BREAKING THE MOULD: A CASE STUDY OF A DIGITAL LEARNING COMMONS IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT

Brenda van WYK[1] and Irvine KADZENGA[2]

[1]*Head. Library and Information Services, The IIE. Inanda Greens. Sandton, South Africa*
Email: bvanwyk@iie.ac.za

[2]*National Librarian, Rosebank College.*
Email: ikadzenga@rosebankcollege.co.za

Abstract

One of the four brands of The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE), Rosebank College, implemented its first digitally enabled campus in Polokwane, South Africa during 2015, opening its doors to new cohorts for the first time in January 2016. This new Rosebank campus changed the tertiary landscape by embarking on a different model offering all support services, teaching and learning in a digitally enabled environment. From a focus on e-learning via the Black Board learning management system, (LMS), to digital library services, this digitally enabled campus, (also known as a connected campus), was designed to cater for distance students and supported by a number of scheduled contact sessions. A digital library and information service (LIS) model was required to cater for the information needs of the new campus. This paper gives an overview of how this new model changed the landscape of information services offered at the digital campus. The planning and implementation of a suitable digital library model, rather than a traditional paper based library service was an obvious choice in establishing the Polokwane Rosebank College. Valuable lessons were learnt during the planning and implementation of this digital learning commons and these are shared as a case study in this paper.

Keywords: Digital Learning Commons; Digital campus; Private higher education; Distance learning.

1. Introduction and background

At the time of submitting this paper, there were 117 private higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, accredited by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) to offer certificate, diploma and degree qualifications. In comparison public HEI has 25 public universities. HEIs, such as The IIE offer a range of qualifications covering undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. The IIE operates across 23 sites offering more than 80 registered accredited higher education programmes from higher certificates to Masters Degrees on its Varsity College, Vega, Rosebank College and DSSA campuses.

The IIE distance teaching and learning programmes require specialised information support and provision to both students and academics alike. Rosebank College implemented its first digitally enabled campus, or connected campus as it is generally known, in 2015. The mode of teaching and learning on this campus is following a new trend in digital and distance learning. As a result traditional role library and information services changed and libraries are looking

differently, interdepartmental collaboration increased, new and dual roles of librarians are seen. Incorporating cyber centres into physical library spaces, or having them in close proximity of the library, changed business models and libraries developed into collaborative digital spaces designed and equipped for enhanced electronic access to information.

1.1 The IIE library and information services

It is not uncommon for a private HEI library to have smaller collections and physical spaces compared to its public counter parts. Collection building in the private HEI library is more focused and are offered as specialised core subject and reference collections.

The IIE Senate is the governing body of all its library services, policies and regulates the compliance to standards. The library services team is headed by a central Head of Library and Information Services and three decentralised National Librarians. This library management team manages 23 library sites within a matrix management structure.

Traditional library roles in this environment are fast changing, and are now faced with more interdepartmental collaboration and adopting dual roles are increasingly required from librarians and information specialists. Incorporating cyber centres into library spaces require a re-thinking and re-engineering to transform library spaces into fully flexed digital learning commons. New skills are required from the digital librarian and roles are becoming embedded into the academic process. Digital access to information services for students and academics of this the digital campus are now part of the e-learning managed in the Blackboard learning management system (LMS).

The planning and implementation of a digital learning commons, as a suitable digital library model rather than a traditional paper based library and information service, was an obvious choice for the newly established Polokwane Rosebank College campus. Valuable lessons were learnt during the planning and implementation of this digital learning commons.

2. Literature overview: what is in a name?

Terms such as learning commons, knowledge commons, research commons, media commons have been developed and defined by Library and Information Science (LIS) scholars since 2004: Lori (2013, 3) referred to the definition used by Beagle *et al.* describing a learning commons as: " a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, human, and social resources organised in support of learning". It is clear that he views a learning commons slightly differently from an information commons where IT plays a bigger role in the digital learning commons.

It was decided that the Polokwane digitally enabled learning space must be:

- Inviting and digitally enabled learning spaces
- Has both a demarcated physical as well as a virtual space
- Collaboration and sharing expertise between IT, the library and academics take place
- Access to services at all hours via the internet is possible – the library without walls principle
- Staff must be digitally skilled, proactive, innovative, flexible and developmental.

