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Librarian-academic collaboration: the role of strategic communication and relationship management

ABSTRACT

Information literacy and critical thinking skills are essential in the information age towards achieving academic success and being adequately skilled for lifelong learning. Academic libraries have an indispensable role to play in this regard. Collaboration between librarians and academics is important to ensure both effective information-literacy training and service provision to students and to the academic community. However, a lack of understanding, knowledge, and communication regarding academic libraries' teaching and research role is proving to be an obstacle in obtaining librarian-academic collaboration. Academic libraries do mostly not apply strategic communication management to build and maintain relationships with its stakeholders, which contributes to the challenges surrounding librarian-academic collaboration. This paper reports on how four academic libraries practise communication and relationship management to enhance librarian-academic collaboration. The study aims to make recommendations for the application of more effective, strategy-driven communication and relationship management to enhance librarian-academic collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of university or academic libraries is to assist the university in attaining its main goals, namely research and the teaching of undergraduate and graduate students (Hakala & Nygrén, 2010: 204-205; Julien & Given, 2002/2003: 69-70; Unagha, 2009: 195). Information and technological developments since the early 1980s have changed the role of the traditional academic library as a mere provider of information to one of being a provider of *access* to information and information services (Cardina & Wicks, 2004: 133; Jose & Bhat, 2007: 23; Rowley, 1995: 25; Vos, 2001: 26). Especially information librarians are now viewed as advisors and trainers in respect of correct searching techniques and the choice of relevant databases, and also as information managers who have to organise the mass of unorganised information available on the Internet (Cardwell, 2001: 254; Vos, 2001: 26, 50). It is essential, in the information age, to be information literate and to apply critical thinking skills to achieve academic success and to be adequately skilled for lifelong learning, especially in an ever-changing globalised work environment (Agee, 2005: 249; Bruce, 2001: 107; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 149; McAskill, 2008: 1; Somi & De Jager, 2005: 266). It is for this reason that McGuinness (2006: 573) posits that the academic library as a 'learning centre' now replaces the traditional, static image of the library as a materials storehouse. This 'learning centre' is presented as an interactive learning environment in which information is specifically selected for problem-solving, rather than strictly prescribed by academics.

Librarian-academic collaboration

Academic librarians should therefore reconstruct their professional roles and responsibilities by becoming *active key educators* in the teaching and learning environments of the future (Cardina & Wicks, 2004: 134; Cardwell, 2001: 254-255; Dewey, 2004: 6; Peacock, as quoted by Nimon, 2002: 15). Julien and Given (2002/2003: 67) state that since information literacy is vital to students' academic success, librarians and academics should *collaborate* so as effectively to teach students information literacy. The latter refers to people being skilled to locate, retrieve and apply relevant information independently with a view to solving problems (Cardwell, 2001: 256; De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2002: 168; Somi & De Jager, 2005: 260). Bhavnagri and Bielat (2005: 122) define librarian-academic collaboration as follows:

> In this collaborative effort, the librarian acts as expert, scaffolding the faculty member's skills in technology; the faculty member as an expert, scaffolding the librarian's knowledge of research and teaching pedagogy; and the faculty member and librarian (as peers) collaborating to scaffold students' research methods, knowledge and skills.

Besides enabling the library and the university to attain their strategic goals, there are several other benefits to collaboration between academics and librarians (Cardwell, 2001: 257-259; Julien & Given, 2002/2003: 68-70; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 149-151; McGuinness, 2006: 578; Neuhaus & Snowden, 2003: 199):

- Academics will clearly understand the scope of the library's support for teaching and research.
- Librarians will be familiar with course work, which will enable them to assist students more effectively.
- Academics will be able to design assignments while taking into account the library's available resources.
- Academics, who have become used to information-seeking strategies such as depending on a network of personal contacts, and following citation trails (neither being suitable for the novice researcher) would have more reasonable expectations of students' ability to do research and use information sources.
- Information-literacy training will be established as part of formal academic courses, and librarians will be able to implement assessment procedures and act on the results.
- Academics, who feel that the library staff understand their needs and who are knowledgeable about the library and its services, will encourage their students to make use of the library. As students make use of the library, their appreciation of libraries is strengthened and it ensures their long-term use of libraries.
- Students would understand the research process better, which would lead to improved pass rates.
- Independent library research will be emphasised as a valuable, life-long learning skill.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned advantages of librarian-academic collaboration, academics are, for several reasons, not always keen on collaborating with librarians:

