

## Students first: innovative partnerships to enrich the student experience

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### **Abstract:**

*University libraries are no longer only the domain of librarians, students and scholars. As collections have moved online, libraries have created more collaborative working spaces for students, and incorporated other enquiry services such as ICT or academic skills assistance. In 2015, La Trobe University went one step further and integrated Student Administration services, to extend the student help portfolio via single physical and virtual service points. As part of a total University and Library restructure, a new service model was created in the Library, incorporating six specialist help areas: Library, Student Administration, Course Advisors, IT, Careers, and Academic Skills.*

## Introduction

Creating and maintaining collaborative partnerships in a multi-layered institution is complex but essential in an environment of rapidly changing student and staff expectations and restrained resources (McGee, 2014; Ferer, 2012; Abram, 2013). An outcome of increased focus on institutional mission (Franklin, 2012) and the value of partnerships (Giesecke, 2012) has increased the emphasis on collaboration at multiple levels for universities in the current environment (Salisbury, 2015).

In 2015, La Trobe University implemented a new organisational structure throughout the entire University, to ensure future sustainability and strength going forward, and to provide a solid direction for teaching, learning and research for the current and future operating environment. The University Strategic Plan *Future Ready 2013-2017* (LTU, 2013) outlined the aspirations of the University, and provided organisational units with a roadmap for operational innovation and excellence. The suite of documents that articulate the University's vision make clear the direction for staff and students, and include the *Learning and Teaching Plan* (LTU, 2013), and the *Digital Learning Strategy* (LTU, 2015). The Library also implemented a very radical restructure to align with the new University structure, with new teams focussing on Learning and Teaching, Research, and Collections as discrete units. Other administrative areas of the University also experienced significant restructure, with a refreshed focus on internal partnerships and collaborations to support institutional objectives. This paper will focus on a new service model implemented within the Co-curricular Team in Learning and Teaching, in partnership with Student Administration Services.

The Library Learning and Teaching Team incorporates the Curricular, Co-curricular and Training teams, all working together with the *Library Learning and Teaching Partnership Framework*. This internal framework outlines the principles, context and focus for delivery of collaborative services in a variety of modes, to support the varying needs of students at all campuses and locations. Within Learning and Teaching there are three teams, the Curricular Team, which works with academic teaching staff in all areas of learning and teaching activity, particularly to embed assessable information and digital literacy tailored activities into the curriculum to support student learning at the point of need. The Training Team works across all of Learning, Teaching and Research in development of online and face-to-face specialised training, as required for the entire student and researcher cohort. The Co-Curricular team is responsible for all front line face-to-face and virtual services.

Alongside the new Library structure, a new collaborative service model was implemented for face-to-face and virtual student services. In partnership with Student Administration Services, the *ASK La Trobe Help Zone* was established and implemented in January 2015. This service was promoted as a single entry point for student help, and incorporated:

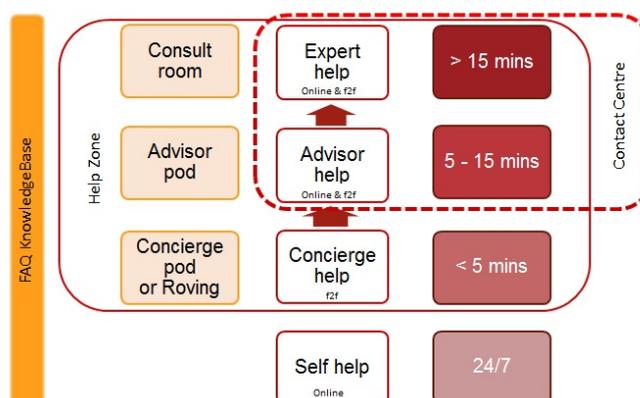
- Student administration services
- Academic course advisors,
- Library borrowing and related services,
- Library reference help,
- Student ICT
- Academic skills and Careers.

