working to your advantage. We have not made great strides with library content in the VLE but the university’s focus is now more on the university portal, SCT Luminis, badged locally as UCD Connect, and we are far better positioned there.

The portal is being built up as the entry point to the student online learning environment and our systems team was very successful in getting involved from the start of its evolution in 2005. This has been key and we have achieved a presence on the home page, small but crucial because it is dedicated to links to key online resources, as can be seen in Figure 1.

We also have our own prominent ‘Library’ tab with a fuller set of content (see Figure 2).

We have more recently developed a suite of optional subject and functional channels that users can subscribe to. These are largely deep links to the website but with some dynamic content which we hope to improve upon over the year.

The portal includes ‘single sign on’ and when logging in users are also logged into Athens and to our library system, TALIS. Data from TALIS about the user account is pulled into the portal environment on login, as can be seen in the screenshot (Figure 3), using the TALIS Keystone product and APIs. Users can, if they wish, automatically follow the link to update their account online. This is the most advanced use of the portal that we have to date and represents the sort of genuine ‘mash-up’ of content from two systems, based on web services, that we hope to see more of.

The library presence in the portal has been an outstanding success and its look and feel will be completely refreshed for the next academic session. It does, however, raise interesting issues concerning the future relationship between the portal and the library website, which is not currently entirely clear – currently we maintain quite a lot of the content (such as news) in duplicate and most links on the portal are just deep links across to the website.
Conclusion

We have only recently discovered, quite by chance, that an e-mail information bulletin is sent to undergraduates every fortnight by the Vice-President for Students and it has been agreed that the library can submit items to this to send out from time to time – though inclusion is not guaranteed.

As this shows, it is still surprisingly challenging for us to become recognised and embedded in the overall curriculum, processes and activities of the university, and everything, at every level, that we can do to improve our position and get where the researchers and students naturally are needs to be pursued. This is something the above paragraphs all illustrate in various practical ways, both physical and digital.

Users do need to visit the physical libraries, and they do need to make the effort to explore the separate silos of library-maintained online content, which we are working to make a more compelling user experience. But we need to meet users halfway and provide linkages and information about these facilities in the physical and online environments where they naturally congregate.