

A Submission to the Information Futures Commission

The 10 year Vision of Scholarly Information

Faculty of Veterinary Science

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INTRODUCTION

The task of producing a vision 10 years into the future is fraught with danger for a topic as rapidly developing as information systems. Thinking back to the state of these systems 10 years ago, and seeing what has transpired in the time since, gives little confidence in the fortune-telling ability of anyone.

Some issues which perhaps could be predicted with some surety...

- Student numbers will increase, their demands for learning experiences will be more variable, and the resources available to teach them will be less than optimal in the eyes of many.
- Demands on staff will be greater, with the tensions between teaching, research and service responsibilities as strong as ever.
- The capacity for information technologies to deliver performance beyond almost everyone's predictions will be both a source of great potential benefit and also of unexpected opportunity. This will be accompanied by increased technical complication with the potential to distract from the core activities that produce the information in the first place.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Students

Undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Faculty of Veterinary Science, like all students, will become increasingly comfortable working with information technologies. It is likely that they will also become increasingly demanding of the technology used by the University in the provision of teaching materials as part of the veterinary curriculum, or as part of their postgraduate studies. Planning of student computer laboratories needs to anticipate the need for regular and continued upgrading of hardware to cope with the ever increasing demands of software and content to which students are exposed.

It is likely that, over the next 10 years, students will have increased access to personal technology in the form of personal laptops, Personal Digital Assistants, hybrid mobile phones and such. While access to these technologies cannot be assumed, and the University must continue to provide an appropriate level of computer access for students as a matter of equity, it is also important that University systems allow sufficient flexibility for connection for students who do choose to use their own hardware.

There is need for informed local debate about the best way forward for student computer facilities. The University's main role could be to concentrate on the provision of networking and connection for student machines of an appropriately standardised configuration, with the associated complications of maintaining connectability of disparate systems. Alternatively, the University could attempt to provide computer facilities for all students, with the associated costs of regular change-over and upgrading of facilities to avoid obsolescence. The rapid development of wireless networking capabilities suggests that it will become increasingly practical for students to carry a great deal of information with them during classes within handheld devices that are connected back into core information resources.

Staff

The demands of most academic staff in veterinary science are reasonably simple. As is the current situation, personal computer hardware has become required

equipment to maintain communication with colleagues, collaborators and students. There is every reason to expect the University to provide a moderate level of personal technology to all academic staff sufficient to allow them to undertake the routine tasks of authorship of written and graphical materials without reliance on administrative staff. It should be part of the planning that this equipment be replaced frequently enough to allow the replaced technology to pass on to postgraduate students or other users well before it has become obsolete.

While perhaps not as glamorous as some aspects of information technology, it should also be recognised that staff require reliable communication systems (email, telephony) and current versions of software. This is an integral aspect of the University's working infrastructure.

The amount of electronic information held by each staff member has grown extraordinarily over the last 10 years, and this growth is likely to continue unabated for the foreseeable future. The University has a role to play in facilitating the storage and retrieval of these documents, images and other electronic resources. Maximal value can be obtained from these resources by facilitating access to communal document and image collections.

Issues of intellectual property and copyright ownership of these resources must be addressed, to clarify the issues of resource ownership and to facilitate the sharing of information with confidence.

Information systems must be designed to minimise the administrative burden imposed on staff using or supervising computer resources. The role of information systems as a fundamental form of infrastructure must be supported by the allocation of sufficient hardware and staffing resources to maintain these systems in a reliable working state.

Teaching

Within the School of Veterinary Science it is likely that, over the next 10 years, there will be increasing demand for students to undertake off-site learning so as to maximise their exposure to global experiences, and to allow each student to learn in an environment of direct relevance to their own circumstance. Changes in the veterinary curriculum already require students to spend considerable amounts of time remote from the veterinary school and this imposes substantial costs both in financial terms and in the potential for students, whilst off-site, to lose access to the learning opportunities of being on campus. Students spending time on work placements within Victoria, within Australia and overseas, should have the capacity to maintain active links with the veterinary school whilst away so that their experiences are seen as being integrated into the core veterinary curriculum rather than being seen as being distinct. The University and the Veterinary Faculty must be in a position to take advantage of the rapid developments in broad bandwidth communications to allow students in remote sites to take part in, and contribute to, teaching activities (lectures, tutorials including image rich content) available to students on campus.

