

# Research Support in Theological Libraries (2)

by Ian Stoodley

We are used to serving the undergraduate community in our ANZTLA educational institutions. My aim in this presentation is to explore what may need to change in our libraries as those institutions expand their operations and we are asked to serve postgraduate researchers.

The ideas presented here are meant to stimulate our thinking. Their practicality or relevance will change according to the context but hopefully they include something of use to every situation. They draw from a selection of relevant literature, an email exchange with the Faculty of Science and Technology liaison librarian at QUT, a quick survey of postgraduate students in the Information Studies Group at QUT, and my own fairly recent experience as a postgraduate student.

References are given throughout, as a potential resource for those who have to justify applications for more librarian time or library funding.

These thoughts are grouped under three headings which indicate what seem to be some key issues:

- Librarian as access provider
- Librarian as educator
- Librarian as communicator

## Librarian as access provider

A key aspect of postgraduate study is the need to explore a narrowly defined topic in great depth. This is related to the requirement, at least for doctoral candidates, that they make a unique contribution to knowledge. The implication for a library is that it should not only be able to cater for a breadth of research topics but also a substantial depth of material. Given the typically small size of both collections and budget in theological libraries, this is a significant challenge.

Macauley and Green identified a shift in the librarian's role from collection building to providing access to informational resources.<sup>1</sup> I suggest one response to postgraduate demand lies in investing in a strong resource network with a view to diversifying our resources. Such



<sup>1</sup> Peter Macauley and Rosemary Green, "The Transformation of Information and Library Services," in *International Handbook of Distance Education*, ed. Terry Evans, Margaret Haughey and David Murphy (Bingkey, UK: Emerald, 2008), 367-383.

a network already exists between theological libraries, but we may need to look beyond this, for example to universities which offer theological programmes of study. Associated with this is the provision of electronic resources.

A quick survey of the expectations of a handful of postgraduate students in the Information Studies Group at QUT revealed an emphasis on electronic tools and resources (Table 1). When asked how the library could best support their studies, they included:

- Subscription to as many databases, journals, eResources as possible
- Increasing access to electronic books (perhaps more important than extended borrowing privileges)
- Maintenance of web links to helpful resources
- A thesis database which is searchable and downloadable, indicating good examples
- A website offering equivalent service to that offered face-to-face
- Ensuring resources are accessible remotely

**Table 1. Results of a quick survey of postgraduate students at QUT**

	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Staff</b>
<b>Essential</b>	<p><b>Subscribe</b> to as many journals (print or electronic), databases and eResources as possible;</p> <p>An up to date gateway including <b>links to helpful resources</b> for research in different areas;</p> <p><b>Access to theses</b> that is searchable and downloadable, indicating examples of good theses in various topic areas;</p> <p>Database search engine that shows the <b>frequency of keywords</b> for each search document found.</p>	<p>Extensive <b>opening hours</b>;</p> <p>Extended <b>loan periods</b>;</p> <p>Training in using <b>referencing software</b>;</p> <p>Consideration for <b>disabled users</b>;</p> <p><b>Alerting services</b> which keep students up to date with the latest research in their field of study;</p> <p><b>Interlibrary loans</b> (x2);</p> <p><b>A way for students to contribute</b> their ideas, things they have found e.g. a wiki.</p>	<p><b>Friendly</b> and more importantly <b>knowledgeable</b> staff, preferably from different languages, cultures and nations;</p> <p><b>Expert assistance</b> in navigating the research process;</p> <p>Librarians who are <b>subject specialists</b>.</p>
<b>Helpful</b>		<p><b>Interlibrary loans</b>;</p> <p>A handy <b>instruction</b> for using the library targeting first time users. What about translating into the different languages of library's users?</p> <p>Frequent <b>library training</b> workshops;</p> <p>Regular email <b>news</b> and library <b>tips</b>.</p>	
<b>Ideal</b>	<p>Increasing number of <b>electronic</b> books, perhaps more important than extended loan periods;</p> <p>A small collection for <b>different languages</b>.</p>	<p>Offering a large number of services <b>on-line</b>;</p> <p>A <b>very good website</b>, equivalent service online to that which is offered face-to-face;</p> <p>A <b>quiet place</b> to work;</p> <p>A web presence that <b>allows students to collaboratively learn</b> by encouraging discussion, content creation, sharing about resources available through the library.</p>	

“Thus, the librarian brings to the supervisory team expertise in search strategy, resource quality assessment, synthesis, bibliographic style and alternative sources of information.”

My own preference as a student was to have an item available in both print and electronic format. The electronic format gave me sufficient insight into the content to decide whether it was potentially useful, I preferred to read the print version, but then I would return to the electronic version to cut-and-paste quotes, bibliographic details, etc. into an Endnote database. This is not just a question of convenience. My thesis bibliography has about 200 entries, my Endnote database has more again and I considered many more resources beyond this only to discard them as irrelevant. For a fulltime candidate this happens intensively during the first 12 months, though continuing somewhat throughout the research project – postgraduate students need tools to help them access and manage this volume of material.

Macauley and Green observed that students increasingly preferred and were reliant on online and electronic resources.<sup>2</sup> They preferred Internet search engines to library database websites and tended to accept all sources of information as authoritative. This leads to another key issue for the librarian...

