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A View from the Inside: Integrating the University Library within an Academic Department

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Abstract

The library at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden is unusual because it is fully integrated within an academic department, *the Department of Communication and Learning in Science*. This guest editorial explores the opportunities and challenges of integration and offers observation on the learning from establishing this integrated model.

Keywords: Organisational structure; library integration

What is a university library? A collection of printed material of course, but also a huge number of digital resources such as scientific journals, databases, learning resources, and more. And not to forget library staff—librarians, but also bibliometricians, communication officers, teachers and IT staff. Perhaps also researchers, but more about this later.

The university library is most often a building or several at central locations of the campus as well as a digital platform on the university website. At *Chalmers University of Technology*, the library is all that. However, Chalmers university library is also unusual because it is integrated within an academic department, *the Department of Communication and Learning in Science*. The

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whole department consists of four divisions, among which two of those are library divisions: *the Division of Learning and Learning Environments* and *the Division of Information Resources and Scientific Publication*. The other two divisions, *the Division of Engineering Education Science* and *the Division of Language and Communication*, run standard academic activity, i.e., teaching, research, and knowledge transfer. The department also has, like every other academic department, a *Division of Operational Support*.

1. Understanding the Significance of Organisational Position

Does the library in this integrated model change its meaning or presence? Is there still a library? Of course, there is. But it is also true that this library has no organisation of its own, no single entity in the organisational chart called "the library". Instead, we often talk about the "library divisions". However, most often still, in daily speech, we talk about the library, both within the department itself and outside it, in our dialogues with faculty members of the other departments, with the university management, and with other, external partners in the university sector. How come? I believe every organisation has one internal structure established to function; that is, that has reasonable roles and assignments that makes the machinery work smoothly, and one external structure, which is accessible, reachable, and understandable to others. As a service organisation with patrons and partners, the internal structure of the university library is of less importance. I do believe that the internal structure is important, but not in the contact with patrons and partners, because what they want is their needs to be fulfilled. The importance of the internal structure and organisation of the university library lies in how the library can organise its work tasks and mobilise its resources.

The importance of the external structure on the other hand, lies in how the library services can be reached. A simple example from another sector could be the global home furniture store, IKEA. As a customer I really do not care about the organisation of the company, the titles of the staff nor what management philosophy lies behind it. I just want to get my piece of furniture, at a reasonable price and with the highest possible quality. This fundamental requirement probably also goes for university libraries. I do think that libraries and other service organisations should be well organised, well thought through, and relevant for their purposes, but I believe we need to think

more carefully about and acknowledge the two sides of the organisational coin. My experience from re-organising the current and previous academic organisations, including the university library, is that we too often mix up the internal and the external structure and try to be everything at once: a well-oiled machine and a reachable partner. Looking at my own university library organisation I consider it perfectly acceptable to have a complex internal structure to make sure our work tasks are carried out by the most competent staff with a range of complex skills, but at the same time talk about the library with partners and patrons in the simplest way, as if we had one simple and understandable library entity and, just as importantly, one mind. However, for this to succeed, we need library staff to work at the back and act at the front. To use Erving Goffman's terminology (Goffman, 1959) the "self" of the library, i.e., the librarians, should present "the conception" of the library in meeting with patrons, and become trusted, even though the self, backstage, also has many more roles, nuances, and wills. In everyday library practice this means that whoever from the complex library organisation meets a patron, they should act as if there is one single library 'mind and body'. If the patron has questions that the librarian cannot answer immediately, s/he should indicate that s/he can get the answer, because that is what the patron reasonably expects. S/he should then pose the questions to specialist colleagues before going back to the patron with the answers.

2. Some Advantages of Integration

This leads us to questions about the advantages and drawbacks when a library is integrated with an academic department. As an academic with a PhD in Technology Management and Economics and an academic career with teaching and research on the societal effects of digitalisation, and now with a dual role as head of an academic department and university library director, it is easy to take the library patrons' perspective as former student, doctoral student, and researcher/teacher. At most other Swedish universities, the library is a division within the university operational support and with the library director reporting to the university director. This structure puts the library director at the same table as other senior professional services colleagues including the IT manager, the HR director, and the Communications director. Nothing wrong with having good relationships with the operational support of the university, but what is missing is the

