Sustainable academic libraries in Australia: exploring 'radical collaborations' and implications for reference services

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Abstract:

Sustainability is a major focus in Australian academic libraries, as universities face proposals for significant regulatory change in the higher education sector. The profession has already witnessed new technologies and new service delivery models requiring rapid skills development, process re-engineering and organisational change. Academic libraries deliver increasingly large and diverse service catalogues as new opportunities arise in supporting the changing research and teaching landscapes (ACRL Top Trends 2014). Yet at the same time libraries no longer have sole authority in supporting user's information needs and must reconsider the value of traditional services, including reference. Across the sector there are increasing calls for 'radical collaboration' (Neal, 2010; Anderson, 2011; Wilson, 2012) to meet this 'challenge of abundance' (Diaz, 2014).

Radical collaborations see the traditional notion of the academic library as an independent, self-sustaining entity set aside, in favour of new relationships between libraries and their communities (Neal, 2010). The purpose may be a shared benefit, a common goal or an intersecting mandate. These new kinds of collaborations are being suggested as the key to developing and planning the workforce of the future (Delaney & Bates, 2014), realigning services to new delivery paradigms (Wilson, 2012) and demonstrating value and impact (Creaser & Spezi, 2014).

The University of Western Australia Library has been involved in a number of collaborations with campus partners to enhance services to the University community. Several of these collaborations, one of which is described, now form an important part of the 'reference' function, replacing, in part, more traditional services and offering a valuable multi-faceted support structure to students.

This paper also reports the results of an exploratory study investigating the nature and prevalence of new kinds of collaborations between Australian academic libraries and their on-campus partners. Responses indicate collaborations are responding to a number of complex challenges, including augmenting traditional reference services.

Introduction

The radical evolution of library services since the emergence of the digital age has, arguably, been most significantly experienced in the reference services area. Reference services have adapted admirably to the mass digitalisation of information sources and changes in scholarly publishing; employing new face to face and online approaches to assist clients in accessing appropriate electronic information sources through constantly changing technologies. A secondary challenge has resulted from the plenitude of online sources, both library-subscribed and freely available: what Diaz (2012, p.232) has called the "challenge of abundance". Reference librarians are no longer the sole authority in meeting information needs, and demand at library reference desks has decreased (Diaz, 2012; Tyckoson, 2012).

From change comes opportunity, and this paper discusses some of the recent trends amongst academic libraries in their efforts to reimagine, redesign and restructure reference services, and sustain connections with their community. One notable trend has been the evolution of the liaison model which many libraries have embraced as a way of maintaining contact with their users and staying relevant to users' information-related needs and behaviours. Continuing challenges in the academic context push professional librarians to continually question their notions of reference services and the nature of their connections with users. A body of literature is emerging to suggest that collaboration with like-minded partners is the key to the ongoing relevance of libraries.

The University of Western Australia Library (UWA Library), through its own recent experience, is recognising that collaborations with other campus units are a promising way for reference librarians to continue to meet the needs of users who often don't know what they don't know, and don't know that the library can help. The authors will describe a case study where UWA Library has collaborated with UWA Student Services to re-package reference services and build new and broader connections with users, which is delivering positive improvements to the student experience.

In an endeavour to determine whether there is a discernible trend towards collaboration with on-campus partners amongst Australian academic libraries, the authors conducted exploratory research via a qualitative survey. The results of the survey are described, with a particular focus on collaborations that may be fulfilling one or more of the functions of a traditional reference service.

Trends in modern reference – reimagined, redesigned, restructured

In his review of the history of reference service Tyckoson (2012) notes that the four functions of a traditional reference service described by Samuel Green in 1876 are still essentially the same. That is:

- teaching users how to use the library;
- answering specific informational queries;
- recommending sources to users to fit their needs and desires;
- promoting the library in the Community.

Although this may be broadly true, the complexity of the modern university has required rapid and radical evolution of reference services, in particular during the last two decades, for these functions to hold continuing value. The most obvious catalysts for change have been developments in information and communication technologies, and sophisticated search engine algorithms, which offer abundant information sources with just the click of a mouse or swipe of a finger.

As patrons have moved online, so have reference librarians, creating online guides to new types of resources, and anticipating reference questions with online FAQs. This kind of support has become so ubiquitous that as Stevens (2013, p. 204) notes, reference service "now includes behind the scenes work of designing, organizing, and presenting information is such a way that makes it possible for users to find information on their own".