3. The Polokwane case study: breaking the mould - setting new trends

The mode of provision in distance learning is based on designing programmes where the lecturer and the student may be separated either entirely or at certain intervals. The CHE guidelines for distance learning in South Africa (2014, 12) make provision for single mode, dual mode and mixed mode for distance education. Unisa (University of South Africa) provides mostly single mode of distance education, whilst The IIE brands, such as Rosebank College, to date offered a mixed mode. Here, courses are offered via contact sessions with digital learning support including online access to relevant information, and independent learning via IIELearn, the Blackboard e-learning management student portal.

The IIE embraces the concept of technology enabled learning, Doctor Agherdien, instructional designer at The IIE, describes this form of learning as: "… social beings involved complex intellectual, social and psychological processes that happen in a fluid space" (2015, 3). The advocacy, planning and implementation of a digital learning commons to cater for the academic information needs of the new campus add information- and information technology components to this definition, playing out in a multi-disciplinary environment of cooperation.

3.1 Rosebank College and distance education – answering to new trends in HEI

The IIE's Rosebank College started offering distance education in 2013 with the Bachelor of Business Administration degree. In 2016 a new learning management model was developed called RCLearn, making use of the Blackboard LMS for all the distance offerings.

3.2 Planning and implementing a Digital Learning Commons – towards Library 3.0

The long term vision is to develop the digital learning commons into a 3.0 library. According to Kwanya, Stillwell and Underwood (2015) progressing to a 3.0 library model implies that a library service and its institutional decision makers are moving away from traditional library services towards electronic services. The planning and implementation of the campus digital learning commons was an important part of the Polokwane connected campus project plan. The project team comprised of The Project Manager, Academic Manager, Head Librarian and National Librarian, General Manager, Financial Manager, IT Manager and Operations Manager and consultants. According to (Farber 2012, 3) the learning commons philosophy is contextual, iterative and evolving and there are four cyclical stages which needs to be taken into considerate when implementing it. The four cyclical stages by (Farber 2012, 5) are as follows:

- **Stage 1: Essential conditions**

This is about building a shared vision with the community, students and staff members. During the period of establishing the model, the management of Rosebank College and IIE involved every stakeholder whom they thought would be valuable to the learning commons.

- **Stage 2: Applying the framework**

The learning commons conceptual framework identifies four learning spaces namely open commons, the virtual commons, the physical commons and the investigative commons (Farber 2012, 6). The Polokwane campus offers a welcoming, technology rich, flexible space for learning by individual, small groups and large groups. The entire building has Wi-Fi with charging stations for laptops and smartphones and tablets.

- **Stage 3: Implementation**

These four stages are critical for the successful implementation of a digital learning commons. The Polokwane campus has an area with moveable tables, chairs and work stations. There is an adjoining cyber centre area, opening up into a collaborative space and managed by the librarian.

- **Stage 4: Analyse, evolve and adopt**

The digital learning commons has to keep up with ever changing technological developments to stay relevant, which requires the project team to be proactive and open to new developments. Going forward, the management of The IIE and Rosebank College will need to analyse how the learning commons have been supporting the teaching and learning at the connected campus. The progress and expected performance of this will be investigated during the post project monitoring phase.

3.3 New library and information services require new skills

Information technologies in the 21st century are changing and developing rapidly. These global changes influenced every facet of library and information services in public, academic, and special libraries. There are new opportunities and challenges to the library professionals to play important roles in the knowledge society of HEI (Pawar and Kaur nd, 1). The digital library staff at Polokwane campus are required to have all the skills and competencies of a Web 3.0 librarian as explained by Kwanya, Underwood and Stillwell (2015). These skills, inter alia, include information retrieval and resource knowledge and competencies, legal competency for copyright and DRM compliance, research competency among others.

3.3.1 Embedded librarianship for the digital environment

Embedded librarianship is defined as a distinctive innovation that moves the librarians out of libraries and creates a new model of library and information work (Dene 2011, 225). For embedded librarianship to work on this connected campus, the Head Librarian from IIE worked with the developers of the modules to make sure that some of the textbooks to be used by students and lecturers were going to be available as e-books on the library system.