- Despite the more specialised nature of the technological information environment, a notion exists among library users (from undergraduates to academics) that the library is irrelevant because Internet availability offers an 'easy' means of finding information (Dewey, 2004: 6; Jose & Bhat, 2007: 24; Kuchi, 2006: 148; Libqual, 2008: 38, 53, 68, 83 & 92; McAskill, 2008: 2; Nims, 1999: 250; Sass, 2002: 38; Somi & De Jager, 2005: 265; Unagha, 2009: 199; Vos, 2001: 63).
- Though librarians are often required to provide information-literacy training, academics are not always required to cooperate with librarians. Information-literacy training can only be successful if supported by academics (Cardwell, 2001: 258).
- In addition to the above lack of support from academics, many librarians feel unprepared for their instructional roles, and may even express hostility towards the students and the academics they teach (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 149).
- Parent institutions of libraries do not always acknowledge the role of information literacy in their strategic statements (De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2003: 108; Nimon, 2002: 16; Somi & De Jager, 2005: 266). There is also general ignorance as to the importance of information literacy and the role and proficiency of librarians in conveying such skills. Neuhaus and Snowden (2003: 199) maintain that when university administrators understand and value the role of the university library, these matters will be taken into consideration in setting plans, goals and objectives for the university.

- The corporate image of libraries is sometimes not positive, which results in problems in respect both of allocating funds from the parent organisation (Chu, 1998: 231-232; Jose & Bhat, 2007: 24-25; Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 151-152; Sass, 2002: 37-38), and of facilitating librarian-academic collaboration.
- Academics are mostly ignorant regarding the important role of the library in assisting the university in achieving the reason for its existence, namely teaching and research (Julien & Given, 2002/2003: 69-70; McGuinness, 2006: 280). This could be why many librarians label academics as people who are "troublesome and arrogant and who fail to understand librarians' roles" (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 150). Many academics are thus not always in favour of collaborative programme planning and of teaching that involves professional library staff – especially because of time constraints in respect of teaching courses. Also, because they only had limited exposure to librarians' skills and expertise during their own studies, academics thus view librarians' main task as being to support undergraduate students' learning activities. (Julien & Given, 2002/2003: 68-69; McGuinness, 2006: 578; Nimon, 2002: 16).
- Librarians experience an unequal balance of power in their relationship with academics: the provision of in-class time for information-literacy training is viewed as a 'gift' from the academic, and librarians are thus 'dependent' on academics (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009: 151).
- Librarians do not always understand either the nature of academic work or the specific needs of academics (Julien & Given, 2002/2003: 68-69). As a result, librarians are unable to support academics effectively, while academics might in turn feel that the library is unable to support their academic work. This lack of dialogue and understanding leads to hampered relationships between the library and academics.
- Nimon (2002: 20-21) makes an important point in stating that advocacy has been an important strategy of librarians pursuing collaboration with academics in programme planning and teaching. Advocacy, however, is unsuccessful in that many think that the case the advocate is making is so self-evidently true that he/she must simply convey it clearly to the audience. When library advocacy fails, librarians mostly blame the academic community without taking into consideration the specific needs of the latter.

The above makes it clear that libraries cannot assume that all its stakeholders necessarily understand or have knowledge about its services and its potential role in teaching and research. Nimon (2002: 21) and Babafemi (2002: 464) therefore advocate two-way symmetrical communication between the library and its stakeholders as a means of achieving mutual understanding and respect regarding the goals of the library and of academics so as to negotiate effective collaboration and to build mutually beneficial relationships between the library and the academic community.

Strategic communication and relationship management by academic libraries

Mostly, academic libraries apply neither strategic communication[1] nor relationship management. This is the case, since they believe that they have a captive audience with no option but to use the library to attain academic success, or that communication management is unnecessary because library funding is dependent on university funds, or that communication management is not part of the library's tasks and should rather be managed by the university's communication department, or that communication management might create expectations that the library is unable to satisfy (Aitufe, 1993: 40; Marshall, 2001: 117; Nims, 1999: 250-251). Another reason is that libraries, as with other non-profit organisations (NPOs), have neither the knowledge nor the funds to practise communication and relationship management (Dyer *et al*., 2002: 15; Marshall, 2001: 119; Naudé, 2001: 265; Wiggill, 2009). Yet Aitufe (1993: 40) argues that public relations [communication management] efforts by libraries are necessary because "there is competition from many sources for the time and interest of students and staff". When no effort is made to convey the educational importance of the library to its stakeholders, it could happen that the library is viewed as being no more than a bookstore.