Online reference support has gradually moved from being library-centric (where patrons had to visit the library website) to being user-centric, whereby library information and support are embedded so that users can access it in the course of carrying out other, non-library functions. For example at UWA, information literacy support tools might be placed in or linked from the learning management system where students access teaching and learning materials; reference questions can be answered via UWA's customer relationship management system, AskUWA. A side effect of this ubiquitous access to the library is the apparent disappearance (disintermediation) of librarians from the information supply chain, if viewed from the user's perspective (Brabazon, 2014). Librarians have become victims of their own success in providing seamlessly accessible virtual help to patrons; for example, the UWA Library's online guide to Harvard referencing was accessed well over a million times in 2014, but many of those accessing the guide may not recognise that they are using a library service.

The online trend towards 'being in their space' (Delaney & Bates, 2014) mirrors the trend in the organisational structure and provision of reference services over the last two decades toward the faculty liaison or embedded librarian model. What constitutes liaison differs across institutions but the aim of this approach is essentially to work from the user's perspective, to better understand the needs of a particular group and to "create a channel of communication that allows the faculty's needs to be understood by the library and the library to be interpreted by the faculty" (Scholomon et al, cited in Rodwell, 2008, p. 117). This model has enabled reference librarians to deliver reference services in the context of specific faculty priorities, practices and preferences, and in their 2009 report for the American Libraries Association Shumaker and Talley noted that this approach had become widespread, assumed a range of models, and was continuing to grow.

Recently there has been an additional focus on supporting specialist areas such as research data management and research grant applications. Changes to Australian university funding arrangements have elevated the importance of research funding and many academic libraries have responded with dedicated research support roles and/or expanding liaison services to cover these areas, as described by Keller in her summary of research support in Australian universities (2015).

While liaison and embedded librarians are continuing to fulfil the functions of reference in many valuable ways, Rodwell, writing in 2007 questioned the effectiveness and sustainability of the role under the weight of so many expectations. By 2009 Shumaker and Talley concluded that the embedded librarian model succeeded "largely because of the outstanding skills and exemplary dedication of individual embedded librarians" (p. 55) and was not scalable without more effective management. Giesecke notes that faculty independence, organisational silos and mixed values continue to present challenges to co-operative approaches such as liaison librarianship (2012). As academic libraries take on more functions as described in the ACRL's review of top trends in academic libraries (2014), they need to rethink labour and time-intensive embedded and liaison services.

Current challenges and opportunities in Australian academic libraries

Anderson (2011) suggests that the very structure of the academic research library is configured to outdated notions of information scarcity, and that traditional functions and structures play a very marginal role in the lives of users. He suggests that an important focus for academic libraries should be the perceptions of value that exist in the minds of their users.

Five Australian academic libraries in the research-intensive Group of Eight, including the University of Western Australia, piloted the Ithaka S&R Survey of Academics for the first time in 2013-2014, with the aim of better understanding how academics value the library's various functions within their institutions (Brown, Rod, & Schonfeld, 2014). Across the institutions involved, 90% of respondents identified the library's role as a 'buyer', paying for resources from academic journals to books to electronic databases, as its most important function. Over 20% of respondents strongly agreed that the role librarians play at their institution is becoming much less important.

Facing ongoing uncertainty around future funding models in the higher education sector in Australia, The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) recently agreed that one of the most significant challenges for academic libraries is demonstrating and communicating their value and impact (Council of Australian University Librarians, 2013). Despite widespread and radical restructuring of reference services over the past few decades, as described above, the Ithaka results suggest the library's engagement functions are not highly valued by key stakeholders in faculties. Australian academic libraries may be forced by economic realities to cease or scale back services, and those that are not perceived as valuable will likely be targeted first.

