

Faculty of Land and Food Resources

Response to the Consultation Paper

“Scholarly Information in a Digital Age – Choices for the University of Melbourne” by the Information Futures Commission

Dr Stefan Arndt – Chair LFR Library Committee after consultation with staff and students of the LFR faculty

The Faculty of Land and Food Resources welcomes the Consultation Paper by the Information Futures Commission as a timely initiative to respond to the demands of a rapidly evolving digital world. The University of Melbourne is facing a number of challenges particularly in light of the implementation of the Melbourne Model and the Growing Esteem strategy. The LFR faculty experiences particular and complex challenges with regard to the future of scholarly information which are different to those faced by other faculties or departments. Our faculty is one of the first that has successfully implemented new Melbourne Model postgraduate courses. The new degrees require new ways of teaching and learning and also interactions with a different and divers cohort of students. Our faculty also faces the challenge of being located across four different campuses, two of them in regional Victoria. This is creating difficulties in delivering excellence in teaching and learning, communication and information access and exchange. In order to achieve high standards in the three strands of the Growing Esteem strategy it is imperative that we adapt to the changes that the digital age is creating and that we support all of our campuses in the best possible way.

Embrace technology

Technology is changing and advancing in an ever increasing speed. Technology will therefore change the way we learn, research and communicate in the next 10 years, probably in a similar way it has changed our behaviours in the last 10 years. Not many people had mobile phones in 1998, wireless networks were unheard of, most academics used desktop computers instead of laptops and went into libraries to photocopy papers rather than downloading them from the net. It is essential that our University embraces and adopts new technology and that our vision for the next 10 years includes enough flexibility to allow for technological changes to be implemented. It is impossible for us to foresee what is technologically possible in 2018. We should make sure that we have the strategy, the mindset and the resources to adopt and embrace the latest technology in the coming years so that we are the leaders in our field.

Maintaining access to the best information.

Access to scholarly information has always been of pivotal importance in Universities and in the past libraries provided the physical gateway to information. The last decade has seen a shift to electronic information; quick and easy access to electronic data resources and information repositories will be even more important in the future.

Maintaining and expanding this access is of utmost importance in our faculty, particularly for staff and students located in regional campuses.

The acquisition or subscription of electronic resources should be one focus of an information futures strategy. Although the subscription to electronic resources (in particular electronic journals) is generally excellent at Melbourne there is room for improvement. For many journals staff and students can access only articles published in the last 10 years although back issues are digitised and potentially available.

The development of information filters and electronic information repositories should also be an important aspect of a strategy. The ever increasing flow of information makes searching and filtering of information more and more difficult. There are excellent search engines in place for journal articles (Web of Science, PubMed etc) but other information is much more difficult to find and to access and is in many cases not available in digital format. Articles published in books are difficult to access and even PhD, MSc or Honours theses are difficult to find and retrieve. There is a need to make these information sources available in an electronic format as this will increase circulation and impact. The ability to locate relevant research quickly will dramatically improve communication and scientific progress. Similarly, e-books could be a valuable and easy accessible resource and we should evaluate possibilities to increase the number of books available in this format. Electronic resources for teaching, such as digital recordings of first class lectures or seminars, will also become more and more important when distance learning enables flexible delivery. The University needs to assist departments in developing and recording these forms of teaching.

The access of digital information is still a challenge in many of our regional campuses. Limited internet bandwidth, frequent internet outages and absence of wireless networks in most of our campuses (with the exception of Parkville) disadvantage regional staff and students compared to their metropolitan colleagues and it is imperative that the University improves this service.

However, there is also the need to expand and maintain our book collections. The specialised book collection in LFR libraries in disciplines such as Forest Science (in Creswick), Agriculture (Dookie) and Horticulture (Burnley) are invaluable resources of national significance. Although a focus on electronic resources is important and justified to give researchers and students access to the most up-to-date information we also need to maintain collections of information that has a historic value and is in some cases unique in Australia.

Open Access repositories are an interesting concept and we should engage in a serious discussion about the opportunities, advantages and disadvantages that open access repositories offer. However, open access repositories bring with them a range of issues (e.g. intellectual property) and there needs to be a wider discussion amongst other Universities in Australia. We could not and should not do this on our own.

Ensuring that regional campuses are well-serviced in terms of information and have access to the latest developments in information services.