### Librarian as educator

Given the information searching habits of students entering postgraduate studies, the proliferation of material they are likely to be confronted with and their possible uncritical acceptance of it, they need help to develop their information literacy and adopt an informed learning approach.<sup>3</sup>

Such is the importance of the librarian’s educative role for the postgraduate, Macauley and McKnight have suggested a librarian should be a member of the supervisory team of each student.<sup>4</sup> The librarian’s information specialist role would be well defined and not embrace all of the duties required of other supervisors on the team.

Postgraduates need help from the librarian to increase their depth of knowledge, avoid duplication of research, identify gaps in knowledge, keep up to date and know where to publish. Thus, the librarian brings to the supervisory team expertise in search strategy, resource quality assessment, synthesis, bibliographic style and alternative sources of information. They can also help the team identify high risk students through their practical engagement with students in their resource seeking.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Macauley and Green, “Transformation,” 367-383.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Macauley and Sue McKnight, “Library Representation on Supervisory Panels: A Model of Collaboration,” in *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)elations*, ed. Alison Bartlett and Gina Mercer (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 113-122; Christine S. Bruce, *Informed Learning* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Macauley and McKnight, “Library Representation,” 113-122.

<sup>5</sup> Macauley and Green, “Transformation,” 367-383; Peter Macauley, “The Librarian – The Candidate’s Forgotten Friend,” in *Doctorates Downunder*, ed. Carey J. Denholm and Terry Evans (Camberwell: ACER Press, 2006) 50-58; Macauley and McKnight, “Library Representation,” 113-122.



*“For example, at the beginning of the candidacy we may sit alongside the student and help them devise and execute a search strategy in detail, however in time (and for some students a very short time) we should be reflecting their research questions back to them and expecting them to stand on their own feet.”*

Indeed, librarians will perform an educative role even if they are not included formally on a supervisory team. The advantage of being formally recognized is that it makes it clearer (to the candidate, academics and librarian) that the librarian is working in collaboration with others in helping the candidate pursue the objectives of their candidacy. Our work on supervision in the STEM (Science, Technology, Mathematics and Engineering) disciplines revealed that a key goal of postgraduate study is to produce an independent researcher.<sup>6</sup> This means, for example, a researcher who is able to drive their own research, find their own solutions, and if necessary question and take a stand against the status quo. These abilities develop over time and in order to help progress the candidate towards independence the supervisor’s role typically changes during the course of the candidacy, generally from directing to collaborating. The librarian needs to be aware of this progression in order to contribute to the educative process. For example, at the beginning of the candidacy we may sit alongside the student and help them devise and execute a search strategy in detail, however in time (and for some students a very short time) we should be reflecting their research questions back to them and expecting them to stand on their own feet. If we are not doing this, we could actually be working against the educational goals of their candidacy. The librarian, then, needs to be communicating with the candidate’s supervisors, which leads to another key issue...

### Librarian as communicator

Emma Nelms, liaison librarian for the Faculty of Science and Technology at QUT, says postgraduates, more than undergraduates, require your time, will come back for repeated visits and can pose quite difficult questions. They benefit from frequent in-depth workshops and may require a workshop series of the kind offered by QUT, called Advanced Information Retrieval Skills (<http://www.library.qut.edu.au/learn/airs/index.jsp>). On a similar note, one respondent in my quick postgraduate survey said they appreciated regular library newsletters which presented tips, reminders and new resources. Emma also commented that postgraduates are much more enjoyable to teach and will happily participate in a two hour training session on library things. Her summary of the impact postgraduate education on the library was: more staff, more software and more resources.

Reinforcing the need to be engaged in helping meet students’ specific needs, Macauley and Green’s observation was that libraries have moved historically from proactive to reactive, and now to personalised services.<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily mean customising to meet each student’s individual needs, but making it possible for

<sup>6</sup> Christine S. Bruce and Ian D. Stoodley, “Science and Technology Supervision Resources,” 2010, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/38456/3/38456P.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Macauley and Green, “Transformation,” 367–383.



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students to themselves filter library functions in order to increase their relevance to them.

Additionally, my quick student survey indicated that students want a means by which they can interact online and learn from each other, for example through a wiki. In this way they could discuss, create content, comment on helpful library resources, contribute their ideas and share discoveries. What I find interesting here is that they do not see themselves with respect to the library as mere receivers of content but also as content providers. This is consistent with an informed learning approach:

- Information awareness and communication – Research students situating themselves in the community of researchers; and
- Knowledge extension – Research students aware of themselves and their interactions as catalysts of innovation.<sup>8</sup>

It may be that our institutions already offer interactive online services, however it could be useful to ensure students have easy access to and from the library system while using such services.

## Conclusion

The demands placed on libraries by postgraduate candidates are significant, in terms of resources, staffing and services offered. However, not everyone necessarily appreciates the impact a postgraduate level of education would have on their library, especially for example on a library staffed by a 0.6 librarian plus volunteers. It is up to us to raise awareness and promote our libraries' needs, for the sake of the candidates enrolling in our institutions.

Even if we are not immediately in the position of having to cater for postgraduate researchers, theological education is changing and our institutions developing. We may be well served to ensure we are included in planning discussions and to think ahead so we are as well placed as possible to serve a postgraduate community as access providers, educators and communicators in the future.

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce, *Informed Learning*.



## Bibliography

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