



Trends in Theological and Religious Studies Librarianship: Global and Regional Perspectives

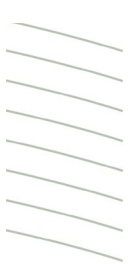
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In July 2024, three theological library associations – Atla (formerly the American Theological Library Association) based in North America, ANZTLA (Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association) and BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie), including members of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL) – launched a global study to better understand the environment in which theological and religious studies libraries are functioning and how libraries and librarianship are evolving to meet the changing landscape of theological education. Understanding the theological librarianship landscape, on a regional and global scale, is important as we all consider ‘The Big Reset’ and how the profession and our libraries react to change and embrace opportunity as we move forward. Discovering the unique challenges of different regions and finding the commonalities across our environments is essential to helping the entire theological library community to grow, learn, and adapt. During this session global trends and perspectives identified in the study will be shared



alongside highlights specific to the ANZTLA community captured through both the global study data and ANZTLA annual statistics.

The context in which theological libraries are working has been changing for some time. The changes in the environment are impacting libraries and librarians in a myriad of ways. Some of the specific changes in the environment include:

1. Socio-religious: The decline of historically dominant religious traditions and interest in the West.
2. Demographic: The increasing diversity of populations and cultures.
3. Research and scholarship: The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of humanities and social science research.
4. Technology: The internet revolution.

It is within the context of these widespread and pervasive changes that libraries finding the need to adapt and change to stay engaged and effective.

The global study launched mid-year in 2024 consisted of a survey distributed to members of all three organizations followed by focus groups that further explored themes and trends emerging from the survey results. A version of the survey in English was sent to members of Atla and ANZTLA, and to BETH members in English, Italian, and Spanish. A total of 200 individuals responded to the survey. Approximately 23% percent of the membership of ANZTLA responded to the survey.

Following the survey, a total of five focus groups were held, one for ANZTLA members, two for BETH members, and two for Atla members. Of the thirty-five total focus group participants, nine were from ANZTLA. After initial analysis of the survey, several themes were identified, and the



focus group discussion guide was developed to explore these themes more deeply. Additionally, there was a desire to explore regional differences and global commonalities.

An initial set of questions in the survey focused on demographic-type information, including professional identity. On average, respondents to the question, “*How would you describe yourself professionally?*” selected 2.2 of the options.



If a respondent selected one option, those selections were split fairly evenly between *academic/college/university librarian* or *librarian at a religious studies or theological library* or *theological or religious studies librarian*. If a respondent selected two more responses, most often selected *academic/college/university librarian* with *theological or religious studies librarian* or *librarian at a religious studies or theological library*. If selected three or more, often identified as one or more of those three plus *library administrator* or *faculty*. If selected five, usually identified as *administrator at a religious studies or theological institution* as well. Other responses were few but most frequently included *archivist* or *church, cathedral or diocesan librarian*.



Shifting to review of responses from just ANZTLA members, the average was lower than the overall with only 1.5 selections per respondent.

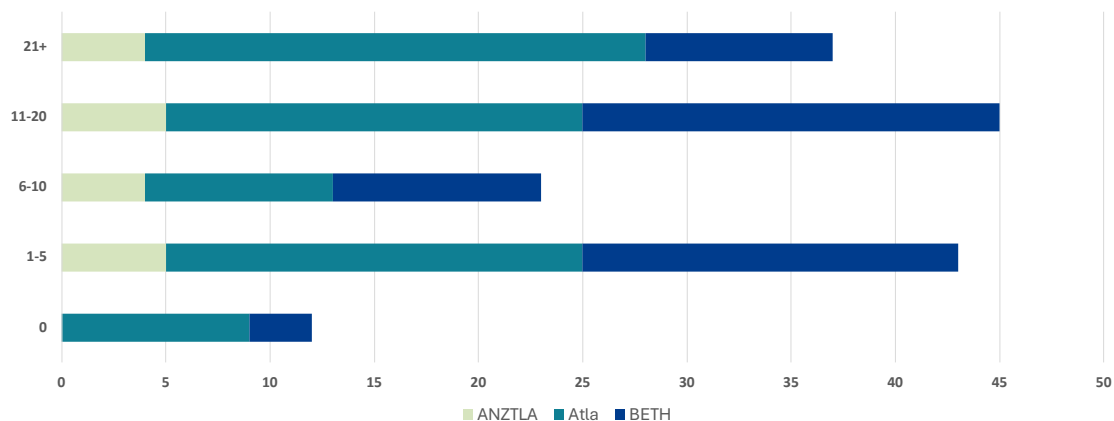


The majority of ANZTLA respondents selected one option, fairly even split across the same three options as the whole, but slightly higher in *librarian at a religious studies or theological library*, which make sense given the anecdote that ANZTLA colleagues shared with me that many members come to the subject matter after becoming a librarian. The remaining ANZTLA respondents that selected multiple options, mostly combining *theological or religious studies librarian* or *academic/college/university librarian* with *librarian at a religious studies or theological library*. If an ANZTLA respondent selected a high number of options, they typically added *library administrator* or *faculty* to the mix.

When asked “*How many years have you described yourself as a theological or religious studies librarian?*” responses across the various categories were fairly evenly spread for ANZTLA respondents while early (1-5 years) or late (11-20 and 20+) were the higher categories overall.



How many years have you described yourself as a theological or religious studies librarian?



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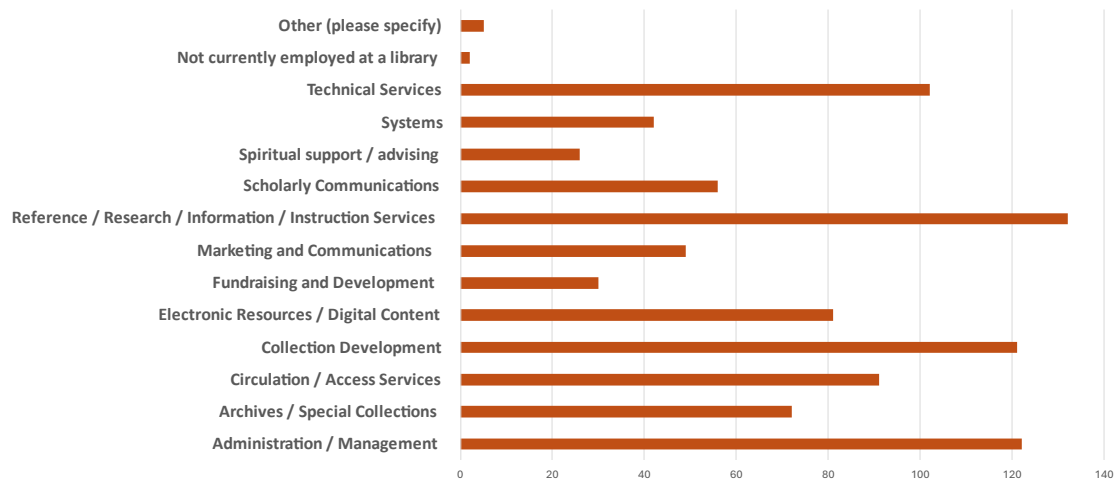
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When asked to describe their job function, again respondents could make multiple selections and on average 4.7 options were selected. Only 22 selected a single job function and most often that selection was *administration* or *reference/research/information/instruction services*. The majority indicated more than one area, and often many areas with four respondents selecting all twelve areas and another four selecting eleven of the twelve areas. In the other category of responses, one respondent indicated “managing the library from beginning to end” and others mentioned support for other activities in the institution including open research/science support, worship copyright, learning management systems administration, and oversight of writing center.



Which term most closely matches your current job function



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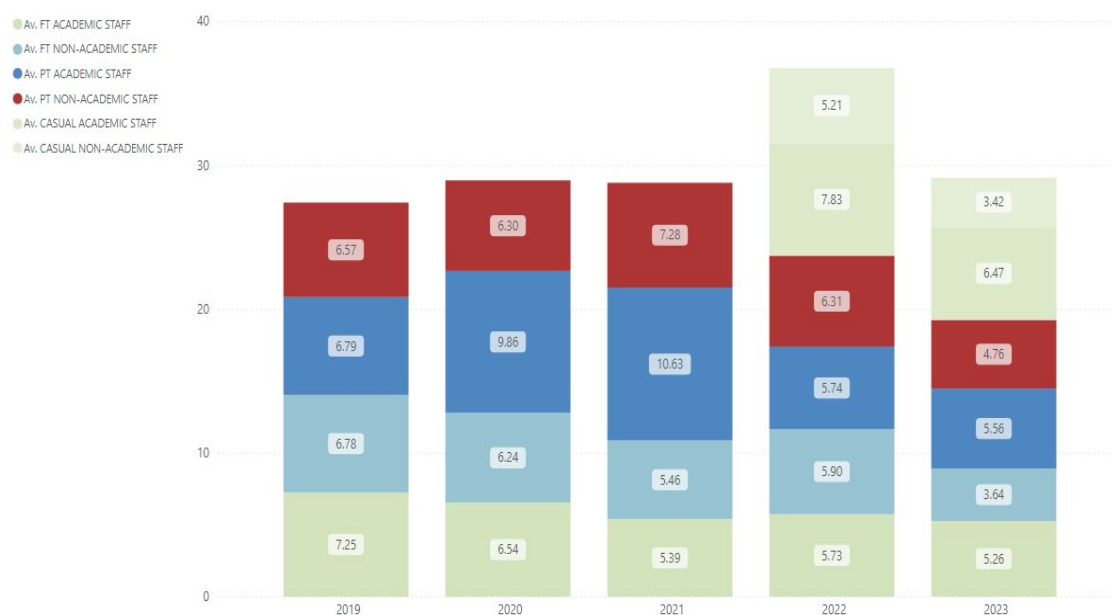
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ANZTLA Highlight #1

