Changing Image of the University of Malta Library: New Roles, Challenges, and Services

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Abstract: Up to a few years ago, the Library was perceived as a study place with books, a simple on-line catalogue and access to electronic databases. With the implementation of an integrated discovery tool, investing in a vast number of online resources and pushing forward the concept of open access publishing, the Library has become a central hub of dynamic research for the academic community, connecting with students at different stages of their courses, academics, and support staff. It strives to keep up with current trends and emerging technologies to ensure that users' needs and expectations are catered for.

In May 2012, the Library set up an Outreach Department to establish and maintain an on-going partnership with faculties and students, attend to queries about the Library, and implement marketing strategies to promote new services and resources made available to users.

This paper provides an insight of how the Library's role has changed during the past 5 years and what challenges are being faced in a rapid changing and dynamic information landscape.

Keywords: Outreach**,** library marketing, academic libraries

In earlier days, libraries functioned as archives, collecting and preserving material without disseminating it. With growing demand for information, the role of the archives developed, giving the beginning to institutions that not only stored the records but also organized them and provided access for a wider number of users. The

setting up of first libraries dates back to the 3ʳᵈ millennium BC, when people began to use clay tablets. At first, libraries were mostly associated with palaces and temples where scribes created official documentation and religious records; with time, library collections grew to include works of science, art, and philosophy.[1]

According to Oxford English Dictionary a library is:

A building, room, or set of rooms, containing a collection of books for the use of the public or of some particular portion of it, or of the members of some society or the like; a public institution or establishment, charged with the care of a collection of books, and the duty of rendering the books accessible to those who require to use them.[2]

With the ongoing development of science and technology, the Library has become more than just a room filled with books for the use of public. Considering the University of Malta Library as an example, this article will be providing some insight of how the University Library's role has changed through time focusing mostly on the past five years, giving an overview of new initiatives and services offered by the Library from the point of view of the Outreach Department.

University of Malta Library: brief introduction

The University of Malta was founded in 1592 by the Jesuits and primarily set up as *Collegium Melitense* to teach philosophy, theology, grammar and humanistic studies.

The beginnings of the University of Malta Library are dated back to 1769, when Pope Clement XIV authorized the establishment of the University of Studies. Together with the establishment of the University, all property of the previous school, including book collections, was transferred to the new institution. In 1953, the University appointed the first professionally qualified Librarian – Ġuże Cassar Pullicino. A year after, purchasing new stock and creating a proper catalogue made

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1   F. Estabrook, L.S. Foskett, J. Douglas and S. Haider, 'Library', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 12 May 2017: http://www.britannica.com/topic/library (accessed 31 October 2017).
2   'Library, n.1'*, Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2017: http://www.oed.com.ejournals. um.edu.mt/view/Entry/107923 (accessed 31 October 2017).

possible the setting up of a new library in the Valletta building. In 1967, the Library was transferred to the newly built block and its current location – the University Campus in Msida. Since then, the Library has developed, slowly introducing new services, starting with creating the reference section and, a year after, the Melitensia collection. That year it also introduced Library of Congress classification which is still used today.

In 1991 the Library started implementing automated services, such as the library software Adlib, and in 1992, an on-line Library catalogue OPAC – an online public access catalogue which enabled users to browse Library print resources remotely. Soon after, the Library opened branches at the Institute of Health Care at Guardamangia and in Gozo. In 1995, the Library building was extended and the Junior College branch library set up.

In 2000, the Library made a step towards gradual migration to electronic resources and journals. Nowadays it is hard to imagine the Library without subscriptions to the vast amount of electronic journals and databases available. In 2009, it upgraded its management software to Ex Libris-Aleph 500 which allowed smoother running of day-to-day activities and services. In April 2010 it implemented an online bibliographic management software – RefWorks and, in 2011, users were introduced to the e-Library, a meta-search engine that allowed users to browse its online resources and search in up to ten databases simultaneously.[3]

Following the rapid development of services, growing amount of queries and change in patrons' needs, in May 2012 the Library set up the Outreach Department, once again changing its face, from an institution providing resources to University staff and students, to an institution actively participating in the academic life, accommodating users' needs and assisting its patrons.