Coordinated data-basing and retrieval of electronic teaching materials such as images, videos and other resources, allows curricular integration between disciplines and enriches the learning experience of students without the reliance on constant caseload.

Research

The demands of researchers are highly variable, with some disciplines having relatively basic demands on information systems whilst others may have enormous requirements for computational and analytical resources. Across all areas, however, there will be an increasing requirement for robust storage and archiving of data. In many cases this can be as simple as assistance with small scale, automated local back-up systems supported by reliable network level backing up of data to protect against critical breakdowns.

In many cases, access to computational power sufficient to allow analysis of complex data sets, such as gene libraries and DNA sequence libraries, will be beyond the capacity of individuals or small research groups but achievable through collaborative efforts and development of coordinated joint projects coordinated.

Knowledge Transfer

The Veterinary Faculty has a close relationship with the broader veterinary profession as well as having close links with other groups for whom knowledge transfer can be of mutual benefit. The Veterinary School will be increasingly seen to have a role as the central node or facilitator of communication between multi-location groups, both for electronic and traditional information resources. As is the case with the Medical Faculty, our Faculty has great reliance on external affiliations and associations for teaching and research activities. It is imperative that the University adopts a leadership role in facilitating communication with these groups, and is in a position to drive the development of systems for sharing information between each party, rather than allowing itself to fall behind and lose credibility with external bodies.

LIBRARIES

Currently the Veterinary Science library is located as two off-site branch libraries, servicing the two veterinary science campuses on the veterinary precinct (adjacent to Bio21) and at the Veterinary Clinical Centre at Werribee.

These libraries serve both as central repositories of veterinary literature for the University and external veterinary collaborators, as well as being integral centres for student learning.

Veterinary Science Libraries – 10 Year Vision Statement

It is envisaged that there will be two Veterinary Science Libraries, one in Parkville and one in Werribee, providing for the information needs of undergraduates studying Veterinary Science subjects under the Melbourne Model, graduates studying for the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, postgraduates, research and academic staffing including academic associates in both locations of the Faculty of Veterinary Science. The libraries will also continue to provide some services for outside veterinarians, and the general public.

Library Learning Centres

The two libraries will operate as Library Learning Centres, maintaining at least existing 2008 opening hours. They will work closely with Faculty in curriculum and information support, and work with the Faculty Student Centres on both campuses. The concept of the Libraries being Learning Centres rather than

merely being repositories of book, journal and audio-visual collections is important, as it recognises their contribution to a culture of scholarly pursuit, and to the cohort experience of students within a small, more vocationally based school.

Staffing

The libraries will be staffed by professionally trained staff able to provide disciplinary expertise as well as by non-professional staff who are vital to the running of the libraries.

Facilities

Information Technology (IT) facilities including wireless and other facilities in the libraries will provide ready access to library and other resources.

Collections

While electronic books and journals will be very important, the libraries will still maintain some book and journal collections. Building on existing collections, the library collections will reflect the new subjects taught as part of the Faculty Melbourne Model curriculum. It is envisaged that some parts of the collections will be moved off-campus while other parts e.g. videos and slide sets will be digitised.

The move to the Library Learning Centres model, and the Faculty Melbourne Model, with increased student numbers of upwards of 200 students per year (compared to the current 120 students per year), and changes in curriculum will have implications for the library budget. There will also be an impact on the physical capacity of the public areas of the libraries in terms of study space, shelving and IT facilities, as well as on the library office/work areas (in particular Veterinary Science Library Werribee).