

YES WE CAN! HOW TAFE QUEENSLAND LIBRARIES DELIVER

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ABSTRACT

Ninety thousand students, 3,000 teaching staff, 1.73 million square kilometres, 13 TAFE institutes and one Library and Information Management System (LIMS) - so how do TAFE Queensland libraries provide quality services?

Since 2008 TAFE Queensland libraries have based their service on a 'shared services model' which delivers library and information services across the state and beyond, allowing clients access to 700,000 printed, multimedia and web based resources. The shared services model prescribes that a client of one Institute becomes a client of all Queensland TAFE Institutes, with defined privileges, rights and responsibilities.

1. BEFORE SHARED SERVICES

Prior to 1994, Queensland TAFE college libraries were managed centrally from Brisbane as the TAFE Queensland Library Network (TQLN) and shared the URICA LIMS. TQLN managed, funded, recruited, provided professional development and carried out all the acquisitions and cataloguing activities. From 1994, all functions devolved to college libraries. In 1997, the Contec C2 LIMS was rolled out across the state. Now, Z39.50 protocols allowed the exchange and sharing of bibliographic information. Colleges, which had now been amalgamated into Institutes, each maintained their own separate institute library bibliographic databases, but these were also configured to a federated TAFE Queensland union library catalogue. Each Institute library maintained its own institute library catalogue and its own local client data files on the Contec C2 system. Clients "belonged" to one Institute. Each Institute library was autonomous and had its own access and circulation policies, bibliographic data quality standards, as well as local procedures and workflows. That was all about to change.....

2. THE QUEENSLAND SKILLS PLAN

In 2006, the Queensland Skills Plan was released. It was a major state government initiative to build vocational skills across Queensland. Institute library managers from across the state had already

formed an effective and active forum called SLICC (Strategic Library and Information Consultative Committee) which focussed on strategic initiatives for TAFE Libraries. The Queensland Skills Plan provided the impetus for a new model of service delivery for Queensland TAFE Libraries, driven by a renewed focus on the information needs of the client, whether they were a TAFE student or a TAFE teacher, whether they studied on or off campus, living in the suburbs of Brisbane or a remote Queensland region. This model made each student and each teacher a direct client of all TAFE Queensland Institute libraries.

To make it work, all TAFE Institute libraries had to be willing and able to offer the same agreed level of services to all TAFE library clients. At the same time, the Contec C2 LIMS was nearing the end of its life cycle. The Queensland Skills Plan required that all TAFE business systems had to ensure equity and easy movement of TAFE students within the state and between institutes, so any proposed LIMS would be no exception.

3. CREATING A SHARED SERVICES MODEL

TAFE Queensland libraries needed a LIMS capable of supporting and enabling this initiative. From early 2007, work began in earnest. The shared services model and its business rules needed to be clearly specified. External consultants helped to clarify the business requirements. It was endorsed by senior TAFE Queensland management and application for funding was successful. A project evaluation team was formed and functional specifications extensively tested against vendor products. Civica's Spydus product was selected, a project implementation team was set up and the first Institutes had their data converted, staff trained and the LIMS rolled out in January 2008. Importantly, the business model drove the selection process and parameterisation of the LIMS, rather than the reverse.

4. BENEFITS

4.1. For our clients

For our students and teachers, the benefits are evident - accessing a library catalogue with 700,000 library resources, reserving required items on line and having them posted to their on campus or home address. The new LIMS brought a huge leap in functionality, with the ability for clients to manage their own accounts and transactions, to access their borrowing history, reserves, bookings, routing lists, to email library staff, and to opt to have reminders and reservation notices received by SMS and/or email.

The library web catalogue template used in Institutes created the desirable standard of a 'consistent user experience' with standardised 'look and feel', similar menus, navigation and layout being deployed on all web library catalogues.

Clients enjoy consistent loan policies, including not so enjoyable standardised overdue fees.

There are features of the LIMS which are so far untapped, such as the ability for clients to tailor subject profiles. When fully deployed, these features will provide further benefits to clients.