Because of the above-mentioned misunderstanding about and disregard for the library's important role in assisting the university, and also its academics, academic libraries – to attain their goals – need to plan their communication and relationship-management efforts around the library's strategic goals that proceed from and support the university's strategic goals. Kuchi (2006: 148) states that because of environmental, technological and educational changes, academic libraries have, as well as adopting new technologies, been adjusting and accommodating existing resources. However, implementing such initiatives requires both substantial support and resources from the library's stakeholders. Libraries therefore need to communicate their *mission* to stakeholders since doing so allows for a shared understanding of the library's changing environment among stakeholders. Kuchi (2006: 148) continues:

> Clarifying and communicating the mission assures the library's constituencies about why it is doing what it does; and it gives rationale, meaning, and structure to the library's decisions and actions. Libraries need to communicate their mission to their stakeholders in such a way that the stakeholders begin to recognize the library's mission more easily and become familiar with it.

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[1] The terms *corporate communication* or *communication management* are increasingly used to describe the *management* function that aims to make the organisation more effective by applying two-way communication to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders (Steyn & Puth, 2000: 2-3). Although the term *public relations* is still used in academic literature to refer to corporate communication or to communication management, preference, in this paper, is still given to the term *communication and relationship management* to emphasise that strategic communication and strong relationships go hand in hand.

It is against this background that this study investigates academic libraries' application of *strategic* communication and relationship management to accomplish effective librarian-academic collaboration. More specifically, this paper endeavours to answer the following research questions:

- How should academic libraries practise communication and relationship management to enhance librarian-academic collaboration?
- How do academic libraries practise communication and relationship management to enhance librarian-academic collaboration?
- How can the difference between normative communication and relationship management theory and practice, as experienced by academic libraries, be bridged to enhance librarian-academic collaboration?

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Strategic communication and relationship management

Any organisation's communication strategy[2] should be aligned with its vision, mission and goals in order to contribute most to the success and effectiveness of the organisation (Grunig & Grunig, 2000: 308–309; Grunig & Repper, 1992: 120; Steyn, 2000: 4, 12; Steyn, 2002: 9). In other words, the organisation's communication strategy should both be rooted in and support the overall organisational enterprise strategy,[3] and so contribute to achieving organisational goals and efficacy (Angelopulo & Schoonraad, 2006: 36; Grunig & Repper, 1992: 120;

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[2] Referring to *strategic communication and relationship management*, the Excellence Study found that building strong stakeholder relationships is very important because effective organisations identify and achieve goals because they develop relationships with their stakeholders (Grunig *et al*., 1992). When organisations identify goals that are valued by both management and strategic stakeholders, they achieve support from stakeholders. Hon and Grunig (1999: 9) state that "public relations makes an organization more effective, therefore, when it identifies the most strategic publics as part of strategic management processes and conducts communication programs to develop and maintain effective long-term relationships between management and those publics". Strong, mutually beneficial *relationships* are the most important outcome of strategic communication management (Grunig *et al*., 2002: 548; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000: xiii). The term *strategic communication and relationship management* therefore refers to the communication management *process* and its most important *outcome* or *result*.

[3] The *enterprise strategy* is not stated explicitly or formally, but it exists in all organisations (Angelopulo & Schoonraad, 2006: 32; Digman, 1986: 28) and is concerned with the achievement of *non-financial* goals. This strategy, also termed the *societal-role strategy*, is concerned with the organisation's mission, purpose, and role in society (Digman, 1986: 28). The enterprise strategy influences the organisation's relationship with its environment, particularly stakeholders who have an interest in what the organisation does and how it conducts its business (Digman, 1986: 28). According to Steyn (2002: 9), the enterprise strategy must address questions such as "*How is the organization perceived by its stakeholders?*" and "*What are stakeholder values and expectations?*"

Webster, 1990: 18). Webster (1990: 18) further adds that the reason for an organisation's existence is reflected in its vision, mission and goals, and should also be reflected in its communication strategy. This implies that all communication from an organisation must reflect the rationale for *its existence*. This principle is especially important for NPOs, such as an academic library, in obtaining public legitimacy and social trust to operate in a specific environment (Suchman, 1995: 586).