This service model has four categories of help: online self-help, concierge, advisor and expert:

- **Self-help** is information and services that the user can access independently, including information on webpages, self-checkout of books, signage, online library guides, FAQs and eLearning resources.
- **Concierge** help is basic and quick query assistance (e.g. help students enter the virtual queue, book a study room, directional queries) available during opening hours and operated by Student Administration and Library staff. This level of service is available at face-to-face and online service points, and includes triage to manage queues, roving assistance, online chat, and individual assistance at concierge pods.
- **Advisor** help provides answers to more complex queries (for example, finding journal articles, student administration, help with timetabling, using Library Search, special consideration process and more). This level of help is available at face-to-face and online service points, and includes online chat, telephone via the Contact Centre and ICT, as well as individual assistance at service pods.
- **Expert** help is prompt referral to answer the more complex queries to a subject matter expert (course advisors, librarians and student learning lecturers) within the physical Help Zone in the Library.

In 2014, help in the Library already included academic skills advisors and student ICT, but incorporation of Student Administration was a significant and ambitious initiative, due to the scale and complexity of the enquiries. Whilst the Library is primarily concerned with student scholarly engagement, and the previous partnership with student learning advisors was sympathetic to this engagement, student administration, whilst critical to the student academic experience, is of no less importance to students. However, to some staff, it represented an unusual fit with the perception of the service that libraries provide. A huge shift in thinking and perception was required, critical to ensure staff were adoptive and supportive toward the success of the new model. A strong operational partnership was implemented, essential to systematise building works, workflow, training and integration of staff in readiness for start of semester. Another factor was that staff in the Co-Curricular and Student Administration were either new to the University or new to a role in the new structure, so there was a strong emphasis on effective leadership, training and collaboration by all of the *ASK La Trobe* partners.

Figure 1: ASK La Trobe service model



The timing of the implementation brought further pressure to the team, as it coincided with three critical projects: the introduction of a new library system; intensive training for staff in new roles; and preparation for semester one orientation, always a period of intense student activity for the Library, ICT and Student Administration.

This paper will review how parties within the partnership navigated their own pathways, whilst moving towards an integrated service model. Flexibility was critical for all staff as they moved into a new organisational structure; worked in a new service model that included a new and challenging physical space; as well as adapting to working across multiple teams: their own organisational team and the 'ASK La Trobe Help Zone' team. When staff members from all specialist areas work in the Help Zone, they form part of a distinct team, which is moving towards integration and operating as one unit.

This paper will also present operational outcomes of implementation during the first six months, and examine the implications, issues and challenges arising from this collaborative model. It outlines how a structure focussed on strategic partnership is changing our approaches to frontline learning services. The new Library structure is more than just reorganising service provision; it is the beginning of a new identity for the Library, which is more closely aligned with the University aspiration of enhancing services for students. The model brings together diverse customer service elements, in an effort to provide a single seamless service point with a focus on integration of services, including a systems approach using QLess (qless.com) to streamline and manage queues for the multiple service points. The paper will also present plans that will progress the story of this innovative service model and multi-faceted expert team.

## **Planning and Governance**

In response to the University's *Funding Future Ready* initiatives, the Library proposed changes aimed at driving efficiencies in operations to contribute to University outcomes. These changes included collaborating with Student Administration Services, using a shared vision and service model to establish a complete student help service (*ASK La Trobe Service*), concentrating in the first instance (phase one) on face-to-face advice and assistance in the physical Help Zone in the Library. This would provide a place where students can find answers to the majority of their questions, and would create a high quality student experience, and place the University at the leading edge of student service provision nationally. The previous service model included separate Reference, Circulation and Student ICT desks. Academic Skills advisors (Peer Learning Advisors) were situated nearby; however, all services operated independently. Phase two of *ASK La Trobe* would integrate all virtual services, the foundation of this being self-service help via the online FAQ database, and integrated live chat and telephone service.