Anderson suggests a redirection of resources will be essential to the survival of the academic research library (Anderson, 2011). But where should effort be focussed? The Group of Eight Ithaka survey results highlight several opportunities for Australian academic libraries to align themselves with the priorities of their stakeholders. Australian respondents to this survey felt that supporting higher degree students with research, critical analysis and information literacy skills was their library's second most important function (Brown, Rod, & Schonfeld, 2014, p. 11). Further, respondents clearly perceive improvements can be made in developing undergraduates' research, critical analysis and information literacy skills, and two thirds of respondents feel that supporting undergraduates is an important function for the library (Brown, Rod, & Schonfeld, 2014, p. 25). While there are mixed views on whether the library should take primary responsibility for skills development, an opportunity for the library nevertheless exists in the information literacy space, as described by Menchaca (2014 p. 363)

who notes that "Libraries have an opportunity to become, in effect, the training facilities where undergraduates go to develop the "habits of mind" they need to succeed not only in class but in life". What Menchaca is suggesting in his article is a much broader role than that suggested by models of embedded and liaison librarianship.

The limitations of embedded librarianship have already been noted by Rodwell and others and the Ithaka results suggest that, although Australian academic libraries may be able to cite many hundreds of positive individual connections with users, their reference services may not be making an impact and delivering value on a scale which can respond to the significant challenges that exist. Further thinking on how to foster deeper, broader and more holistic connections with users is required.

The case for 'radical collaboration'

Developing effective forms of collaboration has become essential for organisations dealing with the challenges of complex, dynamic environments. Pham and Tanner (2015, p.1) observe that:

> Within the tertiary education sector, collaborative endeavours have been imperative to tackling issues associated with the growing number and diversity of students, reduced government support of the sector and the consequent intensifying competition for limited resources, mounting emphasis on quality assurance and measurement of outcomes in education and research, shifts in learning paradigm, demand for flexible modes of delivery facilitated by modern technology and the proliferation of educational resources and resource formats.

There is a growing imperative for academic libraries to find more opportunities to collaborate with partners within their own organisation, redirecting resources to university (rather than library) priorities (Anderson, 2011), leveraging the liaison model to scale labour intensive individual efforts (Kenney, 2014) and sharing expertise and resources (Giesecke, 2012). Neal (2010) used the phrase "radical collaborations", asserting that research libraries "will be increasingly defined by new and energetic relationships and combinations, and the radicalization of working relationships among research libraries, between libraries and the communities they serve, and in new entrepreneurial partnerships" (p. 66).

Libraries, as campus-wide entities whose broad service catalogues extend across many aspects of both the academic and business sides of the university, are in a unique position to enter into partnerships within their institution (Giesecke, 2012). Libraries share vision and values with departmental units responsible for digital learning, literacy, information technology, research success, student support and more. Libraries can leverage off their reputation for innovation, status as a trusted advisor and relationships developed through liaison work.

Neal (2010) suggests that the test of a successful collaboration is whether it produces something new, saves resources or achieves more than working alone. Kaufman (2012) identifies additional features common to effective collaborations:

- the bringing together of like-minded people with shared goals;
- the combining of different but complementary skills;
- a greater outcome for end-users than could be achieved by the individual participants;

- benefits to all participants; greater resources, recognition and reward when competing for finite resources;
- individual entities giving up some degree of independence to realise the shared goal;
- commitment from the organisations' leaders;
- comprehensive planning;
- well defined relationships.

Collaborating to fulfil traditional reference functions

As highlighted in the Ithaka survey described above, academic libraries have an opportunity and a mandate to find new ways of supporting faculty, postgraduate and undergraduate students with their information needs.

One positive outcome of disintermediation and the re-structure of reference services is that users can 'self-help' with many of their basic information needs. Librarians are therefore able to focus their attention on efforts to contribute more significantly to student success, which is an increasing focus for the broader university and sector, measured in terms of retention, enrolment and assessment.

At UWA, this focus on student retention and success is one shared by both the UWA librarians and STUDY*Smarter* Learning Skills Advisers (LSAs) from Student Services. In recent years, librarians and LSAs have collaborated closely on a number of key initiatives and projects, bringing together library expertise in promoting students' research and referencing skills with LSA expertise in assisting students' study, English language and writing skills. The co-facilitation of WRITE*Smart* Drop-ins is one example of this successful collaboration.

WRITE*Smart* Drop-ins provide a one-stop shop for all of students' academic research and writing needs. They run from 10.00-12.00, Monday to Friday, during teaching weeks. These Drop-ins are based on a Drop-in and Writing Clinic service run independently by STUDY*Smarter* LSAs since 2005. Initially, LSAs ran this service with a central focus on promoting writing, study and English language skills. Increasingly, however, they found they were fielding referencing and research queries. At the same time, librarians were increasingly faced with research and reference questions being part of larger challenges for students, who also needed help with academic writing conventions.