3.3.2 Realigning library orientation sessions for the information needs in a digital environment

Traditional library orientation sessions such as information literacy training, plagiarism and referencing sessions, library guides and others had be adapted to successfully introduce students to the changed service models. Library Orientation and training sessions are offered to both students and lecturers and include:

- Learning information retrieval and database search skills via the library website

- Training session an understanding of intellectual integrity, plagiarism prevention and consequences of plagiarism as set out in The IIE Intellectual Integrity Policy, found on the library website

- Introduction to study skills and assignment writing

- Session explain how to use plagiarism prevention software, Safe Assign – how to videos on the library website
- Assistance with downloading eReader software- shortcuts are available on the library website.

3.4 Collection building in a digital learning commons

Collection building principles for a digital learning commons are different from traditional academic collection building principles and practices, and requires the library team to have extensive product knowledge to ensure that the correct databases and electronic resources are selected. E-resources are accessible on and off the campus through central EZproxy authentication. The print collection is limited and mainly for use on the campus as core reference material. Services also include intra- and interlibrary loans facilities should additional material be required.

3.4.1 E-Resources

Electronic resources represent the important component of the collections building activities of libraries. "Electronic resources refer to those materials that require computer access, whether through a personal computer, mainframe or handheld mobile device" (Johnson 2012, 3). The various e-journals, e-books and full text databases were acquired in mind of this connected campus. At Polokwane campus, the library acquired e-resources packages and subscriptions from EbscoHost, SABINET and ERIC such as eBooks, e-journals and e-databases.

3.4.2 E-Books

Vassiliou and Rowley refer to Armstrong, Edwards, and Lonsdale (2008), where they define an e-book as "any piece of electronic text regardless of size or composition (a digital object), but excluding journal publications, made available electronically (or optically) for any device (handheld or desk-bound) that includes a screen". On average, each course being offered on this connected campus has two e-books as prescribed books. The IIE library website has various free software download links which are used by users on their devices such as laptops and tablets. Devices are not supplied to students, but the library has work stations, as well as loading stations were devices can be recharged.

3.4.3 Digital rights management

The digital environment brings new challenges with copyright compliance. Digital rights of publishers, suppliers and authors receive special consideration. "Digital Rights Management (DRM) is any system used by producers, publishers and vendors to embed technological controls on what users can do with electronic files such as e-books" (American Library Association 2012). Subscriptions and license agreements of digital subscriptions are managed on a national level, while training and awareness among students and academics takes place on campus.

3.5 Challenges and benefits of implementing a Digital Learning Commons

Adopting a new mode of information support in a digital learning commons has numerous benefits, but also a set of challenges. The digital learning commons implementation was part of the bigger Polokwane project and did not have a separate budget. All costs were included

in the main project budget. **Table 1** summarises the benefits and challenges experienced in implementing the digital learning commons.

Benefits	Challenges
Access to the latest electronic resources	EResource are expensive
No overdue library fees on eBook	Exchange rate fluctuations complicate budget planning
Access to subscription and free eBooks	Reskilling of librarian
Access to wealth of knowledge via OA resources	Dealing with resistance to using eBooks
Sharing of skills across departments	Ensuring that academic staff and students have the digital skills required
Support independent learning	Creating an awareness of plagiarism and plagiarism prevention skills in a digital environment.
Unrestricted access to information off campus	Staying abreast of new technological developments
The first phase of funding was part of the bigger project	Future budgets to maintain and develop the digital learning commons must be secured.

Table 1: Benefits and challenges of a digital learning commons

4. Conclusion

The first phase of implementing the digital learning commons was finalised early in 2016. A suitably qualified librarian was appointed, and training and orientation session are on target. The digital environment makes embedded librarianship imperative, and continuous cooperation between the library, IT and academic departments is essential for the success of the digital learning commons.

Students, lecturers and support staff have access to various resources electronically on and off campus at any given point in time and that has helped research to take place faster as compared to the traditional library access. Digital learning commons are dynamic and they require continuous research to adapt to new knowledge and technological trends. The new generation students are digitally inclined and are now more ready than before to engage and connect digitally. The Polokwane connected campus and its digital learning commons provide a state of the art learning environment with unlimited access to high quality academic information sources and teaching and learning support, ensuring a positive student experience.

