

# Electronic Library Development at University of Abertay Dundee in Context

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The development of an electronic library must be seen in the context of the University's mission and strategic planning process.

In the mid-1990's, the University of Abertay Dundee recognised Communication and information Technology developments to be central to the future of the University giving it the potential to create a "competitive edge" over its rivals.

Consequently, we were one of the first Universities in the UK and the first in Scotland to develop an information strategy encompassing all aspects of information - library, IT, media and management information. As outcome of this strategy was to converge the library, IT and media services into "Information Services" to drive forward the concept of "a university for the digital age". A central element in this strategy was the creation of a learning environment in the form of an "electronic library" which would enable our home-based students first class study and learning facilities.

The University is committed to maximising the use of IT to enhance the quality of its academic product and convert its courses to largely electronic delivery, and it was agreed that the home-based student of the future would require such an environment if that quality was to be achieved. As a result, £8m was spent on a state-of-the-art library, designed to be "book free" at some time in the future.

All 700 study places are linked to high-speed wider and local area networks, with NT servers supporting the desktop IT facilities which is of a high minimum standard common platform. As shelves are removed as more information becomes available electronically, all 1200 study places would have this access.

This superb physical and IT infrastructure is only justifiable if it

- provides value for money
  - offers a high level of support to the user
  - provides appropriate training for all users - students and staff
- Apart from the building of the new library overall spend on library resources and IT in the University has not increased (indeed has probably declined in the case of IT), despite the dramatic improvement in IT facilities across the University and the greatly enhanced access to information through the exploitation of electronically-based information resources. This has been achieved through centralisation of IT procurement and support and carefully aligning desktop provision to need, reducing over specification of PC's and print resources.

- The support service is probably the weakest of all services, due to the reluctance of the University to increase its staff costs, but by the use of, for example, cloning of PCs and improving the IT helpdesk function the situation is improving.
- The teaching of information skills by librarians has now been combined with the teaching of IT skills by IT trainers in a first-level module which all students must take. For this to take effect “baseline IT” teaching was transferred from the academic Computing Department to Information Services and early next year all staff will have to enrol on a variant of this module.

This infrastructure has given the University the confidence to plan for a future where much of the students’ experience will take place in the “electronic library” - the role of Information Services is to ensure that this vision will be reached.

In conclusion, it is only through a strategic approach to information (which requires senior management commitment), the development of a high quality infrastructure (IT, electronic resources, physical resources), user support and systematic (and compulsory!) training of users that the “Information Age” will be realised and the electronic library will flourish and become centre stage in the learning process of our students.