At the beginning of 2013 the two groups began to offer the combined WRITE*Smart* Drop-in service, located in a collaborative area of the UWA Library and jointly staffed by librarians and LSAs. UWA has evaluated the WRITE*Smart* Drop-in collaboration and identified the following measures of success:
- The number of Drop-in queries increased from 522 in 2012 (LSA only service) to 964 in 2013 (combined service), and again to 1599 in 2014.
- 94% of respondents in a survey conducted at the end of 2013 rated the service as good, very good or excellent (Table 1)

Table 1 – Quality of WRITE*Smart* session, as indicated by users of the service
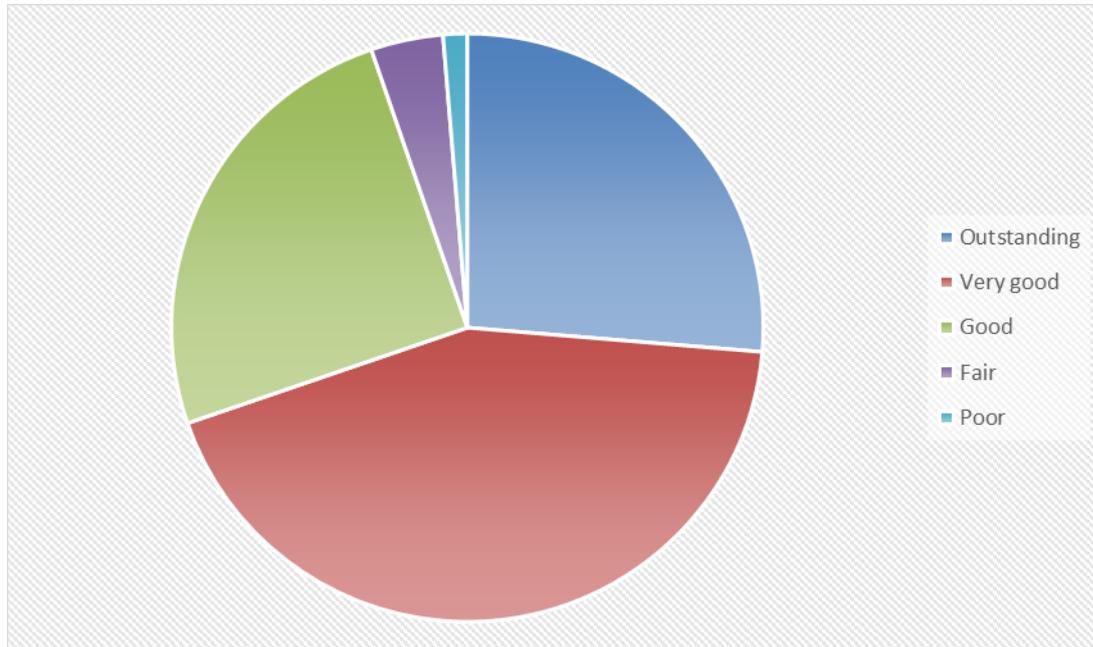
(STUDY*Smarter* Annual Evaluation Report, 2013)

In addition to the ratings above, positive comments from students were received, some significantly noting the convenience of having a single point from which to access a broad range of expertise. Both librarians and learning advisors observe that students seem to like the arrangement, and both groups note that they also learn from each other, and that the service has given them a better understanding of student difficulties and their own role in assisting.

This collaboration is fulfilling the functions of a traditional reference service, as described by Tyckoson (2012), and also demonstrates the hallmarks of successful collaboration as identified earlier by Neal (2010) and Kaufman (2012). It has been highly positive and successful for students and staff and its efficient use of staff time makes it more sustainable than two single services could be if delivered in isolation. The collaborative service may indeed offer a greater perception of value in the mind of the user.

Survey of collaborations in Australian Libraries

In addition to WRITE*Smart*, UWA Library is involved in almost a dozen different collaborations with on-campus partners which are enhancing and transforming the library's functions and relationships with library users, many of which have commenced within the past five years. In reflecting upon our experiences, we became interested in how other academic libraries in Australia might be using collaborations with campus partners to respond to challenges in their own institutions, and the extent to which these may be fulfilling reference functions.