References

Adams, P.N.A. (2011) 'Role of Policies in Collaborative Design Process for Digital Libraries within African Higher Education.' *Library Hi Tech*. 29(4) pp.678-696. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/07378831111189778 [Accessed 17 December 2015].

ALA Digital Content Working Group (2012) ' ALA Digital Content Tip Sheet' http://connect.ala.org/files/94226/DRM%20Library%20Education%20Tip%20Sheet_DEFINITIVE_7_11_12.pdf [Accessed 15 February 2016]

Blackboard (2016). 'Use SafeAssign in Assignments.' https://en-us.help.blackboard.com/Learn/9.1_2014_04/Instructor/100_Assignments/025_Use_SafeAssign [Accessed 03 February 2016].

Carlson, J. & Kneale, R. (2011) 'Embedded librarianship in the research context: navigating new waters'. *College & Research Libraries News* 72(3) pp.167- 169. http://crln.acrl.org/content/72/3/167.full [Accessed 25 January 2016].

Council on Higher Education (2014) '*Distance Higher Education Programmes in a Digital Era: Good Practice Guide.'* Pretoria, Council on Higher Education.

Dene, J. (2011)' Embedded librarianship at the Claremont Colleges. In Embedded librarians: moving beyond one-shot instruction'. *Association of College and Research Libraries*. pp.219-228.

Dewey, B.I. (2008) 'Social, Intellectual, and Cultural Spaces: creating compelling library environments for the digital age' *Journal of Library Administration*. 48 (1) doi: 10.1080/01930820802035059 [Accessed 17 December 2015]

Educause Learning Inniative (2011) '7 Things you should know about the Modern Learning Commons.' *Educause*, April 2011.

Farber, C. (2012) 'Library to learning implementation guide.' http://www.cbeilc.info/l2lc/files/2013/05/Library_Learning_Commons_Implementation_Guide.pdf [Accessed 25 January 2016]

Hunt, H. & Swan, A. (2012) Briefing paper: open access. http://www.pasteur4oa.eu/sites/pasteur4oa/files/resource/Open%20Access%20-%20basic%20briefing%20.pdf [Accessed 21 January 2016]

Hyman, J.A, Moser, T.M., & Segala, L.N. (2014) 'Electronic reading and digital library technologies: understanding learner expectation and usage intent for mobile learning.' *Education Tech Research Development*, 62: pp.35-52. DOI 10.1007/s11423-013-9330-5 [Accessed 17 December 2015].

Johnson, S, Evensen, OL, Gelfand, J, Lammers, G, Sipe, L & Zilper, N. (2012) 'Key issues for e-Resources collection development: a guide for libraries.' *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*. http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/acquisition-collection-development/publications/electronic-resource-guide-2012.pdf [Accessed 21 January 2016]

Kwanya, T; Stilwell, C. & Underwood, P. (2015) '*Library 3.0: Intelligent Libraries and Apomediation'. Kidlington: Elsevier.*

Lori, S. Mestre. (2013) 'Media Commons: the process and value of centralizing services. '*Library Hi Tech*. 31 (4), pp.669-687. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHT-04-2013-0044 [Accessed 17 December 2015].

Online Computer Library Centre (2016) 'EZproxy connects library users to e-content with a single - on.' https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/services/brochures/213330usf_ezproxy.pdf Accessed [04 February 2016].

Pawar, S.S. & Kaur, P. (n.d.) 'Need of change in library and information science education in India and skills in the changing knowledge era: a study.' http://www.consalxvi.org/sites/default/files/10-Sarbjeet%20Singh%20Pawar.pdf [Accessed 24 January 2015].

UNESCO (2006) 'Growth and expansion of private higher education in Africa.' Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Vassiliou, M. & Rowley, J. (2008) 'Progressing the definition of "e-book".' *Library Hi Tech* 26(3) pp.355-368. http://bogliolo.eci.ufmg.br/downloads/TGI061%20Vassiliou%20definition%20of%20ebook%202008.pdf [Accessed 23 January 2016]

The Mighty Pen, (2015) '*Technology enabled learning must prepare students for the workplace*' August (1)6 p.13 http://themightypen.co.za/doc/TMP_Aug_2015_WEB.pdf [Accessed 5 January 2016]