Average # STAFF by Year





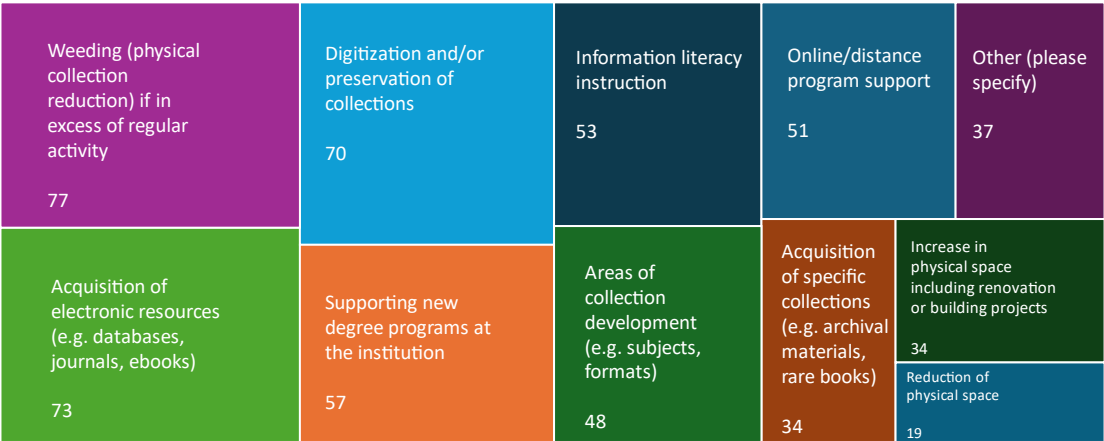
Note the rise in both casual academic and non-academic staff at ANZTLA institution’s libraries over 2022-2023. Why? This could be an area for further research.

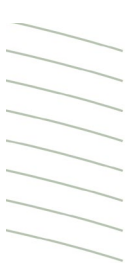
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Several high-level themes emerged from the survey and were further explored in the subsequent focus groups. The first theme revolved around changes in theological education, the environment in which librarians’ function, and the effect of these changes on libraries including expectations of librarians. In summary, and as illustrated in the next several graphics, you’ll see that more is being asked of libraries and librarians, few or no library programs or services are being eliminated, and that most are experiencing reductions in staffing and/or budgets.

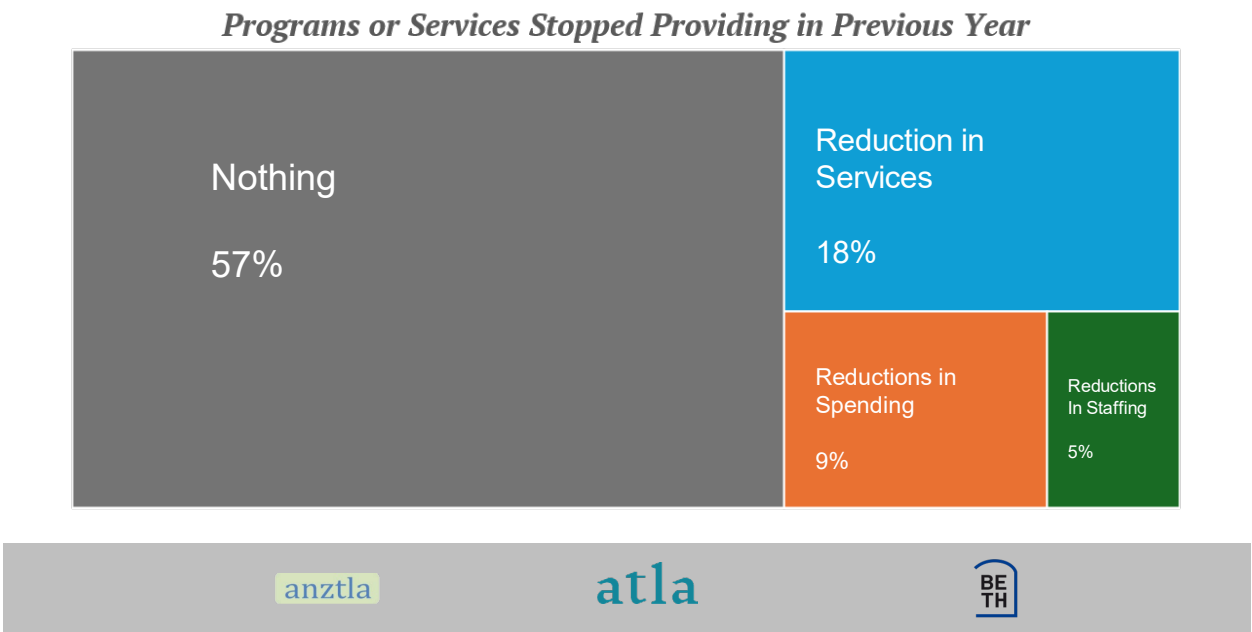
Respondents could select multiple options for new projects, programs, and services or areas requiring increased attention in the previous year, and the average number selected was 3.3. Only six respondents, one from ANZTLA, indicated no new things. Of the ANZTLA respondents, the majority selected between one and three new things, with the maximum number of new things selected as six.

New Projects, Programs, and Services or Areas Requiring Increased Attention in the Previous Year





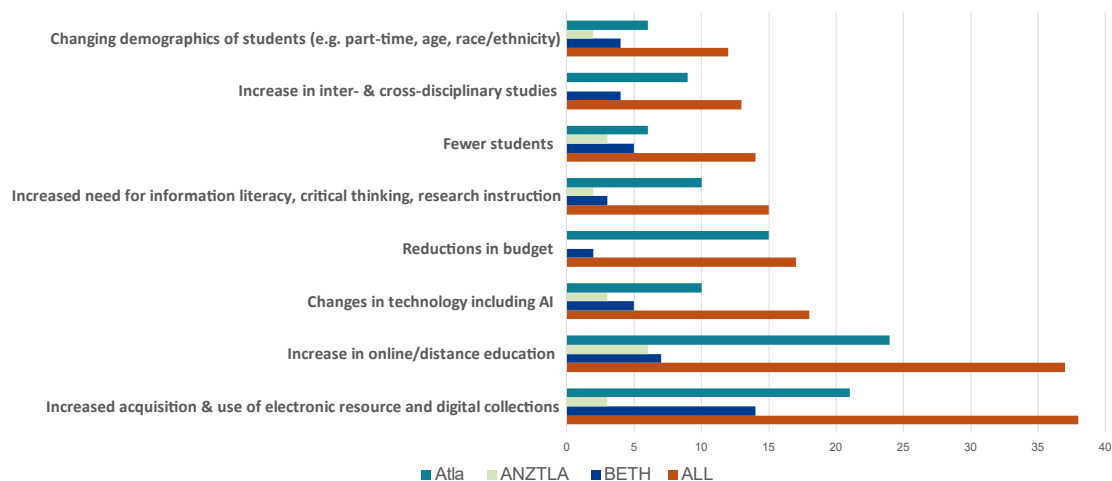
Now shifting to the question of what programs or services the library stopped providing in the previous year, of the 111 respondents who answered this question, 57% indicated they are stopping nothing. This was a surprising result since nearly every respondent indicated they were doing at least one new thing and many indicated doing many new things. Reductions in services ranged from specific types of acquisitions of materials (standing orders, print materials) to significant budget cuts. Reductions in staffing mentioned were both of professional staff and student workers. Reductions in service included hours, instruction, programming, and response time among others. There were a few bright spots in these responses, at least two respondents mentioned reducing purchasing print journals or scanning materials since more content was now available online.



Midway through the survey was the question “How is theological librarianship changing?” to give respondents some acclimate to the subject before addressing the crux of the study. The graphic below highlights the top eight responses across all respondents. Upon closer analysis, it is easy to see that these responses align closely with the top responses of new things that libraries are doing.



How is theological librarianship changing?