Methodology

The authors undertook an exploratory study to investigate whether other Australian academic libraries are engaging in collaborations with their communities in ways that fulfil one or more of the functions of a traditional reference service. The study used a grounded theory approach to qualitative research. An online survey instrument was created using *Qualtrics* software, and emailed by the Deputy University Librarian at The University of Western Australia to an electronic mailing list for all Deputy University Librarians in the CAUL member libraries (37 institutions excluding UWA). Data collection took place in April 2015.

The survey instrument, which was pretested and pilot tested by colleagues in Western Australia, included two open questions regarding collaborations. The questions were deliberately broad, so as not to lead respondents to any particular kind of response. Collaboration was given the meaning ascribed by Neal (2010, p. 67) and an example response from the University of Western Australia was included to illustrate the level of details that would be useful in the response. Respondents were asked if they would agree to be contacted about their response, enabling the authors to validate responses by checking that they were interpreting the response in the way that was intended, and to obtain any further relevant details.

Results

The analysis includes valid responses received from eight Australian universities, with a number of partial responses excluded. This response rate is above average for external surveys, however the small sample limits the identification of strong trends.

Each author examined and compared the responses to pull out significant information about the nature of the collaboration, and the benefits for the library. Where the authors differed in their coded interpretation of the responses, an average was used. The coding categories were derived directly and inductively from the data as is typical in conventional qualitative content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Limitations of the survey instrument include bias in the phrasing of the question and structure of the survey. It is unclear whether some universities may have excluded themselves from participation because their activities do not fit the concept of collaboration as defined in this study.

Discussion

Results from the survey suggest that Australian academic libraries are engaging in collaborations with on-campus partners in a multitude of ways. Table 2 shows the categorisation of the collaborations reported in the survey.