Organisations cannot just convey their vision, mission and goals to stakeholders, but must *continuously engage* with stakeholders, using two-way communication to achieve mutual understanding of one another's goals and needs (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 22; Grunig *et al*., 2002: 548-550; Wiggill, 2009: 51). Two-way communication and mutual understanding lead to establishing strong relationships, which, in the case of academic libraries, might lead to more effective librarian-academic collaboration.

Two types of relationship exist between an organisation and its stakeholders, namely an exchange relationship and a communal relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 20). In an *exchange relationship*, members benefit from one another in response to specific benefits received in the past or expected in the future (Hung, 2005: 396; Hung, 2007: 456). A *communal relationship* is one in which benefits are provided in order to please the other party, without the benefactor expecting the beneficiary to return the favour (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 21; Hung, 2007: 456). Communal relationships are especially characterised by commitment amongst all involved in the relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979: 12–24; Grunig, 2000: 2; Paine, 2003: 8).

NPOs tend to focus more specifically on building communal relationships with stakeholders such as donors, because they receive funding without donors expecting them to return the funding (Naudé, 2001; Wiggill, 2009; Wiggill *et al*., 2009: 55). However, NPOs such as libraries, because they deliver information services to the university community, also have exchange relationships with stakeholders. Stakeholder relationships should therefore be managed according to the demands unique to each type of relationship (Wiggill *et al*., 2009: 54), and relationship types can interchange depending on organisational goals and the specific situation (Hung, 2001: 50–51; Hung, 2007: 454; Wiggill, 2009: 190). This implies that the organisation's vision, mission and goals will determine the type of relationship it has with stakeholders. Organisational vision, mission and goals thus have to be the driving force behind all intended relationship-cultivation strategies.

Different *relationship outcomes* that indicate the quality of the relationship have been identified (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 18–20; Huang, 2001: 65–68; Hung, 2001: 25–30). *Trust* refers to one party's level of confidence in and willingness to expose him-/herself to the other party (in the case of librarian-academic collaboration it could refer to the academic trusting the librarian to find the most recent research on a specific topic). *Control mutuality* refers to the extent to which parties agree as to who has rightful power to influence the other (refer to Bhavnagri and Bielat's definition (2005: 122) of librarian-academic collaboration and to Julien and Pecoskie's view (2009: 151) of the unequal and dependent relationship

between librarians and academics. *Commitment* entails all parties involved feeling that the relationship is worth the time and the effort (this could refer to academics viewing information-literacy training to be such a vital skill that they allocate time for these classes, while the librarian in turn values the academic's input in information-literacy training). The level of *relationship satisfaction* indicates the extent to which one party is positive towards the other because positive expectations regarding the relationship are reinforced and the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs. Both parties reap benefits from the relationship and all stakeholders are thus happy in their interactions with the organisation and feel important to, and valued by the organisation. In the case of effective librarian-academic collaboration, both parties would understand each other's viewpoints and needs and would therefore be satisfied with their relationship.

It is clear from the above discussion that, in order to enhance librarian-academic collaboration, all communication and relationship-management efforts must be rooted in the library's vision, mission and goals in order to be of strategic value and thus be seen to be contributing to organisational effectiveness. This implies that the library, and especially information librarians, should clearly communicate how the library's vision, mission and goals support those of the university. In so doing, the library clearly communicates its academic role or its reason for existence, which could pave the way for mutual goodwill, strong relationships and effective collaboration between librarians and academics.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative research approach was followed to obtain a deeper understanding of how academic libraries apply communication and relationship management to enhance librarian-academic collaboration (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001: 101-102, 147; Lindlof, 1995: 56). Four academic libraries were interviewed for the research project. The Ferdinand Postma Library, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, is the researcher's local university, while the Leeds Metropolitan University Library, England, the *Campusbibliotheek Arenberg, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* in Belgium, and the Library of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands were visited during a study visit to Europe. All of the above academic libraries were selected because of their willingness to participate in the research project, and they therefore formed part of a convenience sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001: 218-219). The aim of the research was not to generalise the findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001: 102), but to obtain a better understanding (Mason, 2002: 65) of how academic libraries communicate to obtain librarian-academic collaboration. In this regard Lindloff (1995: 57) states that although qualitative interpretations result from an intensive analysis of a single or small sample, the research should be recorded in such a way as to disclose the researcher's insight into the research phenomenon.