The Library has almost 70 members of staff working in 11 departments and 6 branch libraries, constantly striving to keep up with the dynamic University community.

3   M. Poulton, 'Library across the years', *The Library*, 11 April 2012: http://www.um.edu.mt/ library/about/library_across_the_years (accessed 31 October 2017).

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New face of the University of Malta Library:
The Outreach Department

The creation of the Outreach Department marked not only improvement and implementation of new services but also a change in perception of the role of the Library and librarians themselves. The Library stopped being only a building filled with books and study spaces and became an active member of the academic community. Librarians understood that investing large amounts of resources in on-line subscriptions to journals, databases and new software will not be effective if there is no one to make use of them. The Library had to take action and emerge from its safe space, having realized that only by reaching out, can users be invited in.

The Outreach Team consists of three members of staff and its main role is to set up on-going communication with students, academics, and other University entities to effectively market the Library resources and initiatives. The team also provides constant assistance and support via phone, emails, face-to-face, and by conducting training workshops. The department is responsible for managing the Library website, Facebook page, and organizing various events.

Before the Outreach Department was created, there was only one person assigned to carry out all these tasks. With the growing amount of work, two other team members were added, creating a full-time Outreach Team.

Academic libraries have relied on patron dependence on library print collections to attract users to their services. The introduction of greater electronic access to research materials, use of online reference utilities, and diverse user needs have caused many academic libraries to re-examine outreach efforts to their campus and community patrons. For some libraries, this initiates an exploration of new marketing and public relations activities.[4]

That was what University of Malta Library had to do; get to know its users and their needs and create an action plan to support them. The task was not easy; outreach was quite a new concept in the library field

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4   C.A. Fabian *et al*., 'Multiple Models for Library Outreach Initiatives'*, The Reference Librarian*, vol. 39, no. 82 (2004), 40.

in Malta and the department had to find the way to approach this new concept and effectively engage patrons.

The starting point was to get the word out, trying to reach out to academics, students, and support staff by sending emails and contacting students' organizations. Outreach set up collaborators could opt whether they would like to be included in this list. Outreach had to find an alternative way to reach out to students by sending the notices, first to administrative staff who could forward the correspondence to all students within a department, institute, or centre. Keeping up with students' organizations also proved difficult, since their members change on a yearly basis, often without any handover from the previous administration.

Another challenge was to come up with initiatives to promote Library services and create promotional material: none of the Outreach team had any experience in design. In 2013 the Library set up its official Facebook page to reach out to young users who spend most of their time on-line. The three librarians had to become teachers, marketing experts, customer support, and designers.

Tasks overview

One major task of the Outreach Department is to provide training on how to use the Library resources, which mainly involve e-Library (until October 2013), HyDi, and RefWorks. The number of workshops has increased on a yearly basis. In 2013 the Department delivered 73 workshops on RefWorks and 48 workshops on HyDi targeting 1,653 students, while in 2016 the numbers increased to 85 RefWorks and 100 HyDi workshops with total of 2,299 participants. Apart from the HyDi and RefWorks workshops, the Department is also responsible for organizing library tours, one-to-one training sessions, database training workshops, and other information sessions for students. Outreach also collaborates with the KSU (Kunsill Studenti Universitarji) to organize biyearly information literacy workshops for staff and students. These workshops are organized in collaboration with the Registrar office and IT Services and a member of the academic staff. The workshop covers subjects

like consequences of plagiarism and how to avoid it, demonstration on Turnitin (plagiarism detection software), referencing, and finding and evaluating information. In comparison with 2013, when Outreach delivered a total of 219 workshops to 2,257 users, in 2016 there were 364 sessions delivered to 4,689 patrons.