In 2014, the Library developed a *Funding Future Ready Business Case* to deal specifically with the Student Help Zones at the Melbourne (Bundoora) and Bendigo campuses. The objectives were to:

- provide scalable services
- identify synergies with other business units in the University
- refine and consolidate service offerings

- offer physical help in the Help Zone with organisational silos invisible at point of student contact
- offer face-to-face help to students at evenings and weekends, and
- provide an enhanced student experience with most services provided in one physical space.

A Steering Committee, representing all parties, provided the vision and guidance to the members of the Operations Group that was implementing the changes. A virtual queuing system (*QLess*) was implemented in June 2015 to help manage the huge student demand.

## Implementation

The brand *ASK La Trobe* was instituted by the University to promote to students a single service point where all enquiries would be answered, in either a virtual or a physical space. This was by no means an easy or simple task for the coordinators or managers, all new to the restructure and aspirations of the Library and the University. Added to this was a staffing envelope of high anxiety post-restructure, staff in new or repurposed roles, and a huge shift in thinking for Library staff in understanding and acceptance of the new service delivery model. In 2014, many staff were anxious to have a job after the restructure, and many had not really considered the operation of their role within the new structure. So much was dependent on the resilience and sponsorship of committed staff within the Co-Curricular Team in the Library and Student Administration.

To establish the physical *ASK La Trobe* Help Zone, the existing Reference, Student ICT and Circulation Desks were replaced by a series of nine individual modular pods in an open plan arrangement, quite different to the previous working area of an enclosed desk space. The vision for improved client service was to have the students or academic staff side by side, with the staff member providing assistance. Phase one of the new Help Zone operation (viewed as the experimental stage) incorporated Student Administration, ICT and the Library. This was a huge challenge for the Library space due to the then unknown volume of queries from Student Administration. Peaks for this service can involve hundreds of students at any one time, particularly at the beginning of semester one, and after exam results.

The operating model included fixed and roving concierge staff, who would answer directional queries, and direct students to the relevant service; the Library operated two pods, ICT two, and Student Administration operated five pods. This quickly caused problems, due to the uneven volume of queries for each service point throughout the initial peak period. The Library operated one desk for borrowing and related queries (fixed concierge) and one for borrowing and reference. Library staffing in the Help Zone included library officers, library technicians and librarians, with senior librarians available for more complex reference help.

The initial plan was to incorporate Student Administration into the Help Zone in the Library. However, it quickly became critical to integrate College Subject Matter Experts (Course Advisors) as well, to work in tandem with Student Administration, which operated as a level one enquiry, escalating to level two (Course Advisors), when students needed to change or select new subjects or courses. With the volume

of queries during this first peak period, staff in the Help Zone had to act quickly to integrate extra pods, consultation rooms and concierge staff to triage the queuing.

## **QLess**

A systems approach using QLess was introduced during the year to streamline and manage queues for the multiple service points in the Help Zone. This is an automated queuing system; students can join the virtual queue from a mobile phone, widget on the University website, or via a concierge in the Help Zone. It is not essential for students to have a mobile phone to use QLess: students can enter the online queue via a concierge, and check the monitors for their turn. QLess was central to managing queues to enable the smooth operation of the Help Zone. QLess operation is simple for staff and the students to use, and staff were enthusiastic in their approach to this new system.

There are five queues and students can only place themselves into any of three of these five queues: Student Administration, Library and ICT. Student Administration operates three queues, but escalates queries via QLess to the other two queues for College Course Advisors, for Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (ASSC); and Science, Health and Engineering (SHE). Students join the queue by texting any of the following keywords to a designated phone number: *Melbourne Library; Melbourne IT; Melbourne Student; Bendigo Library; Bendigo IT or Bendigo Student.*

Students receive a text message when they are nearing the front of the queue, then a second text with the relevant pod number, so they know where to go for service within the Help Zone. There are also monitors positioned appropriately within the Library, so that students can see where they are in the queue. This system allows students to place themselves in the queue without being physically in the Library, and given an estimated time for service, without having to wait in line. QLess calculates the wait time based on the number of students in the queue average time per query. Managers can also monitor the queues and wait times remotely, and adjust staffing and pods as required.