Table 2 – Types of collaborations reported by Australian academic libraries
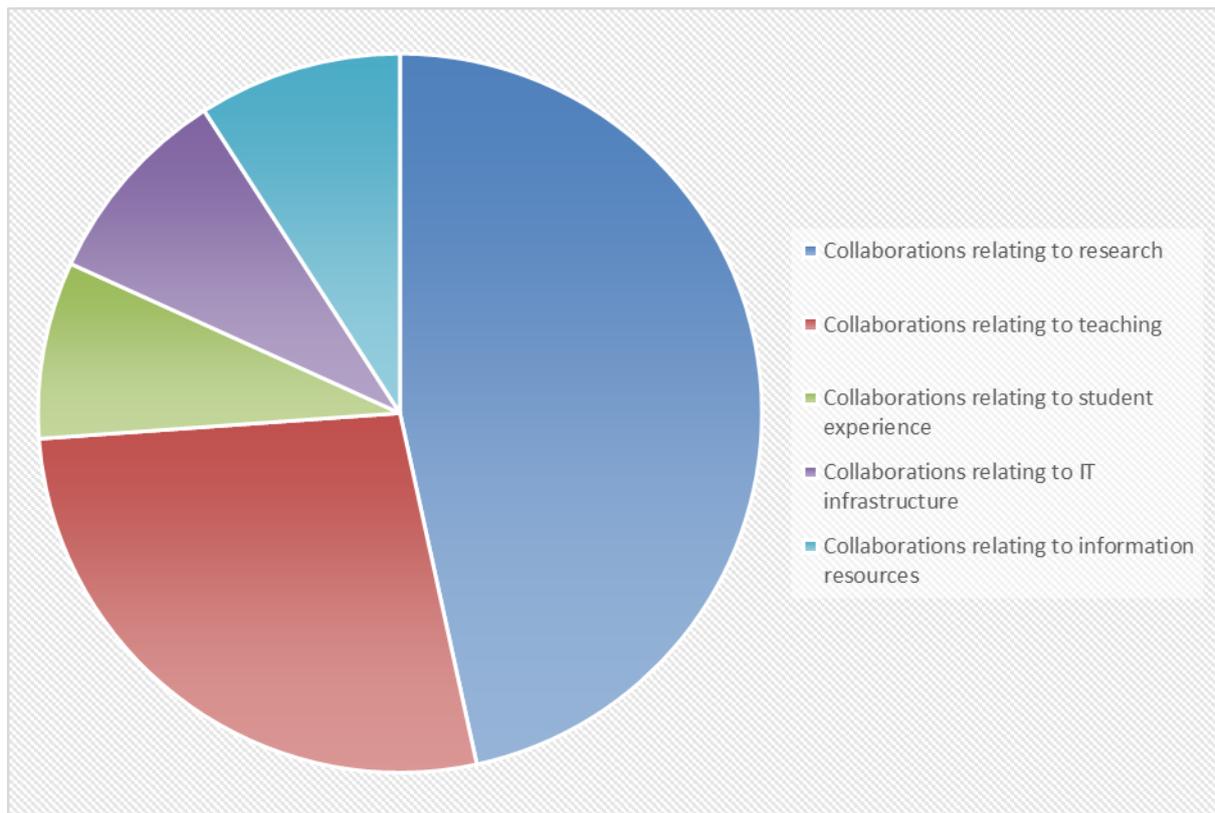
Results suggest that the library is seen as a desirable partner for new initiatives around the creation, digitisation, and use of scholarly information, around support for research, and enhancing teaching and learning and the student experience generally.
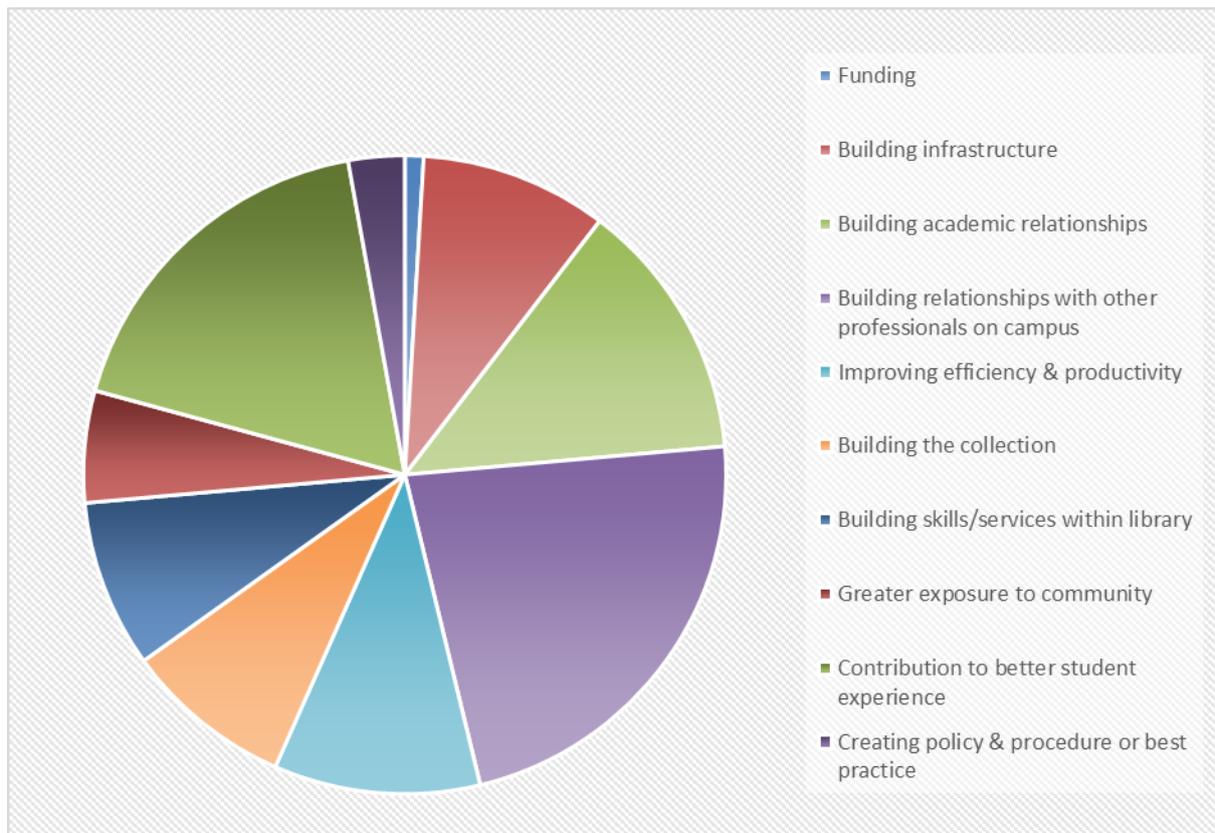
Some respondents were unable to provide the total number of collaborations they were involved in, with one holding the view that all faculty librarian activities can be described as collaborations. 38 collaborations were reported by respondents, with one university reporting involvement in 11 collaborations, and several others reporting one collaboration.