In 2014, the Department started a close collaboration with the Junior College Library and the Systems of Knowledge (SOK) Department at the Junior College. The purpose of this collaboration was to organize information literacy workshops to all first-year students to prepare them for their SOK project and to familiarize them with research requirements before entering University. The workshops were delivered at the beginning of 2015 by the Outreach Team with the help of Junior College librarians. Presentations included tips on how to find, evaluate, and use the information. Following positive feedback, the presentation was amended and from 2016 the sessions were entirely delivered by the Junior College librarians.

Since the target audience at the Junior College varies from the one at the University, the Junior College Library decided to set up their own Outreach Team to reach their patrons and cater for their needs. Also, since the Junior College is targeting pre-University students, it is important that they are given a proper introduction before commencing University courses.

Currently, the Junior College Librarians are issuing their own newsletter, *BOOKMark*, where librarians, academics, and students can publish their articles. They also organize seasonal book displays at the library, including the famous blind date with a book in February for Valentine's Day. Students are encouraged to participate in Book Club meetings and they are given an opportunity to showcase their artwork inside the Library.

Facing challenges

Changing the image of the Library requires constant work from all staff members. Breaking the stereotype of the Library as a dusty place filled with books and the stereotype of librarians became part of a job.

What is one of the greatest challenges libraries must combat to show the public that libraries still matter? It is knocking down stereotypes that are embedded in people's minds that libraries are musty book depositories where a 40 something year old middle aged woman is behind the desk 'ssshhing' any disturbances that are louder than a whisper. But for anyone who has ever worked in a library, they know libraries go beyond books.[5]

Librarians have come to realize that all of them form the 'face' of the Library and, despite the efforts made by the Outreach Department, each staff member needs to reach out to engage users. The main challenge was, and still is, to understand patrons. Being a librarian is one thing; however, seeing things from the point of view of a student/academic could put things into perspective. In order to get to know its users and bring them closer to the Library, Outreach is constantly conducting research, usually in the form of the questionnaires.

So far, Outreach has conducted two major surveys. The first one took place in April 2013. Its aim was to evaluate the Library services, in order to identify the facilities that need improvement to render a better service, which was relevant to the users' needs and expectations.

A total of 1,150 respondents filled in the questionnaire. Some key points which resulted from the survey were that the majority of patrons visit the Library to study, conduct research, read dissertations, and borrow books. Most comments featured a request for further access to journals, subscriptions to databases, more books, better control of noise levels in the silent study areas, and more study space.

A slightly different survey was conducted in 2016 to identify users' opinions regarding the use and awareness of online resources, the purpose of consulting the online resources, and the overall users' experience. A total of 765 people responded.

The results showed a major misconception when it came to basic terminology; 90% of the participants were aware of the existence of electronic journals, 87% knew about electronic articles, but only 59% were aware of electronic databases. It was baffling that users knew about journals and articles but lacked knowledge of databases since they had to access the database first in order to browse through the journal content or read an article.

5   https://www.likedin.com/pulse/overcoming/library-stereotypes-alessandro-russo/ (accessed 31 October 2017).

It also appeared that 87% (670 participants) actively used HyDi for their research, but only 54% used databases. What was most surprising was that almost 66% (504 participants) were still using Google for their academic research.

This brought Outreach to the conclusion that more focus should be placed on promoting databases as another information source, but also that Outreach should educate library users to help them better understand definitions and the concept of journals and electronic databases.

In response to the survey results, the Outreach Team started working to promote databases by introducing the element of information literacy at the start of each HyDi workshops where students can learn the difference between articles, journals, and databases. The Team also prepared subject-oriented emails recommending the use of particular databases for each faculty. Since 73% of participants specified that they would like to receive information about Library resources via e-mail, this became the main channel of promotion.

Understanding patrons allows librarians to cater better for their needs, whilst trying to make services more engaging and accessible. Another challenge that is constantly faced is to encourage students and researchers who do not usually visit the Library to make use of its resources and services. It is not easy to convince users that the Library resources will add value to their projects, especially when they have never visited the Library and have based all their research on Google.

