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OPAC CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT AT CURTIN

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Overview

This paper gives a brief overview of the structures which are in place to manage, guide and monitor OPAC change and development at Curtin University Library. I will begin by saying a few words about the systems context in which we operate, and then outline the way in which responsibilities are divided up among different groups in the library, summarise the principal drivers of change to the OPAC and the main mechanisms we use to put proposed changes into practice. I will conclude by highlighting some of the advantages, as I see it, of the system we have in place.
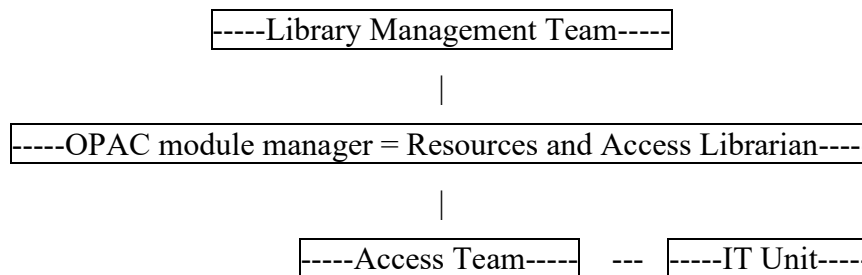
Systems Context

Curtin University Library currently uses the Ex Libris Aleph 500 library system. The previous DRA system was converted to Aleph 14.2 in mid-2002, and an upgrade to version 16.02 took place in mid-2004. Curtin relies on several Ex Libris products to provide different services; as well as Aleph we use SFX, Metalib and Digitool. The library systems environment is thus relatively consistent in that it depends largely on products produced by a single vendor, and is significantly different from that of the other Western Australian university libraries. The model we have adopted for the management and maintenance of library systems is broadly similar across the different products that we have, and so what I have to say about the OPAC will apply broadly to the other products as well. For Aleph, we maintain three separate instances

for Development, Training and Production. In principle the configuration of Training and Production is identical, being simultaneously updated from Development as required.   One characteristic of Ex Libris systems in general, and the Aleph OPAC in particular, is that they allow for a very high level of local customisation. This is naturally a plus point in that it means, for example, that in principle the OPAC can be tailored quite precisely to any individual library's needs, but it also implies a certain overhead in terms of staff time in order to achieve this.

Responsibilities

The main agents in the process of OPAC maintenance and development at Curtin are currently those indicated here.

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        -----Library Management Team-----
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   -----OPAC module manager = Resources and Access Librarian-----
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          -----Access Team-----   ---   -----IT Unit-----
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The role of the Library Management Team, chaired by the University Librarian, is primarily to co-ordinate the management of the suite of different library systems products seen a whole, particularly in the context of system upgrades and their timing, and to pursue specifically strategic matters relating to Ex Libris products. From an operational point of view, responsibility for individual Aleph modules (clients in Aleph terminology) has been devolved to the library units responsible for the associated functions. The Enquiry and Lending Services Unit thus oversees the Aleph Circulation and Course Readings Clients (Course Readings is the Ex Libris term covering Reserve). The Resources and Access Unit is responsible for Acquisitions,

Cataloguing and the OPAC. This marks a shift of emphasis from the system in place before 2005 when the OPAC was managed through the library's Information and Education Services Unit (that is the part of the library concerned with reference and information literacy). Part of the rationale for this change was to ensure that the unit responsible for creation of the catalogue data, with its specialist knowledge of the way the data was structured, was also responsible for the presentation of this data to the public. The potential disadvantage in this change – that OPAC design might become out of touch with client needs and expectations – was addressed by a series of measures which I will describe later.

Within the Resources and Access Unit the actual work on OPAC development is largely devolved to the librarians of the Access Team, and the Senior Librarian who manages it. This group also works on the other Ex Libris public interfaces, SFX and Metalib, and co-ordinates the library web site, so is in a good position to ensure a commonality of approach across the different systems, to harmonise their appearance so far as possible and maximise interoperability. In this work the Access Team is supported by the Library IT Unit, which provides technical advice, completes programming when required and is responsible for servers, back-ups and the like.

Sources of Change

One constant source of potential change to OPACs comes from system enhancement and upgrade developments from the library system vendors. Ex Libris handles these in two main ways. The first is regular 'service pack' updates to the existing system software – these are often bug fixes, but also sometimes include additional functionality for the OPAC (as for other Aleph clients), which we may or may not choose to implement. The second is version upgrades. These of course are

unavoidable and may involve considerable amounts of work. Our only experience of this in Aleph – the upgrade from version 14 to version 16 which took place in mid-2004 – entailed the conversion of the OPAC from a framed to a frameless environment, and therefore the rewriting of numerous web pages to maintain our previous customisation and OPAC functionality.

