
ERASMUS staff development

Experiencing library services in the
Università degli studi di Milano

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“Every acquisition, no matter how big or small, requires an ‘anti-Mafia declaration’, thus ensuring that no university funds exchange hands illegally with the notorious Italian Mafia”. Initially I thought this was a joke at my expense, but this was just one of many of the unexpected and uniquely Italian differences that I discovered during a three-week ERASMUS visit to the Università degli studi di Milano. During September 2012 I visited the university as part of an ERASMUS staff development programme, kindly timetabled by library colleagues at the university. During this period I visited some of the many faculty libraries and learnt best practice from their librarians.

I was first struck by the differences between their libraries and Cardiff University Library where I am employed. The Università degli studi di Milano is the fourth largest university in Italy

and hosts approximately 70,000 students. Until recently it was home to over ninety libraries, albeit many of them small, departmental and unstaffed. As part of a university library service restructure, many of the libraries have been merged and at the time of my visit there were around thirty, with approximately 16 – 21 of these libraries (numbers dependent on who you asked!) staffed and managed as you would expect in a higher education library in Britain. Merging the libraries was an ongoing process. However, delays were occurring as a result of current economic conditions; purpose-built libraries were out of the question as they were simply too expensive. Alongside this, the current library buildings were not fit for extension. The humanities libraries, for example, were situated in a converted hospital, built in a 'crociera' or cross shape, with alcoves for bedside tables.

Further merging of the libraries was proving problematic, and it seemed apparent to me that the sheer number of libraries was a strain on the service and caused problems when trying to unify policies and procedures. Only in recent years had all the libraries started using the same library management system and many of them seemed still to manage themselves on an individual basis rather than as part of a service as a whole; library staff could only renew books from their own library and many libraries allowed only students from their own faculty to use their library's facilities. However, in contrast, many of the librarians from various libraries now collaborate to provide information literacy sessions; they now share resources to improve their sessions and have successfully acquired a budget to design promotional materials.

The implementation of information literacy teaching in the Università degli studi di Milano was possibly the most distinct difference I found between the library services of Milan and Cardiff universities. Prior to my visit to Milan, a colleague from the Università degli studi di Milano had visited Cardiff University libraries specifically to learn about the implementation of an information literacy curriculum, choosing Cardiff because of its ground-breaking Cephalonian method of teaching, and its *Handbook of information literacy teaching*. After spending three weeks with librarians in Milan, I started to understand why their colleague had come to Britain to develop best practice for information literacy teaching.

Librarians at the Università degli studi di Milano had evidenced the need for information literacy

teaching in the university; Metalib data revealed that many users were copying and pasting references from their reading lists into the search box, showing that they did not know how to conduct a search. Although librarians regarded this as clear evidence that information literacy teaching was required to support users to make the most of the library's resources, academics in the university, I am told, were opposed to allowing library staff to teach information literacy. The university libraries were heavily influenced by academics; they controlled acquisitions and, as many had their own departmental libraries, they felt very involved with the library service. It is therefore no surprise that they had the power to cancel scheduled information literacy sessions designed to help students improve citing and referencing. Promotional material had been printed, including times, dates and venues, but had to be cancelled because of academic opposition. Speculation surrounded the reasoning for the cancellation. Some suggested that citing and referencing might be seen as an academic discipline that should only be taught by lecturers, while others believed that there was a general consensus between academic staff that it was not a librarian's place to be involved in academic teaching at all. The influence of some of the university's academics and their opposition to information literacy teaching meant that embedding information literacy into the curriculum was proving difficult.

Although the librarians were facing some barriers to their information literacy sessions there was a good uptake of one-to-one sessions. However, the librarians continue to find evidence for the need for group sessions, in the hope of embedding them into the courses. They have, for example, conducted a usability test of their resources: an observational study to show how the library's electronic resources are used. This highlighted that although some users knew exactly how to find relevant articles in a database, others would search for an article using the Google search box on the university homepage. It is hoped that demonstrating the need for information literacy with such studies will improve academic support of the service. In the meantime, the librarians, along with the digital library team, have developed interactive e-guides, not only showing users how to use resources but also ensuring that they engage with the resource by prompting the user to click on certain links and input terms into the search fields; see (http://users.unimi.it/bibliomediazione/Tutorial_Opac.html).



During my three-week visit it was evident that as well as vast differences in information literacy provision, the attitude towards customer service also differed between Italian and British higher education libraries. Customer service was not regarded as a particularly high priority at Milano, perhaps a result of the different levels of student tuition fees between the two countries. The library service conducts a student satisfaction survey once every six years, whereas a user satisfaction survey is something that higher education libraries in Britain would generally implement at least once a year. Constant feedback is a requirement for improving the library service.

The feedback they receive after conducting these surveys has been consistently similar: a call for more seating areas in the libraries (there are currently approximately 4000 places available in the libraries but approximately 70,000 students), extended opening hours and more resources. The

library service acknowledges these requests and would like to implement change; however, the current economic climate is impacting on its ability to do so. Almost every colleague I spoke to at the Università degli studi di Milano referred to the 'crisis': the impact of the recession was being felt and was playing heavily on the minds of all staff.

Although the library staff did not have the means to expand the libraries or purchase new resources, they were seeking alternative means of improving their service. To overcome the lack of seating they encouraged users to study in public libraries and thus share resources; to improve opening hours they employed students to staff the enquiry desk out of hours; and to provide more resources, particularly electronic, they were promoting open access publishing to their academics and doctoral students so their work would be freely available on the university's online repository, AIR. There was also talk of a purchasing consortium with other higher education institutions in Northern Italy which, it was hoped, would enable them to achieve a larger discount on resources. Although the libraries were faced with difficulties that were hard to overcome without a larger budget, they were seeking to improve customer service through economic means. In a similar fashion the libraries had also started harnessing the power of social media as an economical means of promoting their services to the students and gaining instant feedback to improve customer service.

When I arrived at the restored hospital that was now home to many of the university's libraries and lecture theatres I was awestruck. The libraries were in fabulous surroundings and contained so much history – for example, the former ice house





was home to the philosophy library: during excavation to create space for the library they discovered the remains of an ice store with its original meat hooks that had been designed to keep meat chilled for the hospital patients. It was now the home of displays and exhibitions for the library.

My initial envy of their beautiful buildings and working environment was short-lived as I started to understand some of the difficulties faced by the library. It became evident that the age and therefore the very nature of the buildings that made them beautiful was an impediment.

REFERENCE

- 1 Jessica Gaunt, Nigel Morgan, Rowland Somers, Rosemary Soper & Erica Swain. 2009. Handbook for information literacy teaching. Third revision, 2009. Cardiff University Information Service (Online). Available at: <http://cardiff.ac.uk/insrv/educationandtraining/infolit/hilt/> [accessed 14 March 2013]