"Collaboration is the key to all of our activities so takes many forms for the Library, across many areas of the University." (Survey Respondent)

Collaborations relating to support for research are the most prevalent form of collaboration reported in this study. The collaborations reported were described as involving the university's office for research, or information technology department. Several reported collaborations involve government-mandated research collection activities. Given these activities are time-consuming and essential to the allocation of federal funding to the university, it makes sense to share effort across several parts of the university in a collaborative model.

Australian academic libraries appear to be positive about engaging in collaborations. Table 3 lists the types of benefits to collaboration, as described in the responses. A wide range of benefits are recognised, including improving relationships with faculty and other professionals on campus, as well as developing new skills for librarians.

Table 3 – Benefits of collaborations reported by Australian academic libraries

Legend:
- Funding
- Building infrastructure
- Building academic relationships
- Building relationships with other professionals on campus
- Improving efficiency & productivity
- Building the collection
- Building skills/services within library
- Greater exposure to community
- Contribution to better student experience
- Creating policy & procedure or best practice

Cost savings and resourcing issues do not appear to be highly significant factors driving collaboration amongst Australian libraries, as none of the respondents mentioned these factors specifically. One library mentioned that the receipt of external funding was a driver for one of their collaborations in the research space. Several reported collaborations are focussed on improving the student experience, seeking to overcome an issue for students (for example, accessibility of the collection by those with print disabilities). This suggests that these academic libraries see their role as part of a holistic service to students and as a positive and willing partner in responding to campus priorities.

Several of the collaborations described by respondents seek to resolve challenges which are at the heart of reference services, such as developing information literacy skills. For example, one university library reported involvement in a collaboration to create a core unit for undergraduate students on critical thinking and communication. Another reported collaboration involved the development of a new reading list system. A collaboration relating to academic honesty was also reported. At least one other academic library reported an academic skills assistance program, delivered in the library in collaboration with student services, similar to the UWA STUDY*Smarter* collaboration. While these survey results are in no way comprehensive, there is a strong indication that reference services in Australian academic libraries are being augmented by collaborations and partnerships with other campus units, reflecting the trend in the literature of academic libraries.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the reference service is offered to support library users in their information seeking behaviour. Like most other aspects of the modern library, reference services have already transformed to remain relevant to current scholarly information practices and preferences. Traditional reference services have been deconstructed from the physical presence of the library, with online help and support materials ubiquitous, and libraries commonly seek to create a user-centric service, employing liaison and embedded librarians who find opportunities to support users in the context of their daily activities and priorities at university. As academic libraries seek to demonstrate greater value to the university, the value of the reference function should continue to be examined and investigated.

UWA Library has found that collaborations with campus partners are enhancing reference services to students by positioning library support in the context of more wide-ranging academic support, and teaching information literacy skills together with other skills essential to academic success. The library is sustaining more valuable and holistic connections with users by offering information literacy support together with other academic skills services in a seamless manner.

The burgeoning conversation around the value of academic libraries engaging in greater collaboration with their communities stimulates new research questions. The authors undertook exploratory research to investigate whether Australian academic libraries are engaging in collaborations in ways that fulfil one or more of the purposes of the traditional reference service.

Whilst results from the study described in this paper suggest Australian academic libraries are engaging in collaborations with parts of their community, the purposes of the collaboration are wide-ranging, and often respond to complex, multi-faceted challenges in the university environment. Benefits of the collaboration may be experienced by library users in the course of their information-related activities, but this is not the only driver for collaborating. Libraries are also involved in collaborations to solve information-related problems for the university and experiment with new information-related technologies and possibilities.

Delaney (2014, p. 1) suggests that "academic libraries need to continue to adapt their roles and develop stronger relationships across the university in order to maintain and promote their relevancy to all stakeholders…an embedded existence through collaboration and outreach will strengthen the academic library's presence within its parent institution". In seeking a sustainable future, Australian academic libraries are broadening their notions of self, and exploring radical collaborations with their communities.

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