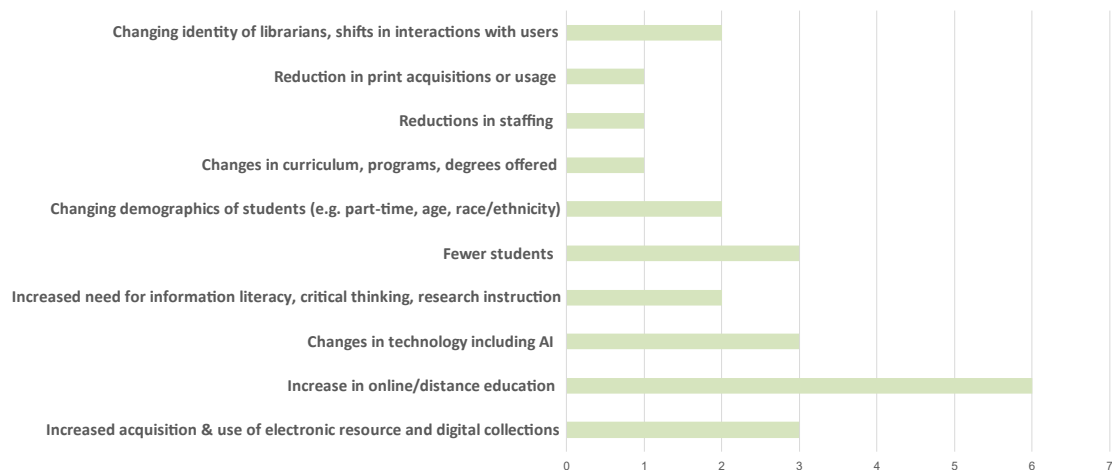
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Shifting to ANZTLA specific data, in the graphic below each of these options were selected by at least one respondent.

How is theological librarianship changing? (ANZTLA only)



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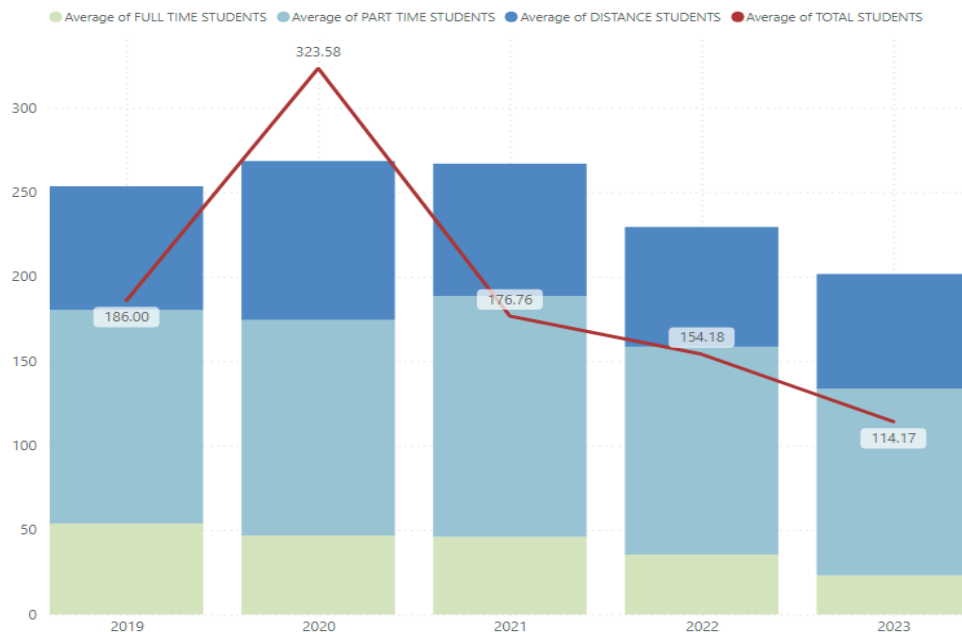
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ANZTLA Highlight #2

Average # Students by Year

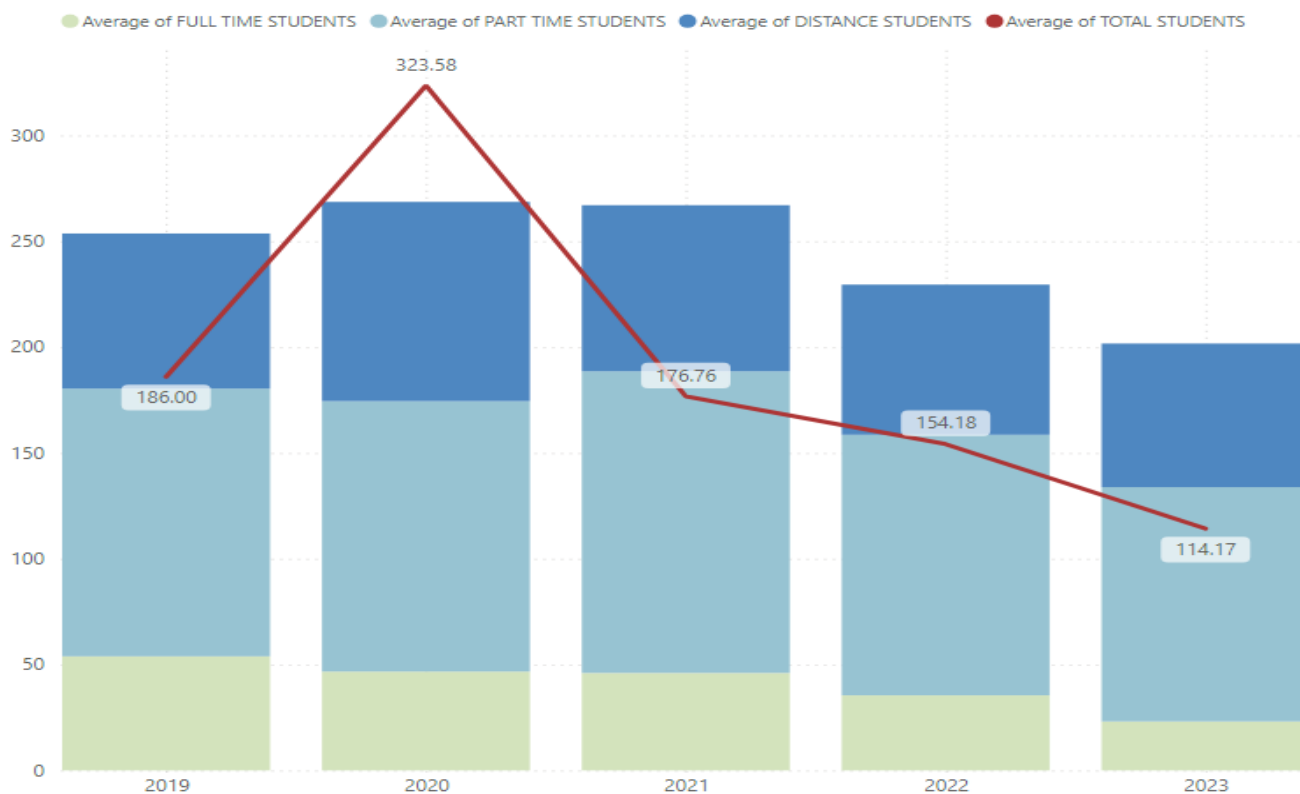


On the previous Atla slide, ANZTLA respondents indicated an increase in online/distance education was the highest factor for how theological librarianship is changing, but from ANZTLA statistics, distance education does not appear to have changed significantly over 2019-2023.

Distance students are defined in ANZTLA statistics as: the number of students who do not attend campus on a regular basis, but it may cover a number of student types including online. Each institution tends to have its own definition of what constitutes a ‘distance student’. Despite question definitions within the ANZTLA statistics questionnaire, consistency in application of what, exactly, is being requested is difficult to maintain.



Average # Students by Year

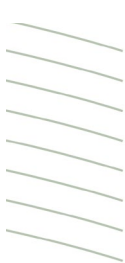


Despite the previous data showing a perception of an increase in online/distance education, ANZTLA statistics show that average distance student numbers have remained fairly stable over the last 3 years (at statistics respondent's institutions) but overall student numbers have gone down, especially full-time students (42% decrease on 2019 numbers for FT students)

As would be expected from general experience, the numbers of students on average at our institutions have decreased over the last five years, but particularly those studying full-time. 2020 saw a 173% increase, most likely attributable to COVID and people having more time on their hands during, but since then, student numbers have dropped by 61% on 2019 levels overall.

We'll look at ANZTLA libraries' budget impacts in ANZTLA Highlight #4.

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A quote from an Atla survey respondent summarizes this theme.

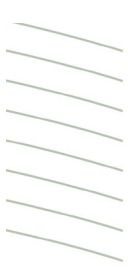
*The number of institutions/libraries shutting down and/or substantially pairing down budgets has increased, so librarians/library directors are expected to **do WAY more with MUCH less.***

Which was also highlighted by an ANZTLA survey respondent.

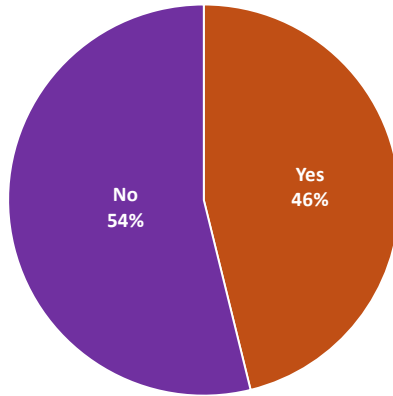
*It is definitely skewing to the online sphere, but still with, an albeit diminished, demand for physical books. More students are part-time which requires **greater intentionality when communicating library services and available resources** - there's less opportunity for passive osmosis that comes with full time on campus study.*

The second theme that emerged was the relationship, and agency, of the library and librarians within its institution or organization.