The statistical data generated by QLess is valuable to assist with forward planning for peak periods in 2016. A range of reports and statistics are available from QLess and include service wait times, outcomes, delays, queue length, return customers, service transactions and service duration by employee or queue. Each report type can be filtered by date, customer, transaction or location types and service results.

## **Review of the Help Zone**

In May 2015 a review of the *ASK La Trobe* Help Zone was conducted to focus on:

- physical (physical layout, equipment and signage)
- operational (processes and procedures);
- organisational (training, integration, roles and responsibilities) and
- strategic (vision, goals, communication and leadership) themes.

Methods of data collection from staff included facilitated workshops, a staff survey, a feedback wall, suggestion box and email. Student feedback was requested through post-service survey and observations of students in the Help Zone.

In general, staff were supportive of the concept of providing one place for students to obtain help, and were committed to working together to provide a high quality service; however, there were some concerns raised. Whilst the aspiration was to provide a seamless service, the volume and nature of the queries made it challenging to fulfil this goal within the first semester of implementation, due to the intense training requirement. At the concierge level, there was a mix of experienced Library staff working alongside student casuals, who had minimal training. It was also difficult for inexperienced staff to mediate the high number of students converging on the Help Zone during peak periods. For example, 2,740 queries were received in the first week of semester. Whilst each service managed its own staffing and operation, there was not one overall coordinator of the service. This caused problems during peak periods when pods required time-critical re-allocation. Staff were also concerned about waiting times, as course advisor consultations can be lengthy. There was also feedback related to the nature of the queries, with Student Administration being more of a transactional service, whilst Library queries centred on borrowing, reference help and information literacy. Whilst the University vision is to put students first, and enhance the student experience, staff feedback from the June review of the Help Zone suggested that the two services did not relate at all and were not a comfortable fit.

The majority of review feedback related to the physical layout of the Help Zone at the Melbourne (Bundoora) campus. As the physical area required increased capacity, it was actually too small and not fit for purpose. The design did not allow for the magnitude and scale of the service, signage was inadequate, and there was minimal space for storage. During peak periods, extra desks were integrated into the Help Zone; however, this created a very dense working environment. Staff working in the Help Zone requested more clarity relating to roles and responsibilities, and a clearer definition of what level and form of integration is required for maximum efficiency. Staff felt that a lot of work and training in advanced reference service and administration was still required to ensure a seamless service. The majority of students surveyed found it easy to locate the services they required, most were satisfied with the service received and found staff to be very knowledgeable. Half of the students were unaware that there were College advisors and student ICT support available.

Noting that the Help Zone is still in an experimental phase, the principal recommendations from the review included:

- urgent attention to the space: engage a space consultant to re-design the Help Zones at the Melbourne (Bundoora) and Bendigo libraries
- move all form submissions to online in order to reduce the number of students in the physical space
- develop and implement an annual *ASK La Trobe* communications plan
- develop and implement an annual training program.

## **Design thinking concept**

Following on from the review, and as part of the University's continuous improvement process, the Library commissioned an external consultant to work on a design concept for the service going forward. This took place during November 2015. The review focussed on reviewing actual client behaviour, and took the form of

a 'design thinking exercise'. The aims were to optimise the user experience, improve seamless engagement across the range of advisors and levels of expertise, maximise the connection between online and physical environments, and develop a flexible and adaptable service area that can change to suit demand during the course of the semester.

A number of data collection methods were used, including a student survey, student and staff focus groups, design thinking workshops, site observation and exit interviews. Early reports from this recent review highlight the same challenges and recommendations previously reported, although there was more attention paid to the embedded infrastructure behind the service, and how this is driving development and improvements. More suggestions were made in relation to the physical space, such as design of work spaces and use of space; however, the Library has applied for funding to create a Help Zone that is fit for purpose, and designed to accommodate all partners appropriately.