Semi-structured interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001: 196; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) containing open-ended questions (Babbie, 2001: 240; Du Plooy, 2002: 143; Sarantakos, 2005: 271) were conducted with the four directors of the participating academic libraries. All of the eight information librarians (who most often collaborate with academics) at the Ferdinand Postma Library and

one at the Leeds Metropolitan University Library were interviewed. Emphasis was placed on understanding the context of communication and relationship management as practised by academic libraries and also the nature of librarian-academic collaboration as experienced by the participating libraries. The interviews therefore aimed to:

- Determine the nature of the libraries' communication strategy.
- Determine whether the interviewed libraries' communication is based on the university and the library's vision, mission and goals, and reflects the reason for its existence.
- Determine how the librarians communicate with academics to foster librarian-academic collaboration.

The data were analysed and categorised to address the research questions and the above-mentioned research aims.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Nature of academic libraries' communication strategy

None of the interviewed libraries had a formal communication strategy to guide communication with stakeholders. As such, no formally planned communication programmes, campaigns or plans aimed at building relationships with specific stakeholders existed at that juncture. All communication was aimed mainly at creating awareness of library services, for example the library's web page, newsletters, distribution of bookmarks, book bags, mouse mats and year planners, and information librarians' visits to their respective schools/departments to promote library services. None of the above-mentioned measures were planned with specific strategic communication goals in mind, nor did they take the communication needs of stakeholders into account. These projects thus served only as an awareness tool, and did not reach non-users of the library.

3.2 Strategy-driven communication

According to the Director of the Ferdinand Postma Library, formal external communication was not planned according to the university and library's vision, mission and strategic goals, but was intuitively strategic, being part of his, and the library staff's job descriptions. The Director of the Library of the University of Amsterdam shared the above view. The Director of the *Campusbibliotheek Arenberg* declared the library's strategic goals to be totally aligned with those of the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* and subsequently all communication from the *Campusbibliotheek Arenberg* was viewed as being strategically driven.

Only two of the information librarians from the Ferdinand Postma Library had studied the university and library's vision, mission and strategic goals and were planning their work and communication accordingly. Another information librarian noted that planning communication according to the university and library's vision, mission and strategic goals would lend more

legitimacy to communication regarding the importance of the library and its accredited information sources. Said one information librarian: "I have worked long enough in the library to know what to communicate to academics. I don't need the university or the library's vision, mission and strategic goals for guidance to do my work." All the other information librarians, both at the Ferdinand Postma Library and the Leeds Metropolitan Library, expressed the opinion that the university and the library's vision, mission and strategic goals could guide their communication and provide the necessary grounds when persuasion regarding the important educational role of the library had to be applied.

3.3 Nature of academic libraries' communication to enhance librarian-academic collaboration

3.3.1 Communication from the library directors

The Director of the Ferdinand Postma Library emphasised the important educational role of an academic library in all his own encounters with university management and other senior stakeholders. He considered communication to be vital for building strong relationships and for the delivery of excellent service, yet felt that "public relations, or marketing as such, ought not to be necessary in an academic environment where the existence and use of a library should be a given".

The Director of the Ferdinand Postma Library further referred to an international trend in which fewer academic staff and students physically were visiting the library, preferring rather to use it electronically. Communication for this reason was very important in that most academic staff, researchers, undergraduate and postgraduate students did not know what services the library rendered. Also, they were not aware of which information databases were available in their field of study, nor did they know about information-literacy training, such knowledge being vital for the production of academic research, the completion of academic qualifications, for balancing the price of databases with the effective use thereof, and for promoting lifelong learning.

The University of Amsterdam being a research university, the Director of the Library reported that he had little difficulty conveying the educational role of his library to university management and to academia. Nonetheless, there were still academics who did not realise the importance of the library because library management tried to make the library 'invisible' by integrating it seamlessly into all university processes. Special services – such as information management and image databases – were thus being offered to university management to communicate the vital role of the academic library.