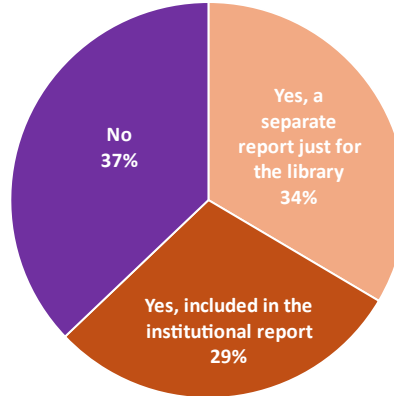
A series of questions focused on strategic planning and annual reporting and the involvement of the library in these activities. More than half of the respondents indicated they do not have a strategic plan, either separate from or included in the institutional strategic plan. For those that did, goals included improving services and gaining efficiencies, increasing engagement, supporting curriculum and research needs of the institution, and increasing acquisition of electronic resources. Several respondents noted continuing to recover/reinvent post-Covid. Again, reductions in staff and physical space were peppered throughout the responses. For those that did create an annual report, the primary audience was overwhelmingly institutional leaders or administrators, and several indicated it is mostly a financial report.



Strategic Plan?



Annual Report?

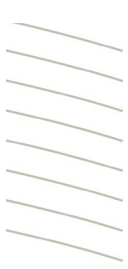


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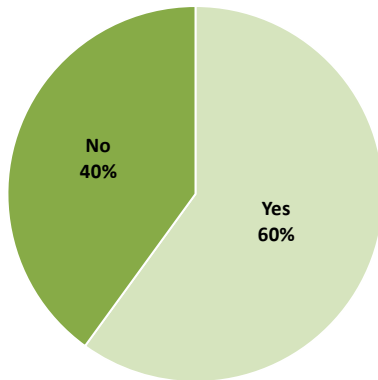
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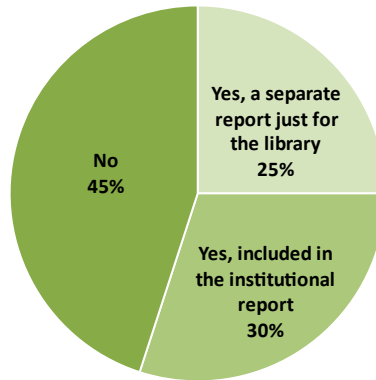
The ANZTLA specific results are similar to the full dataset. In a breakfast conversation during the conference, someone expressed a desire not to provide regular reports which was a bit alarming. After further discussion, what was really being advocated was moving beyond statistics to relationships, to telling stories. Sharing a bunch of statistics doesn't always effectively communicate the kind of message that is trying to be expressed. It's important to work with data and use it to share the story you want to tell, and it's always a lot easier to tell that story when you have great relationships.



Strategic Plan?
(ANZTLA only)



Annual Report?
(ANZTLA only)

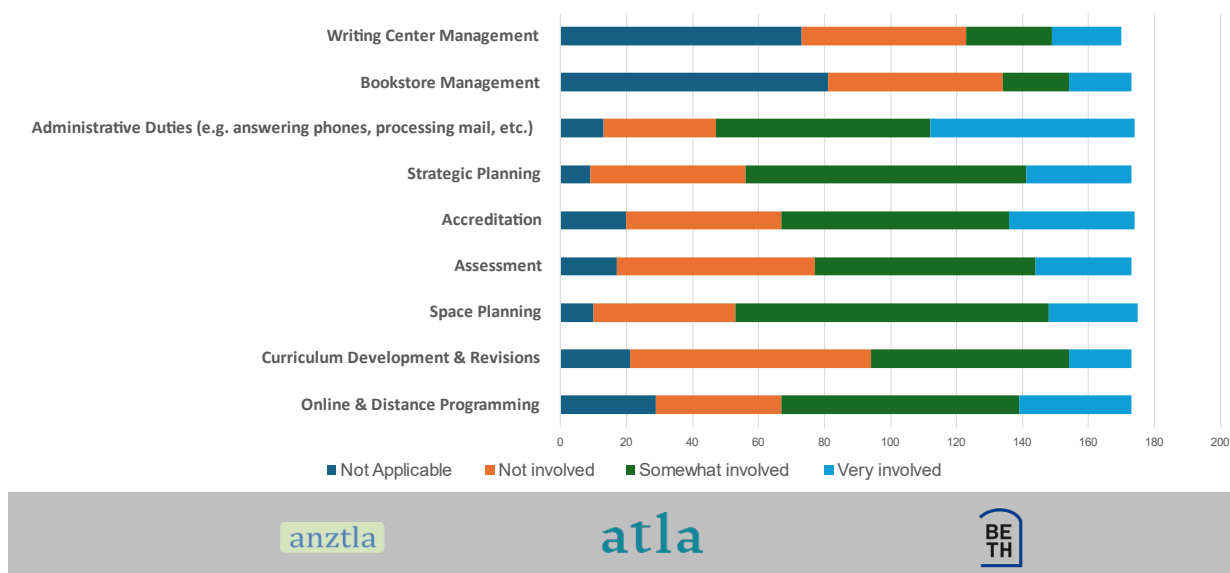


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Subsequent questions explored the involvement of librarians in other institutional activities and institution-wide groups. Librarians are most involved in administrative duties, accreditation, online / distance programs, and strategic planning and are least involved in curriculum development and assessment.



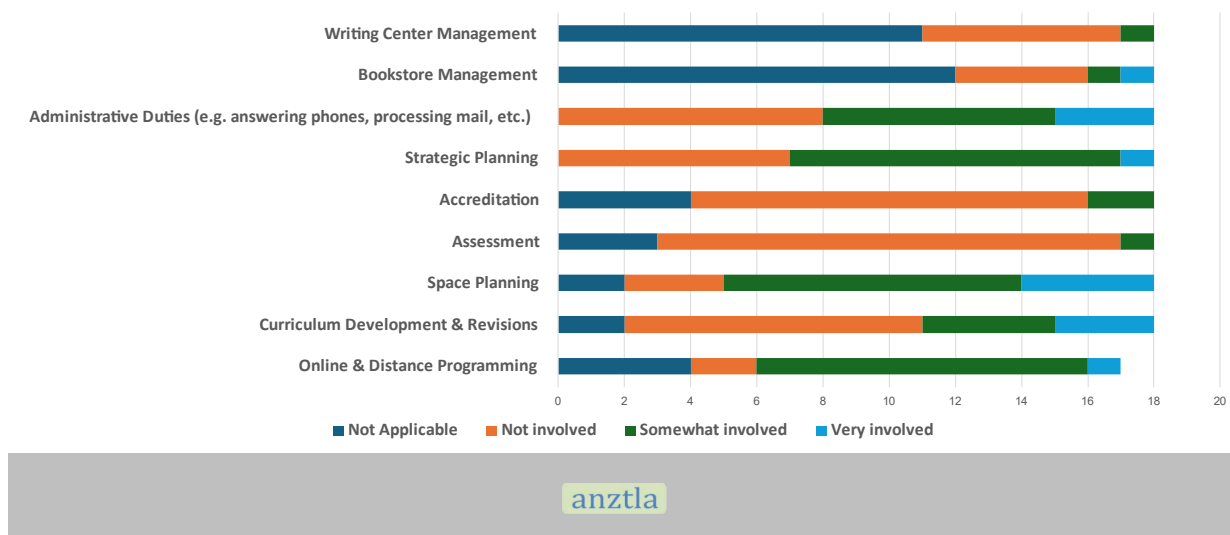
Extent Library or Librarians Involved in Institution-Wide Activities



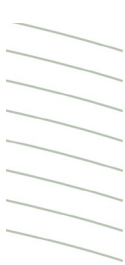
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ANZTLA respondents, the responses were very similar to the full dataset.