Our faculty is located in four campuses and is currently serviced by three libraries in Burnley, Creswick and Dookie. The faculty library at the Parkville campus was closed last year and the space has been converted into a postgraduate learning space. Each library is associated with a research discipline and holds a valuable collection of books

and other scholarly information (see above). There is a need to maintain and update the regional libraries to maintain and improve information services in regional campuses. Apart from the limitations in internet access (see above) there is also a need to transform our regional libraries into modern information and learning centres. At present all of our libraries are classic libraries that are probably seen by staff and students as a mere collection of books with at best a few computers for searching material online. The LFR libraries need to be transformed to “centres for student self learning, spaces for collaborative team work as well as for individual study and team work”, as it is fittingly outlined in the consultation paper. At some locations this will require significant infrastructure investment (i.e. at Burnley) as current libraries are housed in inadequate buildings that can not be refurbished. Students and staff need ‘meeting room’ areas connected to the library where they can study, interact, get printed material, meet with librarians and get a coffee or lunch. But the new libraries should also have places for quiet concentration.

The concept of libraries as interaction points for staff and students also means that the function of librarians needs to change. There is a growing need for librarians to function as the consultant between researchers/students and the digital labyrinth of information and a need for a more active engagement between information service providers and researchers and students. These functions have been considered in the position descriptions of the recently filled library positions in Creswick and Dookie. However, processes need to set in place in Departments, Schools and Faculties that allow for a greater engagement of information providers with academic staff and students to maximise their input into research, teaching and learning.

There is also a need to update staff and students regularly on new developments in information technology. Technology is changing so quickly that staff and students are not up-to-date with the latest technology and this is probably the biggest impediment for adoption of the technology and resources. We advocate initiatives to instruct, guide and educate students *and* staff in the various methods for searching digital information. This is highlighted fairly often but in reality many staff and students are not informed about the latest technological opportunities. This would also lead to a greater efficiency in searching and storing digital information and would be essential to ensure all students are actually educated in the latest technology. Consequently, if students are to get full value out of the tools like LMS, they must have training sessions and ideally these would be included in the curriculum.

Developing methods for sharing resources and people, working collaboratively across multiple campuses and linking with national and international partners.

The digital age made it easier to access information and to communicate with a multitude of collaborators in short periods of time. However, our faculty is still facing great limitations with regards to sharing information and effective communication. How can groups of staff and students communicate effectively if they are located in four different locations? At present they can’t! A lot of time is wasted travelling from and to regional campuses to attend meetings or to give or attend lectures and seminars. There is a need to improve these communication structures. Although video conferencing facilities are available at some campuses their quality is still marginal and their access needs to be improved – again also an issue of internet bandwidth. We should look for

innovative ways of communicating across these distances and embrace and implement modern technology that enables us to do that.

The sharing of resources and access of information is also important for our students. Students need to have the collaborative learning experience in a cohort, but they also need to be able access scholarly information remotely. This is imperative, for example, for our students in the new Master for Forest Ecosystem Science degree that is taught nationally in four different Universities. We need to ensure that our students have access to the best information wherever they study.

Data storage and sharing (future sensor or monitoring networks)

One aspect in research that will become more and more important is the need to have large data storage capacities. Participation in national networks such as OzFlux or the TERN initiatives will require significant data storage capacity and the ability to link access to the data into a national network.

Gatehouse Research Library

We welcome the concept of a Gatehouse Research Library, a suggestion by the Libraries Committee. The Libraries Committee recommended the construction of a new iconic library that is dedicated to advanced research and that houses the research collections of all the faculties. In our view the new main library would be a one-stop-shop high class library that would hold most of the scholarly information at the Parkville campus, offer extensive opening hours and all library services. However, it is important that this main library is accompanied by modern student and staff learning hubs in the faculties that consider the needs of the modern degrees. The current model of a large number of faculty and discipline based libraries on the Parkville campus that are focusing on collecting books and journals is outdated in an increasingly collaborative, global, digital information environment and a new multidisciplinary curriculum with a strong international focus and permeable knowledge boundaries. Most of the existing faculty libraries are not set-up or equipped for the modern way of teaching and learning. We therefore advocate the consolidation of the collections of faculty libraries on the Parkville campus wherever possible into one modern and central library and the conversion of these libraries in modern learning hubs. We also argue that it is important that the non-Parkville libraries are integrated in the Gatehouse library, although collections might not be housed there.