The operation of the Help Zone for 2015 was experimental: an opportunity to learn, adapt and provide an excellent service for students. The internal review and external design concept identified a number of opportunities for improvement. The next major phase for the Steering Committee will be to take the vision, goals and review recommendations, and translate these into a fit-for-purpose *ASK La Trobe* Help Zone at the Melbourne (Bundoora) and Bendigo campuses, to place La Trobe at the forefront of student-facing services. Funding will be critical to progress and move forward to continuously improve the service.

## **Reflections from the Student Administration perspective**

A new Service Model was introduced this year for the Student Administration Team. *ASK La Trobe* was created to provide a centralised service to manage student enquiries, and to avoid or minimise the need to have students visit multiple different locations to manage their administration enquiries. Previously, students needed to attend administration functions provided at each faculty office and/or a central administration office to have their enquiries managed. A new Contact Centre was established to manage all incoming current student telephone enquiries, enquiries generated via the online *ASK La Trobe* service (via a Customer Relationship Management system), and enquiries from social media platforms.

Within the face-to-face Help Zone, when possible there is resolution of enquiries at the first point of contact (approximately 75-85%), without the need for further escalation. The enquiries typically handled at 'Level 1' service include:

- assisting students to use systems such as online enrolment
- timetabling
- managing enquiries relating to fees
- special consideration process
- results and graduations
- variation of enrolments
- course transfers
- advance standings
- processing student payments

There is an extensive online Knowledge Database (FAQs), which students and staff can use on a self-serve basis, to find out information relevant to all University activities. When enquiries relate to more course-specific or specialist areas, staff will escalate to College course advisors. Expert Course Advisors manage specific course advice based enquiries within the Help Zone in the Library. Again, the intention is for the student to have an enquiry managed at their first point of contact.

From a Help Zone operations perspective, a key benefit of the new service model is the central location for students to have their enquiry needs managed. The challenges faced are the lack of space to manage peak enquiry periods, and the 'temporary' or 'experimental' nature of the working space for staff. This has been difficult for staff, particularly during peak periods where the work intensity, lack of space and long wait times for students have affected the staff. To date, the services have been operating separately but co-located; therefore, the challenge ahead will be to train staff who work in the Help Zone towards a more integrated service, in order to streamline baseline queries. Improvements are being made to systems and processes to move more of the simple transactional based enquiries online to both alleviate the pressure on the face to face service in the Help Zone, and improve the student experience.

## **Reflections from the Library perspective**

The new Library structure and service model heralded a significant change in the way that frontline library services were delivered. The removal of the formal Inquiry and Reference desks was essential in creating the integrated Help Zone. Reference (Faculty) librarians were placed in new roles in the new structure, in the Learning and Teaching (Senior Learning Advisors), or Research (Senior Research Advisors) teams, but without any ongoing role in the Help Zone, other than that of backup support for the more complex reference enquiries. Library staff in the Help Zone would consist of Library officers and technicians (borrowing and related enquiries and concierge) and Library technicians and librarians (reference and borrowing and related enquiries) level staff. This was a huge shift in face-to-face service design, and involved an ambitious and intensive training program for Library staff, build capacity for more complex reference advice. This training program has been ongoing all year, and maps to a fully comprehensive staff development plan and individual staff performance plans. A staff training database has been created to manage bookings and house training materials so that staff can review for continuous improvement and new staff training. Training included advanced database searching over all disciplines, the reference interview, introduction to specific resources such as required for law and health, Primo (Alma) familiarisation, referencing and EndNote, training particular to specific student assessment tasks, Reading Lists (Talis) for academic staff, and more.