We have several formal mechanisms in place to collect feedback about OPAC performance and design from different stakeholder groups. Library staff have access to an internal issue logging database – TickAT. This system is primarily intended to allow staff members to alert the Access Team to any problems or issues relating to library system products, but it is also regularly used to record requests for OPAC development work. The ticketing database allows issues to be conveniently recorded and the different stages of their resolution monitored by both the Access Team and the initiating staff member. Client feedback on the OPAC is passed on to the Access Team by Information Desk staff or divisional Senior Librarians through the same method. There is also a similar system in place – Eclectic – which can be accessed by library clients directly, either through the OPAC itself or from the library website. Those issues – including OPAC development and design suggestions -- which relate to library systems are passed on to the Access Team for consideration and action.

The Access Team also seeks to collect feedback on library system products in more active ways: by analysing the results of student or staff surveys, for example, and by conducting periodic focus group meetings with internal and external client groups. Two particularly productive exercises of this sort have concentrated recently on the OPAC. OPAC work for the major Aleph upgrade of 2004 focussed largely on replicating the functionality of the previous version. Once this was completed a brainstorming session was organised among interested library staff to identify areas

for subsequent development and improvement. This consultative process has led among other things to the inclusion of 856 url links in the brief record display, and to the development of a system to allow users to check the progress of recommendations they have made, through a special OPAC subset. More recently, the Access Team worked with a small group of visually impaired students at Curtin to identify ways in which the OPAC could be made more easily legible. One clear outcome from this exercise was an amendment to the OPAC web pages to make them more easily scalable.

Implementation of Change

Suggestions for change from various sources come more or less continually. In the first instance they are evaluated by the Access Team, and if necessary the Resources and Access Librarian, to confirm they are compatible with existing features or other proposed developments, and to assess how much work would be required to implement them. If the proposed change is a relatively simple one to make, then the necessary work may be incorporated into the mainstream operations of the Access Team. If, on the other hand, the proposal is for something of a more complex nature, or will require substantial testing, or extensive programming input, it may be included as a recommended initiative in the annual OPAC report, and considered for the specific allocation of resources in the library planning cycle for the following year. Examples of this sort of project include the indication of availability status in the brief record hit list, and the automatic update of summary holdings information for serials, both of which are currently in progress.

Once it has been decided that work will go ahead to implement a particular change, the Access Team will begin to edit the relevant configuration tables in the

Development instance of Aleph. This may involve simple matters of Aleph configuration, or the editing of html files and perhaps the addition of javascript coding. Complex modifications of this type, or any further programming required for the output of notices, for example, may require input from the IT unit. In order to allow the Access Team to edit relevant files in a controlled manner while restricting full server access to IT staff for security reasons, a samba connection has been set up for the Access Team to appropriate directories on the Development server.

When a change has been made on Development and preliminary testing has been done, any significant change is presented to a wider library audience for comment. This is done through the Aleph Reference Group, an internal email list containing representation from all operational areas of the library and from all library sites. The aim here is to achieve sufficient plurality of input from different quarters to ensure that no implications for different types of OPAC use have been overlooked by the Access Team. Opinion is sought particularly from the Enquiry and Lending Services Unit on matters relating to Reserve or borrower information since these are areas which fall specifically under its jurisdiction. Adjustments are made to customisation as required until the Reference Group is satisfied with the result. In case of a difference of opinion the Resources and Access Librarian has the casting vote. (Normally, a consensus is reached quite amicably.)

The final stage in the change implementation process is the copying of the amended files from the Development instance to Production, which is performed by the IT Unit. The Reference Group is often consulted as to the precise timing of this. Relatively minor changes are normally made as soon as they are ready. More substantial amendments are generally delayed until a suitable occasion in the cycle of the academic year. For example, if a change was agreed which significantly affected

the appearance of basic searching or results pages, or which introduced new functions to the OPAC, implementation might be delayed until after the end of the academic year to ensure that information literacy programmes and handouts could be kept suitably up to date. If the introduction of any change requires significant system downtime – as in a recent case when we wanted to make revisions to the Aleph indexing tables to improve displays and therefore had to reindex the entire database – this would normally be postponed to a time when the minimum of students is on campus

Strengths

The methodology I have outlined has essentially been in place for about two years, and has guided OPAC development and change successfully through that period. I'd like to conclude by briefly listing some of the strengths of the current system. First it provides an unambiguous delineation of responsibilities, with OPAC development clearly in the domain of the Resources and Access Unit. This allows for rapid decision making when required. Secondly, it is the area responsible for the catalogue data which is also responsible for its presentation to the public. Knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of the data maximises the effectiveness of search screens and displays. Thirdly, the model incorporates a diverse and flexible approach to the capturing of ideas for change, and encourages broad consultation on the way changes are introduced. And finally, the model fosters a climate of continuous improvement in which proposed changes can be assessed quickly and implemented without undue delay.