direct contact with the academic departments of the university. This of course can be accounted for in matrix structures, or by taking time to build those relationships separately, but being a head of a division within the university operational support with a good relationship to the departmental heads is different from being one departmental head among others. Chalmers is a single faculty university and there is no dean, only heads of department on the highest level, who all—including me in my role as departmental head and library director—report directly to the vice chancellor of the university. At larger universities there are more faculties, most often lead by deans. At some universities the library director is part of the university academic management, at others s/he may be part of the university operational management. Does that make a difference? I believe it does. As in my case, being one of 13 heads of departments, and in that role part of the university management, it is never difficult to raise and discuss specific library issues. I can also, whenever needed, speak directly to my own manager, the vice chancellor (or in fact CEO) of the university. This role of mine gives the university library admission to the core processes of the university and a possibility to keep my heads of department colleagues up to date with library developments, and perhaps even more important, bring ideas and needs expressed by the university faculty back to the library. In this integrated model, it is also more straightforward to integrate library teaching with the educational programmes of the university. The two academic divisions within my department conduct teaching of their specific academic subjects within all educational programmes at all levels at the university, mostly as integrated parts in courses, in collaboration with teachers with subject specific expertise. Library teaching activity thereby becomes more easily integrated with the engineering programmes, being a part of the department's offer and service to the engineering programmes. The library teaching becomes an obvious share of the teaching run at the department instead of something negotiated and offered in a separate process. This integrated model also places the library, its services and its staff, into a direct and close relationship with our researchers and research activity. A while ago, the department conducted an analysis of the success rate of the applications during the last couple of years for external research funding. The result showed a need for more strategic and long-term preparation for successful proposals, an internal peer review structure to increase the quality of the proposals, and a better alignment between proposal and funding agency. To support that to happen we have now appointed one person, part-time, to work with research support during an extended period. This

research support will also be available for librarians with research ambitions. We already have library staff with PhDs in the department as well as one PhD student, and a good relationship to the Swedish School of Library and Information Science, also geographically close to Chalmers. The potential for conducting library research is there already and could now be even stronger, with a dedicated research support at hand in our own department. In an integrated academic department, it is also easier for a librarian to observe the academic research process at close hand so as to engage, to learn and to develop services. Finally, the mix of staff brings a rich range of competences and perspectives, and this combination can spark many more new and innovative ideas on current activities as well as potential plans. Spending time on team building is of specific importance to get as much as possible out of this mixed management group. Stimulating the division heads to collaborate and recognise synergies inspire the staff to reach out to each other.

3. Is there a Downside to Integration?

Integration is never easy; we all know that. We can refer to Snow's concept "two cultures" (Snow, 1993), which was originally discussing the divide between science and arts, but it could easily be applied to the divide between the academic teaching and research within a university and the university's operational support. The latter is often considered as less important and can be the part of the university most at risk of cost cutting during bad times. However, as often argued, teachers and researchers would not be much without the university support functions. Still, there is often a perceived barrier between the academic and the operational support staff. In the light of this discussion, we are accommodating these two cultures within the same department, with about half of the staff members belonging to each respective group. We therefore find that roughly half of the matters on the agenda of the department management meetings relate to the library and half the academic divisions. Therefore, the composition of the management group needs to be balanced between the representative groups, but with an expectation that everyone should be interested and engaged in all matters. This is demanding, getting to know other activities to a level where one can be part of a strategic discussion and development. I have, without doubt, a fantastic and engaged group, with deep knowledge about their own areas and a strong will to develop their knowledge of others.

4. What have we Learned and what will we do about it?

Although we consider library services as academic services, i.e., as an essential component of the academic life cycle, whether it is carrying out a systematic literature review or handling copyright issues, there is nevertheless a clear border between a university's library staff and the faculty. They may work close to each other on a course, or in a research project, but the conditions for the two categories of staff are quite different. Faculty members are developing an academic career, which means that the more they teach and publish, this directly results in improved terms and conditions of work—for example, there is more time for research and a better salary. It is also more likely that senior faculty members will be more successful when applying for research grants. However, for the experienced university librarian, there is no "academic career". You can take on management tasks and become a division manager or library director, but it does not make you more academically merited. In short, this reality may restrain librarians from true engagement in academic work and create an unequal work situation for university colleagues; librarians on the one hand and faculty members on the other. To come to terms with this situation *the Department of Communication and Learning in Science* will, during 2022, investigate and suggest a possible career path for librarians. I will be delighted to share the work and result with LIBER Quarterly readers.

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