The Director of the *Campusbibliotheek Arenberg*, too, did not experience many problems with regard to in convincing university management and senior university stakeholders of the educational importance of the library in that academics served on library councils. As such, there was at the time of the interview close cooperation between academics and the Library of the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*.

It is clear from the above that the interviewed directors were of the opinion that they did not really have difficulties in conveying the reason for the libraries' existence and its supporting educational role to senior university stakeholders. Some senior stakeholders in the academic community, however, seemed to be ignorant of the library's educational role and services.

3.3.2 Communication from information librarians

All the interviewed information librarians stated that their main responsibility was to communicate, and build and maintain strong relationships with academics by providing in-depth research assistance to both academics and students. It was their responsibility to bring the library's services, and also their research expertise to the attention of academics. All the interviewed information librarians commented that this was a very difficult task as many academics did not perceive librarians and their services as valuable and they also did not have time to spend on library awareness campaigns. Therefore – according to these interviewees – when information librarians contacted academics they had to make sure that they would be interested in the library's service or product, in other words, information librarians had to justify *why* academics would need such a service or product.

The information librarian from Leeds Metropolitan University emphasized that communication about the academic value of librarian-academic collaboration had to be customised to suit different clients' needs. He also recommended that the focus on the 'how' would have to shift to the 'why' of an academic library to convince all stakeholders of the important educational role of academic libraries. In this way, communication and librarian-academic collaboration would be based on the reason for the library's existence. This, in turn, implied that librarians would have to know the needs of the academic community in order to "fit certain library products or services to a specific academic". Engaging in dialogue would thus be the only way to ascertain academics' needs. Snelson (2006: 491) supports this in stating that the value of the library must be explored from the perspective of different types of stakeholders to determine the value of the library to each type of stakeholder.

At the *Campusbibliotheek Arenberg*, the focus of library service delivery had changed from "Just in time" to "Just for you". In this way, information librarians were building personal relationships with academics because they were aware of academics' specific needs. In these personal relationships, the important supportive role of the library was always emphasised, and academics felt that the library valued them. By engaging in dialogue and building strong personal relationships, both information librarians and academics mutually acknowledged and supported each other's role.

Information librarians at the University of Amsterdam and at the Ferdinand Postma Library strove to make information-literacy training coincide with assignments. The information librarians therefore communicated to academics that the quality of students' assignments would improve if they had to use the library's resources to complete assignments. By

coinciding information-literacy training with assignments, students also clearly realised the importance of the verified information available from library databases. An additional outcome of this approach was that information librarians were involved in the development of assignments because they had to verify the availability of library resources for the completion of assignments. However, some of the information librarians conceded that perhaps they did not emphasise the educational outcomes (improved assignments, improved marks, and ultimately improved pass rates) of librarian-academic collaboration strongly enough because many academics still did not value information-literacy training that coincided with assignments. One information librarian said: "I'm afraid to continuously pester the lecturers about the library's services and databases – I'll just irritate them. I'd rather just get on with my job."

Many of the interviewed information librarians mentioned that although they did send information about library products and services to academics, many academics claimed not knowing about specialised services, and they did not relay information about the library's products and services to their students. This was one of the reasons many students favoured the Internet as information source. An information librarian at the Ferdinand Postma Library said: [If] "the information do[es] not address an immediate need of a lecturer, they just ignore it." It was interesting to note that most of these librarians preferred to communicate with academics via email, and not by means of personal visits or telephone calls.

Some information librarians maintained that it was not a librarian's role to promote, market or communicate about the library's services and products, nor should librarians be expected to have an educational role, since they had not received training in these areas. One of the information librarians was adamant: "[I]t is not my job to promote the library's role and products. They [students and academics] must know it because this is an [*sic*] university!" In their opinion, a specific, trained person responsible for communication and relationship management and also for information-literacy training should be appointed – a view that is in line with literature as discussed in Section 1.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Strategic communication and relationship management

In this study, I aimed to determine the communication practices of four academic libraries with a view to enhancing librarian-academic collaboration, and to compare the findings with the normative communication theory on strategic two-way communication and relationship management in order to be able to recommend strategies for more effective librarian-academic collaboration. It is evident from the discussion that, in order to convey the academic library's educational role effectively to all stakeholders, communication should be based on both the library and the university's vision, mission and strategic goals. All communication and relationship-management efforts to enhance librarian-academic collaboration should

therefore be *strategy driven*. None of the interviewed academic libraries had a formal communication strategy, and, with the exception of the directors, only two of the interviewed information librarians actually used their library's vision, mission and goals to guide their communication and their efforts at collaboration with academics. However, all the interviewees communicated *intuitively* according to their library's vision, mission and goals since their job descriptions required them to do so.