The role of reference enquiries in frontline services has changed during the past few years at La Trobe University, with the momentum now on embedding information and digital literacy into the curriculum at the point of student need. This has resulted in fewer face-to-face reference transactions in recent times, as the Library moves to more integration at the subject design level, working in collaboration with the University's Learning and Teaching Centre, and academic teaching staff in the Colleges. The new University structure requires a level of blended learning, and as such, many subject designs are under review, with the Library embedded as a

learning partner. The Learning and Teaching team has been involved in Curriculum Design Intensives, where information and digital literacy activities are embedded into the curriculum with assessment activities related to learning outcomes. Librarians in the curricular team work with academic staff and educational designers in the Learning and Teaching Centre at subject design level. The Library is also developing a Digital Literacy Framework for the University, based on the JISC model, to inform the way forward in developing digital literacy skills for academic staff and students.

Finally, there was lots of discussion and feedback about the role of Student Administration integrating into the Library in terms of 'fit' with perception of academic Library services. However, the University *Future Ready* aspiration and the *Library Learning and Teaching Partnership Framework* clearly place the student's learning journey in the centre of all activities. Therefore, the clear message, which required a real shift in thinking by Library staff, is that it is not about the Library, and it does not matter what services are in the Library building; it is about contributing to an enhanced student experience and supporting the student's learning journey. This is a definite alignment with the aspiration of the University's *Future Ready* strategy.

## Conclusion

In July 2015, more services were added to the Help Zone, with an increase in academic skills advisors in the Help Zone (Peer Learning Advisors), as well as Student Learning lecturers and careers advisors, in a separate consultation area. The Help Zone in the Library is now operating at peak and incorporates Library (Circulation and Reference); Student Administration and College Course Advisors; Student ICT; Careers Counselling; and Student Learning (Lecturers and Peer Learning Advisors), all operating within one expanded physical area. Whilst this has been an ambitious target, and an outstanding achievement by committed staff, there are still significant hurdles regarding the physical space, on the journey towards a seamless service for students. Implementation this year has gradually co-located these services into the one physical area, which is more fit for purpose, with integration incorporated at the transactional level, and working quite successfully.

Were expectations of implementing a high-quality service so quickly too high for the magnitude of the services we were integrating? Previous studies of integrated services (McGee, 2014; Ferer, 2012) have all reflected on the level and quality of the collaborations for success. On reflection, we could see the acceptance and commitment of the staff growing as the year progressed. There were challenges and very difficult issues that had to be resolved, sometimes quite quickly during peak periods. There is a need to work hard on the challenges ahead, which include ongoing staff training, integration of services, service wait times, and student expectations. There is also a need to balance the differing peak periods of each service, and the opportunity for a more combined supportive model within the range of services available.

Students now have a Help Zone that includes most of the services they will need on their academic journey. The increased convenience in having Course Advisors on hand, linked to Student Administration help, of streamlining processes and setting up virtual queuing, has provided an excellent service in a Library with attractive physical spaces and silent study areas. As staff receive further training and experience, the ability to integrate services and resolve enquiries at the point of contact will improve.

There is goodwill and there are great opportunities ahead to address the challenges involved in working towards a seamless service. Being in a service industry, staff are used to delivering a high-quality service and endeavour to do this. More promotion of online services is required, to encourage students further towards more personal efficiencies, and utilisation of face-to-face services for more complex service resolution. It has been an intense journey of challenges and successes for all partners in this partnership. Managing expectations and meeting each other's needs has fostered a high level of mutual respect, harmony and friendship within the group, as we move forward on a pathway towards continuous quality improvement.

Integration of services into the *ASK La Trobe* Help Zone; however, is still a work in progress, as the service moves to integrate virtual services to complete the picture. In 2016, attention will be focussed on adjustments to be made to the physical spaces for the ensuing peak periods, as well as future planning for a physical space that is more 'fit for purpose'. The physical limitations of the Help Zone hinder the ability of staff in their quest for delivery of a high quality service. Continual attention to work practices that will reduce waiting times during peak periods is high on the agenda.

Exceptional delivery of face-to-face and virtual services involves expert collaboration with our partners within the Library and across the University, in order to bring together people, programs and expertise. The commitment and expertise of the partners this year has provided an excellent foundation for a critical service to enhance the student learning experience at La Trobe University.

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