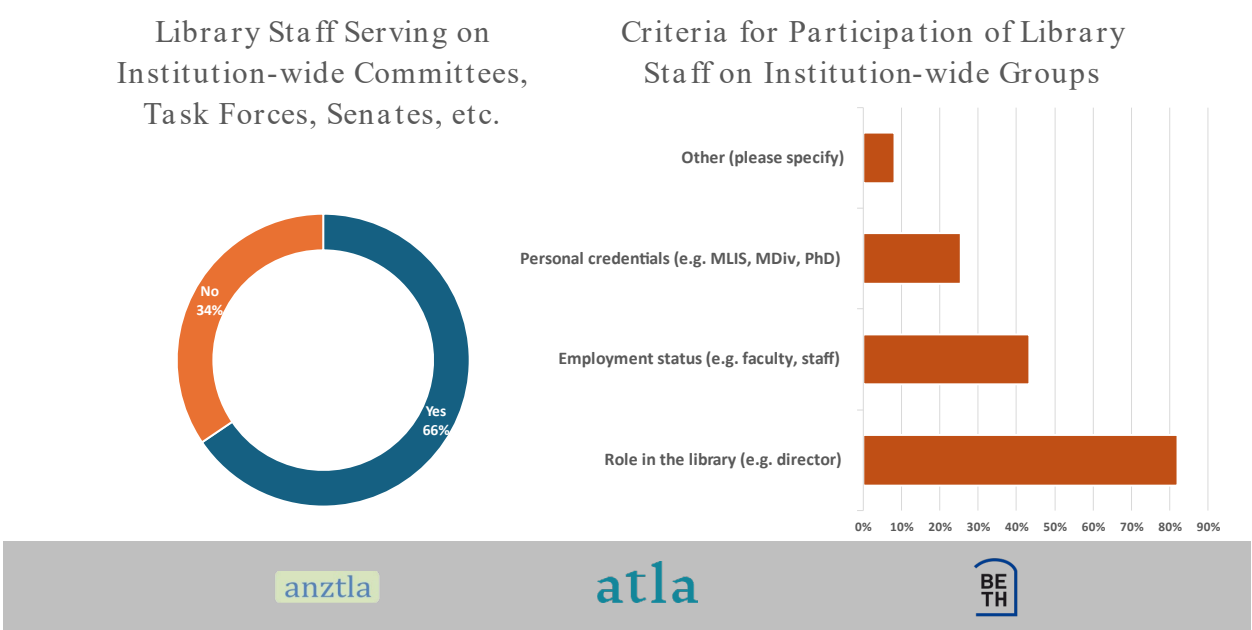
Extent Library or Librarians Involved in Institution-Wide Activities (ANZTLA only)



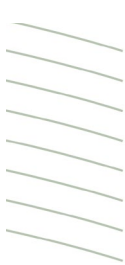
Another way librarians are involved in their institution is by serving on institution-wide committees, task forces, or other groups



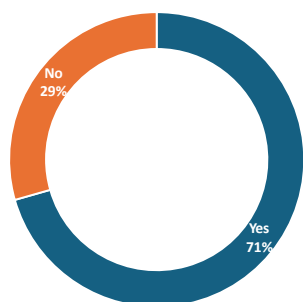
More than half of the respondents serve on these types of groups, with several respondents indicating they have a seat but not a vote. The types of groups librarians serve on ranged from academic committees/councils to faculty senates, health and safety committees, and student experience/services groups. The criteria for serving on these groups included years of experience, tenure, or role within the institution.



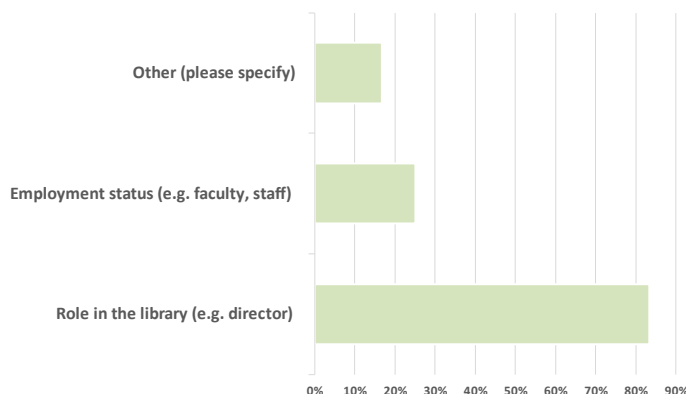
Of the ANZTLA respondents, more than half serve on institution-wide committees and mostly do so because of their role as library director.



Library Staff Serving on Institution-wide Committees, Task Forces, Senates, etc. (ANZTLA only)



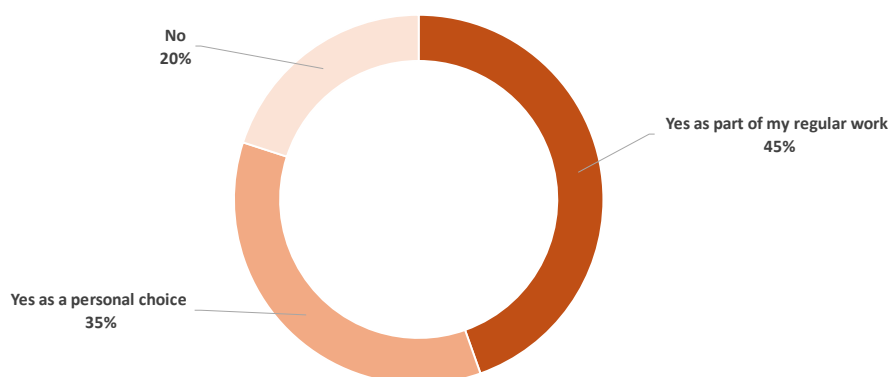
Criteria for Participation of Library Staff on Institution-wide Groups (ANZTLA only)



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Librarians also tend to be involved in committees and groups outside their institution. Of the survey respondents, 80% are involved in such a way, with 45% doing so as part of their regular work and 35% doing so as a personal choice.

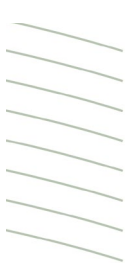
Librarians or Library Staff Serving on Committees & Groups Outside the Institution



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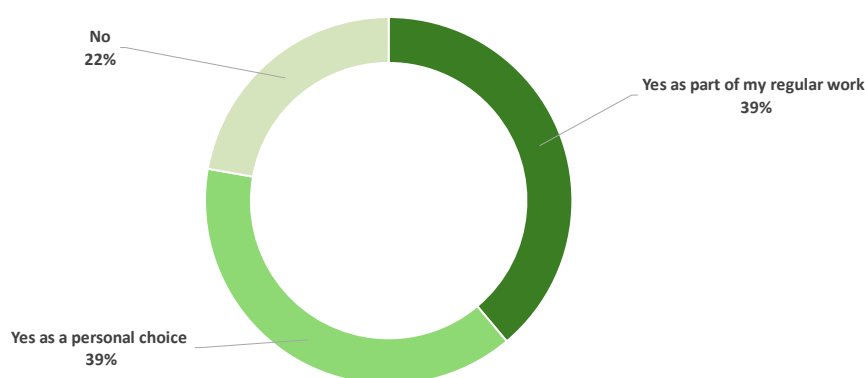
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Slightly fewer ANZTLA respondents (78%) indicated this kind of participation in outside groups with an even split between it being part of their regular work and it being a personal choice. The types of groups indicated were regional and national associations and participation was often required as part of their role. Most indicated that time spent on these types of activities is considered work time.

Librarians or Library Staff Serving on Committees & Groups
Outside the Institution (ANZTLA only)

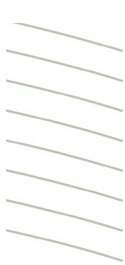


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A quote from an Atla focus group participant encapsulates the second theme, which was mentioned by other speakers at the conference that people expect more of libraries and librarians since they come from a value of service:

*I would frame the new as being the curse of competence. **Librarians are good people. We're kind of service-oriented.** Sometimes when there are things that needed to be done within the seminary, it was thought we could ask the librarian to do that.*

As discussed in another session at the conference, context is important. Just like librarians talk to students about the need for context and ability to understand and digest the resources they identify for their purposes, librarians need to think about the importance of context when sharing and

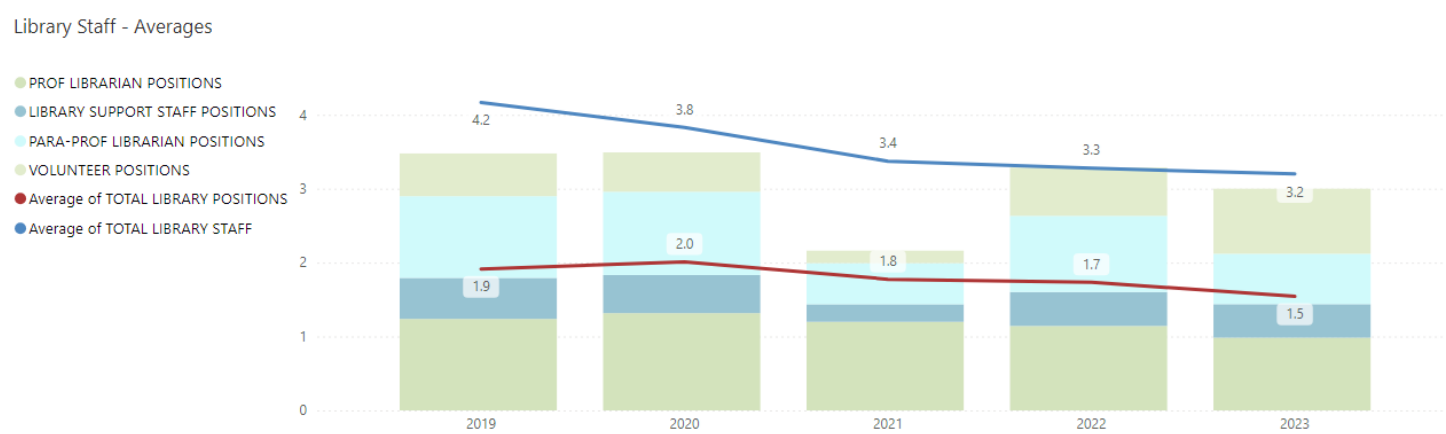


talking about the library and its role in theological education. The statistics we as librarians think about such as checkout rates, downloads, gate count, number of information literacy sessions may not matter or make a difference to faculty or administration unless we put them in context. It's paramount the statistics connect to the story. A question for librarians to explore might be how librarians can articulate the impact of information literacy skills on the quality of assignments students are completing or ultimately affect the graduation rate. As articulated by an ANZTLA focus group participant:

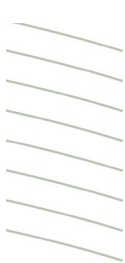
*Digital and online services have completely altered theological librarianship. This is not an issue here, but in other libraries where I have worked the decline in in-house face-to-face library work is now **altering the libraries' character, sense of engagement, and even their sense of purpose.***

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ANZTLA Highlight #3



Whilst on average, ANZTLA libraries have lost 1 staff position over the last 5 years (4.2 to 3.2), the number of people filling the available positions has remained fairly steady (1.9 - 1.5)



The number of professional librarian positions has remained fairly stable but para-professional and volunteer positions have increased. There appear to be fewer professionally qualified people working in more roles in our libraries.

