# Research support for academic excellence

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The Durban University of Technology (DUT) objectives relating to research were formulated to address the poor research standing of DUT. They are explicitly articulated in the institutional strategic plan Strategic Goals and Objectives 2009-2018. The objective "to increase postgraduate research in alignment with niche areas" is to be realised by developing leadership in technology transfer and innovation (Goal 2); and creating sustainable knowledge through applied research (Goal 7). These are to be achieved inter alia by improving the postgraduate experience; and increasing the pool of researchers. In general, universities of technology in South Africa perform poorly in the national research rankings as their primary focus is on teaching and learning.

Implementing changes in the library entailed assessing the needs of DUT postgraduates, academics and researchers, then developing a strategy to meet those needs in line with the goals defined above. Representation by library management on University structures like the Institutional Research Committee and the Higher Degrees Committee meant that channels of communication were already well established and the library was well positioned to respond proactively to the institution's research goals.

An effective library strategy can be articulated and implemented in a number of ways. The library was particularly aware of initiatives in academic libraries at a national and international level and used this information to inform its planning process. One of these initiatives, the Carnegie funded Research Libraries Consortium project in South Africa (2006), developed a comprehensive programme which incorporated the following:

- creating a cohort of librarians skilled in research and research methodology;
- creating a library space for postgraduates in the research commons; and
- developing an online portal for seamless access to library resources.

This programme focussed on the needs of local South African researchers at the "research universities" and allowed DUT to plan appropriate facilities for the university of technology environment. Planning improved services was envisaged through training, instituting new services and by proactive recruitment of librarian's with skills and experience in research.

The approaches described by Franklin provide a helpful framework within which to view the achievements since 2009 at the DUT library.[1]  The following three approaches are particularly appropriate: aligning library services to support the institution's strategic initiatives; modifying the library organizational structure; and employing library staff members who contribute to vital institutional outcomes. All three activities require commitment of significant resources and represent major challenges if they are to be executed effectively.

## Aligning library services to support the institutions strategic initiatives

To this end, the library took a proactive role and implemented several initiatives.

### Developing new policies

Before new services can be created and implemented appropriate policies need to be developed and formally adopted. The following policies were subsequently formulated: a Plagiarism policy to promote academic integrity and awareness of plagiarism (2009); an Institutional Repository (IR) policy for the establishment of a repository for the purpose of management, preservation and retrieval of institutional research (2009); an Information Resources policy (revised 2009) for the acquisition of suitable materials; and an Information Services policy (in progress) to guide the delivery of library services. These were intended to inform the establishment of new services to meet the needs of researchers and so improve the postgraduate experience.

### Repurposing library space

The repurposing of library space resulted in two dedicated postgraduate spaces, termed the Research Commons. These two facilities were opened in 2010 and provide a collaborative environment equipped with computers, software, printing facilities and an atmosphere conducive to study. They soon proved very popular with MTech and DTech students as well as academic staff involved in research, and there are many requests for longer opening hours. Currently, these facilities only cater for a small group of potential users as computers and space are limited and DUT enrolment has increased over the last three years.

## Digital services

An Institutional Repository (IR) was established in 2009 for the curation of theses and published DUT research output. This was a significant achievement as the IR was the first at a South African university of technology and its establishment informed the development of repositories at other universities of technology in the country. It was strongly championed by the library and currently showcases over 600 theses and research papers, making the university's research output available to the global research community. A series of annual workshops on open access publishing have since been arranged by the library to create awareness of copyright and publishing options among DUT researchers.

Delivery of digital services was vitally important to enhance the research experience. An improved library website provides visible and intuitive links to research information and information resources. The Summon discovery tool (another first for DUT in South Africa) was set up and provides "a good starting point" for researchers when searching for information. Seamless linking to improve access to full text content is achieved via implementation of open URL linking (Serial Solutions) while remote access to resources via Ezproxy makes relevant content available anytime, anyplace at the convenience of the researcher or postgraduate. This access was further extended with the implementation of Wi-Fi in libraries and the development of a number of mobile applications. The impact of these developments is clearly shown by the steady increase in usage statistics for online resources.

