

# Library as the 'centre for everything'

## Placing the library at the strategic heart of the community



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### Introduction

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The significance of the academic library in the university campus can be manifest in a variety of ways – through the physical location, the housing of significant collections, the variety of services and as a cultural hub and active partner in university strategy. The idea of the academic library as the 'centre for everything', while having obvious strategic attractions, also brings with it serious hazards which may ultimately be counterproductive to core values.

In recent years Maynooth University (MU) Library has actively worked to ensure that its position as a centre for first-class collections and services has been enhanced and its role has been perceived to be more nuanced – acting as a nexus for a myriad of activities on campus. This progression has been achieved through several key strategies, ranging from an organisational review and strategic leadership to the harnessing of new technologies and the promotion and embedding of new services. All of these have a demonstrable impact, which has created a virtuous circle, and brought the library closer to becoming 'the centre for everything'.

This article will explore how this has happened, reflect on some of the pitfalls and, importantly, consider the risk of moving from being 'valued' and 'involved' to being 'overcommitted' and, ultimately having a diluted focus.

### Organisational review

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While there has been a longstanding tradition of libraries reinventing themselves and adapting their structures to enhance their roles, the challenges imposed by the twenty-first-century university environment requires an unprecedented blend of creativity, flexibility and adaptability. For MU, the imminence of a new building was paralleled with a comprehensive review of the organisational structure. This resulted in a new structure, which provided clearer lines of reporting and responsibility and, critically, included functions such as digitisation, which had not been present even a few years previously. This allowed the library to best meet the needs of the university and its community in a rapidly changing technological and higher education environment. This was a participative project, with a steering group made up of representatives from different grades of library staff, library senior management and a representative from Human Resources. The result is a structure that provides clarity without limiting library staff's notable capacity for innovation and creativity.

### Strategic leadership

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MU Library has an enviable track record in active leadership on campus and this is manifest in a variety of ways. Firstly, the library has worked to act as a cultural hub for the university and local communities, hosting talks and exhibitions in a wide range of fields. This is a role that currently only the library can fulfil, and it has seen the number of events hosted increase by 280% in the last five years. This can pose logistical and resourcing challenges, but it affords us a prominence on campus that is both welcome and strategically very advantageous.

John Kotter among others has noted that the terms 'leadership' and 'management' should not be considered synonymous, and while the organisational structure of MU Library confers certain responsibilities and roles on staff, it is essential that all members of staff have the opportunity to lead – both internally, and, frequently in the broader campus community. To this end, library staff at all grades are involved in a variety of projects, from partnership committees, through green campus initiatives and the University Art Committee. The benefits are wide-ranging, from the obvious (staff feeling valued and their skills being enhanced) to the less apparent, but strategically important, such as the library enhancing its role on campus,

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at the strategic  
heart of the  
community

and having the opportunity to contribute to projects which, while perhaps not having immediately obvious links to our services, ultimately benefit from our involvement and the perspectives the library staff bring. Despite the diversity and various skill sets of our user population, the ability of library staff to consistently deliver remains much admired and this, in conjunction with the broader leadership of the library in key areas has greatly enhanced our strategic credibility on campus.

## Technology

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The use of technology to facilitate an enhanced library experience has been around in various guises for as long as there has been a library profession. While Maynooth has always endeavoured to take advantage of technology, having a new building has allowed us be far more progressive in this area, and has transformed our library presence beyond recognition in comparatively few years. These changes have ranged from the dramatic revolution of the library as a place, harnessing cutting-edge audio-visual technology, through the transformation of services, via the adoption of targeted technologies. As a relatively small university in the middle of a national recession, the sustainability of these technologies and their ability to demonstrably enhance our services has been critical. Coupled with this has been the need to consider and avoid the dangers of 'soft' techno determinism – where we become seduced by the potential of these technologies, and the development of our services becomes influenced by the technology available to us, rather than us adopting technology to help us do our job better. In this respect, the 'human' element has, perhaps ironically, become even more important – particularly regarding the question of whether a technology will genuinely improve things. This is a deeply nuanced issue and undoubtedly varies from university to university – so that a technology which has proven successful in one campus community may simply not be right for another. Understanding your user community and knowing when to lead and when to follow become even more important.

## New services

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The academic library lives or dies on two key tenets: the quality (and accessibility) of its collections, and the range, provision and suitability of its services. To this end, MU Library has worked to marry the traditional services which are felt to remain relevant, with new and innovative offerings. Library users can avail themselves of 3D printing, touch-screen tables and a wide array of research and learning support, from bespoke to ongoing classes throughout the year. In some of these areas Maynooth Library was a very deliberate pioneer, but equally we have been loath to dispense with some of the more traditional services which continue to resonate with our user community. Strategically this is important as it reaffirms the library as a body working hard to understand its users, but it also indicates a need for the library to lead its users to services which they may not previously have considered and which once they have begun to use, quickly become essential. Balancing these twin imperatives, while not always easy, is critical in terms of our role on campus.

## Cultural hub

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Notwithstanding the importance of services and collections, which are targeted directly to the campus community, the ability of MU Library to serve as a cultural hub for both campus and broader community offers very obvious benefits. While the university has grown considerably in the last decade, there remains a very strong connection with the town of Maynooth and its hinterland. This 'town and gown' philosophy is felt throughout the campus and the library has played a central role in reflecting this, from hosting exhibitions of work from members of the community, to offering information literacy classes to the local second level schools. Thus the library can move beyond the limiting confines of the 'academy' and show its value to the people who both live with a university

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in their town, but who also often have long-standing relationships with both the university and the 200-year-old St Patrick's College, which is also on campus.

This theme of inclusivity has a very tangible expression in the library extension, the ground floor of which is open to the general public. That this area contains the exhibition and refreshments spaces was a very deliberate decision that was taken with a view to allowing cultural events be as accessible as possible and ensuring that the building is vibrant all year round.

### Conclusion

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It would be impossible to highlight all the ways in which the library in Maynooth University interacts with its various user communities. The key issue, however, is that there is scope for the library to lead across all its activities and by doing so, to enhance not only the reputation of our staff and services, but to reaffirm our commitment to our various user communities and, ultimately, to be seen as an increasingly valuable partner in all campus activities – library as the 'centre for everything'.

### Reference

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John P Kotter (2013): Management is still not leadership [online]. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2013/01/management-is-still-not-leadership/> [accessed 23 February 2016]

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