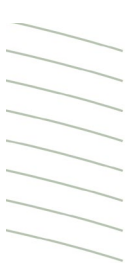
Less professional positions may mean less money for qualified library staffing and with just enough to allow for more non-professional people staffing libraries. As a trained librarian, when you leave will you be replaced by another trained library professional or not?

ANZTLA statistics count *Professional Librarian positions* as all library staff engaged primarily in specialist library work, and occupying positions for which the normal requirements are a university degree or equivalent qualification and eligibility for professional membership of the relevant national library association. *Para-Professional positions* count all library staff engaged primarily in specialist library work for which the normal requirements may be a library technician's qualification or equivalent, or a bachelor's degree or equivalent but no professional library qualification. *Library support staff* includes all paid library staff not included above.

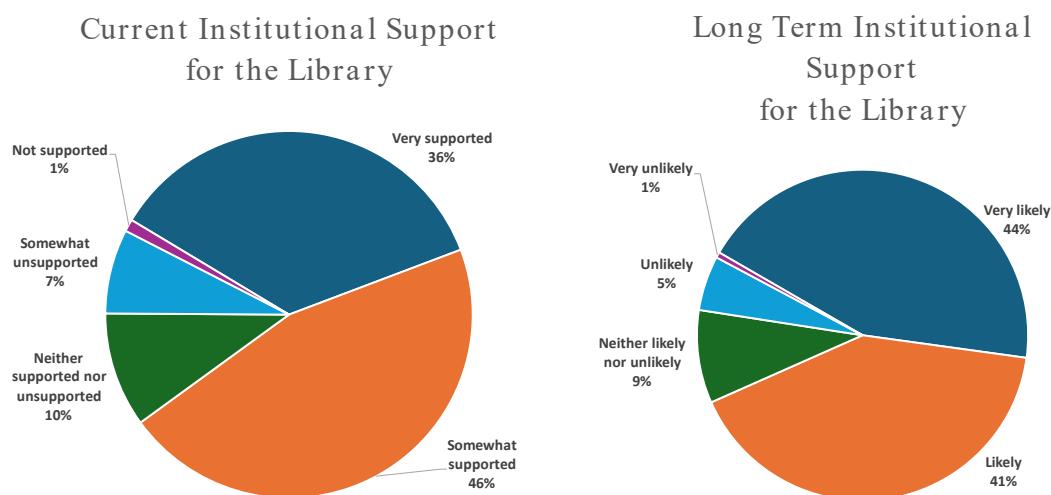
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The third theme emerged as a bit of a surprise. With all shared so far, it may seem the future of theological librarianship is a bit dim, what with more new things being piled on without stopping anything, reductions in staffing and budgets, and being spread thin across all the activities and priorities. And all this within the context of an increased need for electronic resources and digital collections, information literacy and critical thinking instruction, and supporting online / distance learning.

In a series of questions about the level of support for the library and librarian's role, both in the short and long-term, it was a little shocking to discover respondents generally felt a high level of support for the library and librarians, now and into the future.



The majority responded feeling very supported (46%) or somewhat supported (46%) about institutional support for the library and an even greater percentage felt long term support for the library was very likely (44%) or likely (41%)



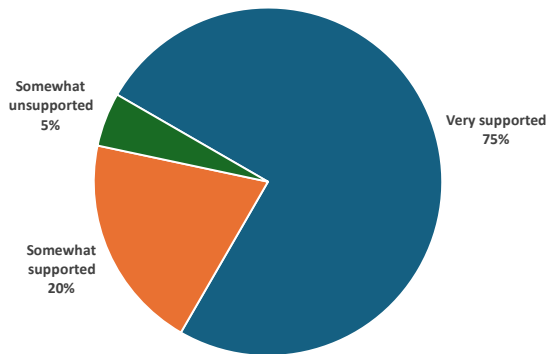
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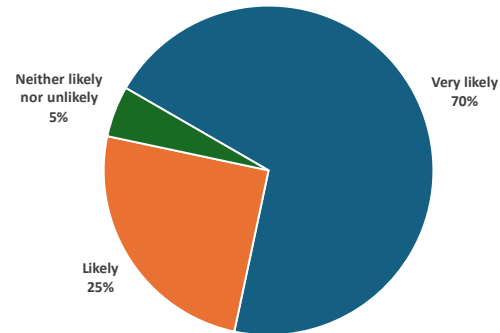


Shifting to ANZTLA respondents, 75% of respondents indicated feeling very supported currently, and perceived long term institutional support with 70% very likely and 25% likely.

Current Institutional Support
for the Library (ANZTLA only)



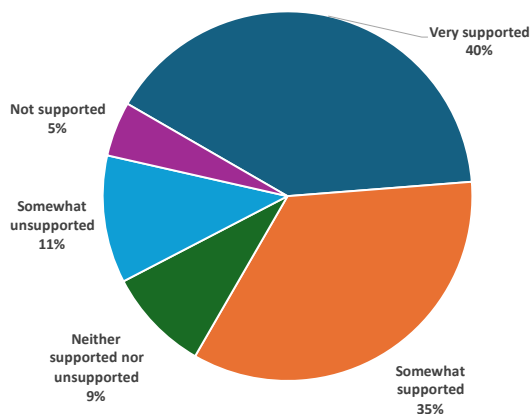
Long Term Institutional
Support for the Library
(ANZTLA only)



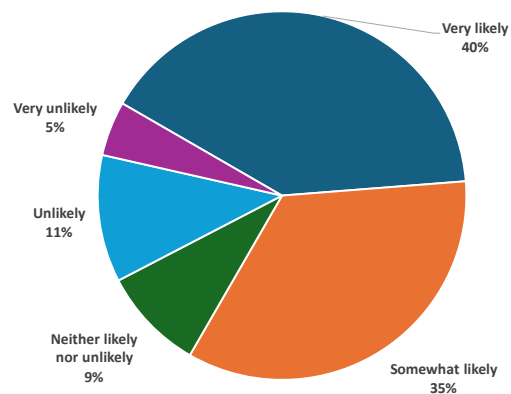
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Looking specifically at the librarian role, again perceived current and long-term support was high with 40% indicating very supported and 35% somewhat supported.

Current Level of Institutional
Support for the Librarian Role



Long Term Institutional Support
for Librarian Role



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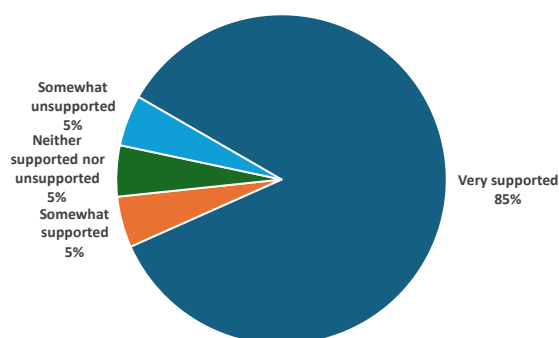
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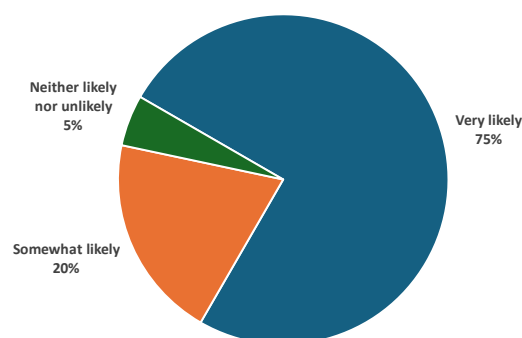


Across the ANZTLA respondents, 85% indicated feeling the librarian role was currently very supported and long-term support perceived as 75% very likely.

