

Information Futures Commission

Response from a college perspective to the discussion paper "Scholarly Information in a Digital Age: choices for the University of Melbourne"

The opportunity to respond to the discussion paper is much appreciated. This is a joint response from libraries at the following colleges: Ormond College, Trinity College, Queen's College, International House, University College, St Hilda's College, St Mary's College and Newman College. The submission aims to address aspects of two themes in the discussion paper: 'Collecting our heritage', and 'Learning and teaching'.

Collecting our heritage

In a section on 'Collecting our heritage' the discussion paper invokes the name of Redmond Barry, then goes on to sum up the challenges around cataloguing and exposing collection contents, and conserving and preserving materials.

This summary resonates in the colleges where we are lucky to be the custodians of many extraordinary rare and old books, manuscripts, letters and other archival materials. These include books from Redmond Barry's personal library, neatly annotated in his own hand. Other gems include two 19th century manuscripts in the Irish language, acquired in 19th century Melbourne by a local doctor with a fascination for all things Irish, Nicholas O'Donnell, and donated to Newman College by his family in 1924. The Sugden Heritage Collections at Queens College represent a unique and extensive source of Methodist and Wesleyan materials.

Work proceeds gradually to catalogue rare and special items on local library systems, and to house items adequately within the available spaces. Assessment of conservation and preservation requirements is needed, as is wider exposure of catalogue records, for example via Libraries Australia. Digitisation would further assist with exposure of and access to materials with research value.

In all these areas - conservation, preservation, digitisation - specialist knowledge is required along with considerable investment and infrastructure. Surely there would be much scope here for collaboration between the colleges and the University of Melbourne. Results would be for our mutual benefit, with the potential to add to the wider picture of the university's cultural collections, and to raise the research profile of the university as well as the colleges in specialist areas of scholarship.

Learning and teaching

a/ Access to course materials on the Learning Management System

“How might scholarly information and technologies be used to facilitate research and knowledge transfer opportunities within the curriculum? What types of learning environments are required for next-generation courses and students?...What argument then for adopting the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Open Course Ware model and Open Access more generally?” (Discussion paper, pp23-24)

Residential colleges of the University of Melbourne typically offer tuition to residential students to support their learning and to encourage discussion and peer support amongst students taking the same subjects. Tutors might be later year students at the University of Melbourne, they might be students or staff members at other universities, they might be working in industry.

While they bring great subject knowledge and teaching skills, these tutors generally have no access via the university's Learning Management System to the courses they are meant to be supporting. Currently, course materials on the Learning Management System are available only to enrolled University of Melbourne students and teaching staff of specific subjects. Therefore, college tutors are reliant on their students to outline the course requirements, lecture content, reading lists and assessment tasks.

In this they are just like the professional staff employed by the University of Melbourne, for example library staff, and staff of the Language and Learning Skills Unit, who do not have access to most of the course materials that students see.

Access to course materials on the Learning Management System is needed beyond the current limited audience. Without this access, support staff across the university and the colleges are not properly equipped to understand the changing curriculum, or to fully support student learning. A more open model of course ware would assist here.

b/ Internet Access to AARNet institutions

“The Melbourne Experience aims to provide students with a strong cohort experience, building strong peer networks and encouraging close links with academic units.” (Discussion paper p. 24)

Building strong peer networks and fostering close links with academic units entails internet connectivity beyond students' home institution. Modern day students are encouraged to broaden their learning horizons. They are used to collaboration with peers not only within their home institutions, but across institutions; they are used to and often rely on information exchange with their peers in other academic institutions – institutions who are more likely than not AARNet shareholders and clients.

Under the University internet cost recovery scheme operative as of May 2007, affiliates like the Colleges are charged \$21 per Gb for internet traffic from the sites of AARNet members and clients connected to the AARNet backbone network (“Domestic On-net” traffic), whereas it is “Effectively ‘free’” for University faculties and departments (see “Internet Costs at The University of Melbourne” at <http://frank.its.unimelb.edu.au/itu/unimelb/charges.html>)

There is strong argument for the abolition of this differential scheme of charging for affiliated Colleges, at least for this particular class of traffic, and for the reinstatement of free internet access to Victoria Regional Network (VRN) institutions for affiliated Colleges. Typically the Colleges recover most of the cost of internet access from their

students. Since traffic downloaded from VRN institutions now incurs a cost of \$21 per Gb for affiliated Colleges, residential college students do feel financially constrained when they need to connect to such sites from the Colleges to access information and data for the purpose of study and research. They tend to reserve such traffic for their university accounts and access data or information from university facilities as much as possible. Reinstating free internet access for affiliated Colleges to VRN (or AARNET) institutions will greatly assist in minimizing such constraints. Furthermore, it will have the desirable effect of making the Colleges' network facilities function as extended facilities for the university – facilities that residential college students will use more freely, thereby easing the pressure on university campus facilities for such activities.

Ongoing discussion

In conclusion, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of Sabina Robertson through her regular attendance at meetings of the college librarians over the past several years. Thanks also to previous University of Melbourne Library attendees Ruth Baxter, Tim Meredith and others. Their willingness to share information has helped us maintain awareness of Information Services developments, which is crucial to us as we support University of Melbourne students in their endeavours.

We would very much value any future opportunity to meet with library representatives and colleagues from other parts of Information Services, to further discuss and move forward with the issues outlined in this paper.

Sylvania Cheung, St Hilda's Library
Laurel Clark, International House Library
Angela Gehrig and Geraldine Woodhatch, Allan and Maria Myers Academic Centre, St Mary's College and Newman College
Robin McComiskey, University College Library
Hazel Nsair, Trinity College Library
Therese Robin and Bronwyn Wallace, Ormond College Library
Gale Watt, Queens College Library

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