Both from survey results and experience, it transpired that many students will not use the Library unless encouraged by their tutors. Outreach has to make constant efforts to make academics aware about recent subscriptions, on-going projects, and training opportunities. At the beginning of each semester, the department sends emails to all academics encouraging them to organize training workshops for their students, while creating tailor-made sessions for specific courses targeting their respective needs. All sessions are held in computer labs at the IT Services Building where each student has access to a computer for hands-on practice. Twice a year, Outreach sends information about recent database subscriptions to all academics. Emails are divided by subjects and prepared separately for each faculty. It is of extreme importance that academics are always up-to-date when it comes to

recent Library initiatives and subscriptions since they can pass on their knowledge to students and encourage them to use the Library resources.

Maintaining a good relationship with academics allows the Library to advertise its services by word of mouth: one of the most effective marketing strategies is where satisfied customers recommend services to prospective users. Many people ask if it's even necessary to market libraries, mistakenly thinking that if someone needs research material, they will always find their way to the nearest library; however, with the growing amount of fake news, hoax websites, and untrustworthy information, it is the librarian's duty to guide users and teach them how to reach and use the best possible resources. That is why libraries have to remain active members of their communities, using marketing to showcase their resources but also encourage patrons to seek the help of qualified personnel who is always willing to help them.

What the future holds

The University of Malta Library has certainly experienced major developments within the past few years. With a strengthened position and increased visibility, it can push towards other projects.

Currently the Library subscribes to over 64,000 electronic journal titles from almost 90 databases. In 2016 the number of downloads of individual articles exceeded 400,000, which clearly demonstrates that e-journals are among the most heavily utilized resources. Every year the Library invests its resources into acquiring new titles and expanding its collection. The year 2017 marks the implementation of a new library management software – ALMA, which brings new possibilities and improvement to services already offered, like modernizing and improving the current HyDi interface and the future implementation of a Reading List solution – Leganto, which will help academics build reading lists for their courses, simultaneously assuring that the required material is present at the Library and, if not, automatically processing requests to the Acquisitions Department to purchase the missing items.

Another major on-going project is the creation and maintenance of OAR@UoM, the first and only institutional repository in Malta which

collects, preserves, and disseminates the intellectual output of the University. The repository was launched in September 2014 and to date over 17,000 items have been deposited. Until the beginning of 2017, the Outreach Department was responsible for organizing training workshops and market the repository; however, with the approaching implementation of the University of Malta Open Access Policy and increased demand for uploading material, the Open Science Department has been created to provide qualified staff to assist academics with any Open Access related queries, depositing their material, and providing guidelines towards copyright clearance. The Open Science Department is also responsible for increasing awareness of Open Access and OAR@UoM by promoting the repository and any Open Access initiatives with the assistance of the Outreach Department. The University of Malta Library is also responsible for the Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) project where all undergraduate and postgraduate theses produced by UM students are prepared as text-based PDF files and deposited on OAR@UoM.

Changing the image of the Library from a book depository, to an active, professional, modern, and user-friendly institution requires constant work from all members of staff; however, this is possible only with the joint effort of different library departments and academics. The Library does a lot to get the message across; however, for the message to reach students, academics must get involved. Students are aware of Library initiatives, services, and workshops but most of them will not make use of them unless they have been recommended or requested by their lecturer. By working together, the Library and academics will reach more students and help them become independent and competent researchers.

The visibility of the Library across the University has definitely improved and, as a result, this offers a number of opportunities for the implementation of new projects and solutions, increasing users' satisfaction, and generating more positive feedback, encouraging future patrons to make use of the services, and bringing librarians satisfaction in their work. In the future, the Outreach Department is planning to expand its workshops' portfolio and develop information literacy workshop that could be offered during DegreePlus as an officially recognized course that could enrich students' CV. This requires time and careful preparation but, seeing prompt development and bright future ahead, the Library is ready for next challenges.

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