Current Level of Institutional Support for the Librarian Role (ANZTLA only)



Long Term Institutional Support for Librarian Role (ANZTLA only)

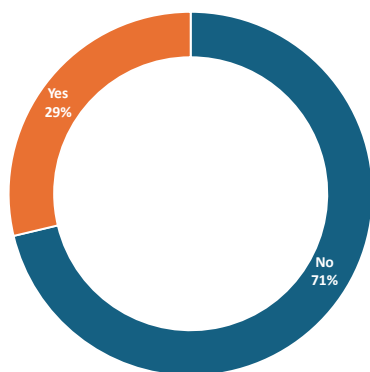


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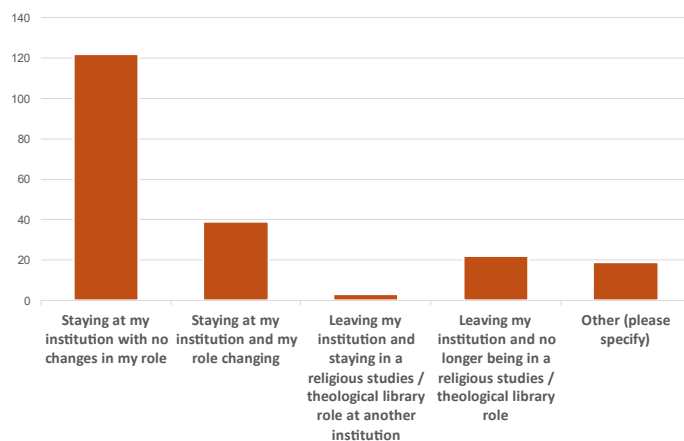
When asked if respondents had concerns about the future of their role in the next 2-3 years, the majority (71%) indicated no and most anticipated staying at their current institution with no changes to their role.



Concern About Future of Role in Next 2-3 Years



Anticipated Changes in Role or Institution in Next Year



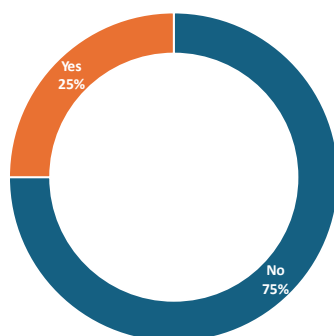
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With ANZTLA, those results increased slightly with 75% indicating no concern about the future of their role and again most respondents anticipating staying put at their institution and in their current role.

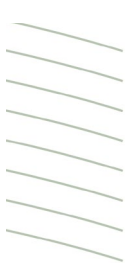
Concern About Future of Role in Next 2-3 Years (ANZTLA only)



Anticipated Changes in Role or Institution in Next Year (ANZTLA only)



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In the focus groups we explored this feeling of optimism amid the changing environment. A BETH focus group participant expressed this theme as follows:

*In order to give value to my role I have to give bigger and bigger chunks of my time to broader information professional work. So, I am the overall technical administrator for our [learning management system]. Interestingly, this has led to a **greater appreciation of my role as Librarian in general.***

Two ANZTLA focus group participants expressed this theme as well:

We are demonstrating a role in student success.

We must think about our reasons for being and reinvent primary focus if not seeing students face to face.

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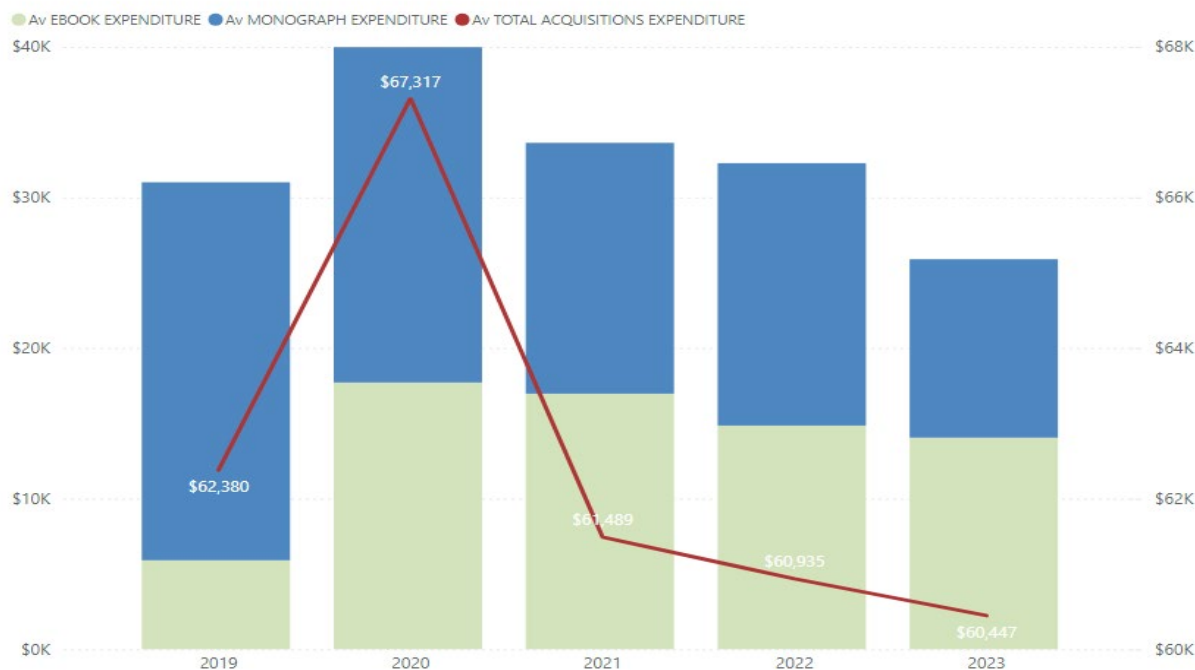
ANZTLA Highlight #4

The next few ANZTLA-specific graphs show an interesting trend...

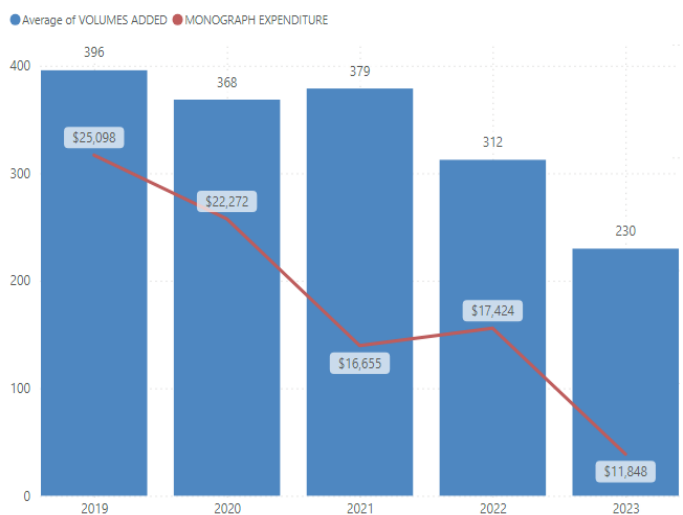
While this expenditure graph may look like it indicates a dramatic drop in average acquisitions expenditure has occurred, in reality, average, expenditure has only dropped about \$2,000 since 2019.

And the split between physical and ebook spending has slowly dropped after a large increase in 2020 – most likely thanks to COVID pushing the need for increased ebook availability.