Following from the above, it can firstly be recommended that academic libraries should compile a communication and relationship-management strategy based on their vision, mission and strategic goals. It is very important that the way in which the library assists its parent organisation, the university, to attain its overall vision, mission and goals be strongly emphasised in the said strategy since this is the reason for the library's existence. Such a strategy would serve as a guide for all communication and relationship-management efforts directed at stakeholders, and it would moreover confer legitimacy on such efforts.

If an academic library bases its communication on the reason for its existence, and indicates how its information resources and services – such as information-literacy training – support the overall goals of the university, this could lesson both the university management and the academic community's ignorance regarding the supporting educational and research role of the library. Strategic communication management would thus lead to enhanced librarian-academic collaboration in that librarians would not have to resort to ineffective library advocacy (consisting mainly of one-way communication) since academics would then have a clear understanding of the library's role.

Furthermore, emphasis on the library's important role in education and research would improve the library's corporate image because it would be clear to all stakeholders that a university cannot function or attain its strategic goals without an excellent academic library. This would assist the library to achieve public legitimacy and social trust from all the stakeholders involved. An added outcome would be that students would rather use the library's accredited information resources, or ask a librarian for assistance than blindly use the Internet. Also, students would also be more willing to attend training on how effectively to use the Internet as an information source, since they would then view librarians as experts on extracting accredited Internet information.

4.2 Librarian-academic collaboration

Especially information librarians should understand that engaging in two-way communication with academics is the only way in which to build and maintain strong librarian-academic relationships and obtain effective collaboration. Two-way communication, or dialogue, serves not only to introduce the library's products and services, but, most importantly, serves to gain an *understanding* of academics' needs and constraints as experienced in teaching and research. Librarians can apply many strategies to create opportunities for engagement with the academics whose departments they serve, such as attending departmental meetings,

introducing themselves and library services to newly appointed faculty, and showing an interest in academics' research areas (Cardwell, 2001: 261-262). In this way, the library can deliver a better service, and information librarians can *personalise* services and products for every individual academic. Academics would then feel valued by the library, and, subsequently, they would be more open to librarian-academic collaboration. An understanding of academics' needs will ease the integration of information services into the scientific process, as is indeed happening at the library of the University of Amsterdam.

Regarding relationship management, academic libraries need to move away from only focussing on *communal* relationships with the academic community. If the library's reason for existence is that of driving both communication and relationship cultivation efforts, it would be evident that the library is not wasting academics' time for, for instance, information-literacy training, or for providing inputs for study guides or for assignment development. Instead, the library would be *adding value* to academics and students' educational experience. In this *exchange* relationship, academics thus provide time in exchange for spesialised knowledge and service.

Regarding the above, it is imperative that especially information librarians realise that they not only have to communicate well, but that they also have to provide an excellent service to academics in order to build and maintain strong relationships to ensure effective collaboration. Especially trust and commitment as relationship outcomes are important in this case, in that academics need to *trust* that librarians are so *committed* that they will provide them with the best possible research and service. An important example is that academics need to be up-to-date on recent research development in their own respective fields, and they have to trust their information librarian to provide them with that information. This is in line with Gregory's view (2008: 19–20) that by focusing on activities most valued by stakeholders – namely those grounded in the relationship dimensions of trust, involvement, openness and commitment – libraries are best able to manage their stakeholders' expectations.

The research makes it clear that effective librarian-academic collaboration is a complicated issue characterised by many challenges. Ultimately, the core of the issue is that while librarian-academic collaboration benefits the library, the academics and the university, the students benefit most. Equipping students with lifelong-learning and critical-thinking skills is especially important in a developing context like South Africa. Libraries therefore need *strategically* to manage communication and relationships with all stakeholders, and especially with academics with a view to developing effective librarian-academic collaboration.

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