4.2. For library processes

Study programs in TAFE are based on nationally accredited training packages. Students enrolled in the same qualification have the same curriculum whether they are studying at a TAFE in Brisbane or Townsville, or in another Australian state. This leads to significant crossover in TAFE library

collections, and a shared bibliographic database creates substantial efficiencies in cataloguing workflows - almost half of all bibliographic records are replicated across TAFE Queensland libraries. More direct access for clients to other Institute collections has greatly increased resource sharing and efficiencies in collection management. Clients now place their own inter-Institute reservations, meaning a decrease in the workload of staff handling inter-library loans.

4.3. For library staff skills development

The shared services model demanded that staff from across the state work together in setting policy and parameterisation, and this has evolved into a healthy network where staff share ideas, innovations, procedures, and best practice.

Much of this networking is achieved via a series of dynamic forums hosted on the TAFE Queensland my.TAFE learning management system. These forums cover the range of library functional areas - data quality, circulation, systems, e-learning, acquisitions, serials, research and information literacy. Especially for regional staff who may work in isolation or without professional development opportunities, the forums are a valuable resource. Without a shared services model, it is unlikely that networking of this depth and breadth would now be taking place.

The management of library web content is an area that has much improved with the shared services model and the software application underpinning it. Web content is now created and maintained via the LIMS platform rather than through institute web publishing units, and this has meant that systems and other library staff have developed Web skills and now have the creative control over library web content. Library staff are gaining the confidence and expertise to implement further library portal products such as Springshare's LibGuides.

4.4. For library strategic planning and marketing,

The cost effectiveness of the shared services consortia model is a financial positive for TAFE Queensland and has allowed many regional Institutes access to a quality LIMS platform that they may not have been able to afford on their own.

The shared services model has increased library visibility within Institutes, and brought favourable attention to all the work that the SLICC group does within the TAFE Queensland system and in national library professional contexts such as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

The shared services model has also provided a marketing opportunity and a product to use for strategic leverage and to demonstrate the value add of library services.

5. CHALLENGES

With LIMS standardisation comes an unavoidable and corresponding loss of autonomy for Institute libraries.

Lending policies can no longer be easily varied 'on the fly' when special circumstances arise. The ability for operators to override some circulation settings is a necessary compromise.

Some cataloguing staff have expressed dissatisfaction with the notion of 'wiki-bibs' - bibliographic records they have created or edited are subsequently changed by cataloguers at other Institutes. This is often perceived as happening in an uncontrolled and unaudited manner, and is suspected of

undercutting professional standards.

Another challenge professionally as we move from to a more stable phase of system deployment is the requirement for staff including new staff to be kept up to date with training and also to ensure staff 'buy in' to the shared services model at a conceptual level.

It must be acknowledged that there are huge differences between Institute libraries in terms of resources, collections, student numbers and local Institute strategic priorities. What works for one Institute, may cause hardship for others, so shared services policies need to take these differences into account.

Also challenging is the general concept of ensuring the business rules of the LIMS reflect current environments. TAFE Institutes in Queensland are in the process of becoming statutory authorities and there is potential for tensions to arise between the co-operative and sharing culture that exists in the library network model, and the business demands of Institutes as they become increasingly autonomous, competitive and market driven.

And while there is huge potential for better use of collections, to apply the concept of 'food miles', the 'book miles' of a resource that is posted around the state may conflict with the sustainability principles which we are all wishing to deploy in our workplaces and homes.

The licensing of many digital products do not easily lend themselves to shared services because the structure and pricing models of licenses tend to be based on a fixed number of users. Attempts to license on behalf of the whole state are preferable but often prohibitive in cost.

Sometimes teachers talk about how students are lazy when what they mean is that they are clever, clever enough to make the system work for them. So, some clever students choose to borrow from another TAFE so they can get the item posted to their home address, and/or return items through the chute at their own TAFE to save return postage. While this is not a significant challenge compared to the others mentioned, it reminds us that however well a system is specified, there are always aspects of service delivery that surprise us or are beyond our control.

6. WHAT MAKES IT WORK

The LIMS that supports the shared services model benefits from a community of practice amongst systems 'super users', one at each Institute, with an effective trouble shooting peer network offering immediate advice and insights. When issues have to go further up the line, the TAFE IT help desk and the LIMS training and support librarian resolve the majority of issues. More complex or intractable issues proceed to the vendor help desk.

TAFE Queensland libraries are fortunate to have committed and skilled staff across all library functional areas, a strong culture of co-operation, and a dynamic environment with continuous demands for efficiencies and innovation. All this makes it work, and allows us to say "yes we can!"