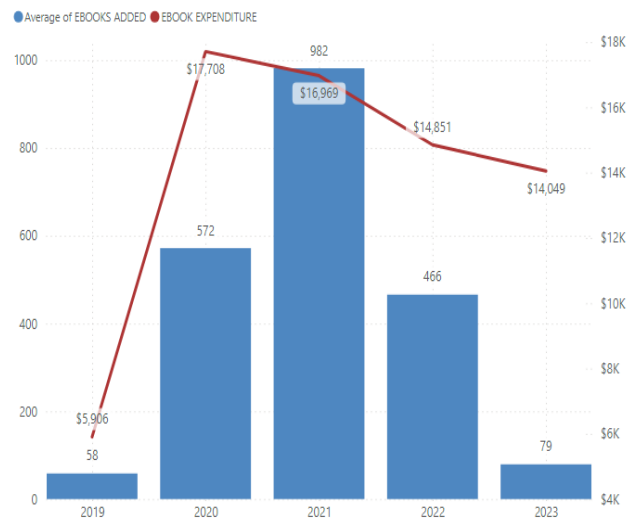
EXPENDITURE



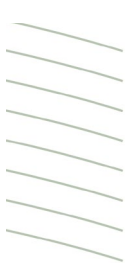
MONOGRAPHS PURCHASES



Average EBOOK PURCHASES



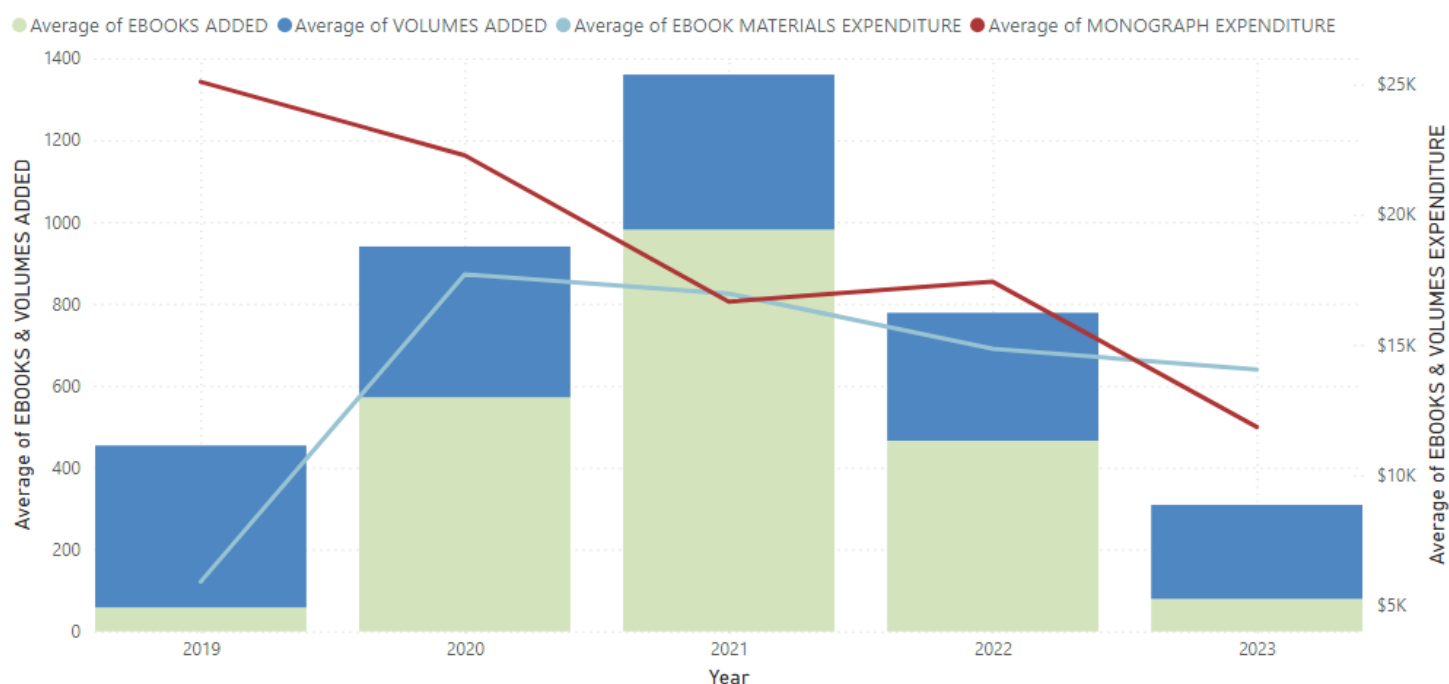
The interesting thing these graphs show is that, as would be expected due to COVID, ebook purchases increased significantly in 2020-21-22 but have since dropped off to almost 2019 levels in 2023. And while the expenditure amounts have also risen and dropped over the same time period,



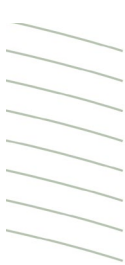
the ebook expenditure amount remains more than double 2019 amounts – perhaps indicating that the ebooks we are now purchasing are more expensive.

This could make you think that physical book purchases would have decreased as ebook purchases have increased, and the data shows the average number of physical books being added to collections is indeed decreasing - by almost 60% since 2019. Which matches almost exactly the decrease in expenditure on physical books. But ebook expenditure has increased by over 230% in the same period. To more easily compare these, see the next slide:

Average of EBOOKS & VOLUMES ADDED & Average of EBOOK & MONOGRAPH EXPENDITURE by Year



This combined graph illustrates the change in ebook purchasing and the corresponding budget increase. Outside the COVID years (2020-21-22), we are still adding more physical books to our collections than ebooks which may be surprising to some. Perhaps this sheds some light on the availability in ebook format of theological and religious titles that most of our libraries would be purchasing. I know I purchase most of our new resources in ebook format but still come across

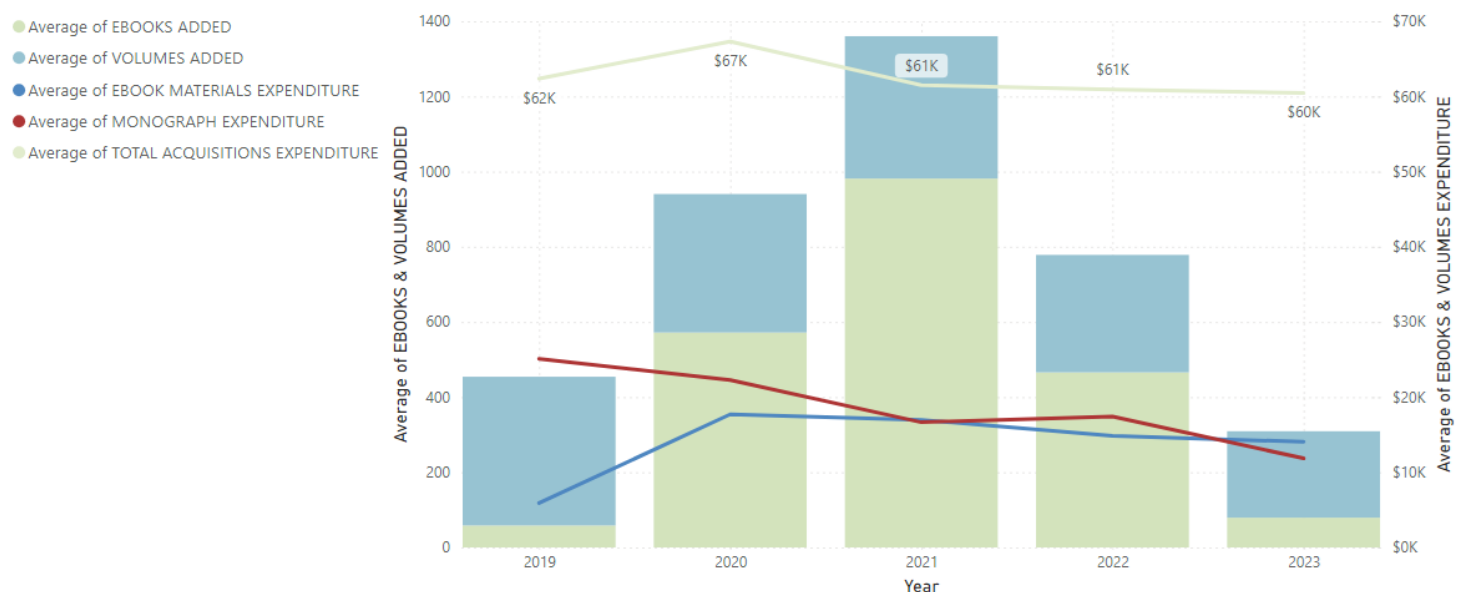


many titles that are just not available in ebook format for libraries, particularly in Australia/NZ, to purchase.

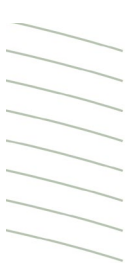
COVID database price reductions and special offers from publishers and vendors may account for increased expenditure in 2020-21-22, but now that we are back to a more ‘normal’ situation, overall expenditure does seem to be fairly similar, only that it seems we can afford fewer books/ebooks. We’re buying almost 100 less physical books than we did in 2019, and, perhaps surprisingly, purchasing only 21 more ebooks titles that we did 5 years ago.

Part of support for the library is adequate provision of funding:

Average of EBOOKS & VOLUMES ADDED, Average of EBOOK & MONOGRAPH EXPENDITURE & Average of TOTAL ACQUISITI...



This is the same data as the previous slide, but it now also shows the total average acquisitions expenditure for the last 5 years - besides a slight jump in 2020, overall average expenditures have remained fairly steady so the adage of ‘doing more with less’ may be applicable. When book and subscription costs keep increasing, but the library budget doesn’t follow, that equates to a reduction in library budgets in real terms.



It shows that, on average in 2023, we have approximately the same amount of funding as in 2019 (96% of 2019 levels - only \$2,000 less), but in 2023, we are only buying 68% of the resources we were in 2019. We can't afford to buy the amount we used to because library budgets are not keeping pace with resource price increases.

While funding has not decreased significantly, in reality, it has not increased comparatively with the rising costs of the resources we need to purchase, therefore in real terms, our budgets are decreasing. This lack of support from our institutions is hidden behind us trying to make do with less. So, whilst ANZTLA libraries say they feel supported by their institutions, that support does not appear to flow through to adequate funding of library budgets.

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What is next? Sharing the results of the global study far and wide, and facilitating discussions with librarians, faculty, administrators, all those involved in the theological education ecosystem. It's important that we understand the similarities in situations around the globe as well as the unique local context and use both to provide support across our community. As evidenced in the survey results and focus group discussions, librarians have an immense passion for their work and are dedicated to the role they play in theological education. Despite the changing environment, the understanding that we are all in this together is apparent. Theological librarians are dedicated, and determined, and willing to accept new challenges and adapt to the environment at hand. By working together, it's possible we can make the load lighter and help those beyond the library profession understand the importance of the work.