## Skills development

Training/teaching to promote research skills and information literacy is offered to postgraduates and researchers to develop abilities in searching for information; keeping current in a particular subject field; managing referencing (EndNote software); and using citation data. The existing, customised DUT Harvard Style guide was revised so as to cater for the wider range of information sources used by postgraduates and researchers The use of Turnitin (academic plagiarism detector software) as an effective means of improving academic integrity was driven by the library, and librarians provide support in this regard. The Research Commons host a variety of training in close liaison with the Institution's Research Directorate and the faculties. A series of research capacity building workshops for postgraduates, EndNote training, and training on the SPSS software for data analysis and management, are just some of the skills development opportunities offered.

## Reviewing usage

To enhance quality, a regular review of information resources in terms of usage (using a return on investment approach) and the needs of research became part of an on-going process. This practice informs new subscriptions and cancellations in consultation with faculties and research interest groups. A subscription to Web of Science was considered and subsequently expanded (in terms of date coverage) in response to the need to benchmark the institution's research output nationally. The Web of Science provides a measure of researcher productivity (h-index); and the targets set by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) aim to increase the number of ISI active researchers and ISI scientific outputs.

Active liaison by the library management and postgraduate/subject librarians ensures that appropriate information on resources and services is channelled to university research structures. Faculties are consulted and kept well informed.

# Modifying the library's organizational structure to directly support the university's mission

Structures within the library were adjusted to focus more specifically on delivery of research support services.

The department responsible for innovation and development was adapted and renamed to reflect a strong IT focus and so spearhead digital changes. An Institutional Repository Committee established by the library, operates with library and faculty representation. This ensures that the interests of researchers are well-represented.

Information services are now consolidated under the Head of Academic Services. Two postgraduate librarians (posts created in 2010 and 2011) form part of this service and they collaborate with the existing cohort of subject librarians and the interlibrary loans assistant in meeting research needs. Emphasis has been placed on a user-centred attitude to services. At the 2012 postgraduate induction "a special thank you and vote of thanks to the library for their service provision and support" was noted by the outgoing Postgraduate Forum Committee.

# Developing library staff to reflect changing needs

A constant, throughout the process of developing services, is recognition of the changing role of the librarian. New categories of staff exemplify key responsibility areas defined by the library, and reflect the proactive and research-focused approach in the library. New roles have been created, including the positions of Head of Academic Services, Head of IT Innovation and Development, the creation of postgraduate librarians, and an IR administrator. Further, the library learning culture encourages staff members to engage in further studies to improve their educational qualifications and to reskill themselves. Personal and professional development is strongly supported with staff members actively encouraged to participate in the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), its interest groups and other professional associations. Staff members attend and present at a range of conferences (both online and face to face) and are urged to publish in professional publications.

Involvement in the LIS profession is an important aspect of the library ethos. Library staff members play an active role in the development of libraries at a national level. As representatives of government advisory bodies such as the National Council for Libraries and Information Services

(NCLIS), and as members of national committees, they make a valuable contribution to the development of LIS in the country.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the initiatives which have impacted significantly on the research behaviour of postgraduates and researchers at DUT. The achievements of the DUT library, particularly in light of the limited resources available and the strong teaching legacy at the institution, have been impressive over the past three years. The shift in focus from support for teaching and learning to incorporating extensive research support has meant a deliberate and strategic reconfiguration of library services. Students and faculty programme reviews report favourably on the postgraduate facilities and support now offered by the library.

Future initiatives by the library will be directed towards enhancing the postgraduate and researcher experience by:

- developing and implementing effective measures for ongoing service excellence;
- expanding library collections and the interlibrary loan service to effectively meet growing research information needs;
- providing greater research support via the library website and virtual research communities;
- improving communication with postgraduates; and
- embedding the library in faculty research initiatives.

## References

1. Franklin, B. 2012. Surviving to thriving: advancing the institutional mission. Journal of library administration, 52:94-107