

# A history of the University of Natal Libraries, 1910 – 2003<sup>1</sup>

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Received 22 February 2012

Accepted 25 May 2012

*This study documented the development of the two libraries of the University of Natal from 1910 to 2003. The historical research method was chosen as the optimal method for the collection and analysis of data, the broad approach to the study being interpretative. Understanding the present and anticipating and managing change depends to some extent on our appreciation and understanding of history. This study, by investigating the historical record of the University of Natal Libraries, is not only a revelation of the past but also assisted in identifying possible future trends in academic librarianship in South Africa, particularly as far as the management of multi-centred libraries is concerned. In addition, the value of the study lies in the consolidation and interpretation of information in numerous unpublished records and scattered, ephemeral sources.*

**Keywords:** Academic libraries – KwaZulu-Natal – History; University of KwaZulu-Natal; Libraries – History

## 1 Introduction

'All institutions need to question their inheritance' declared Dr F.N. Ginwala (2005: 6), first Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, at her inaugural speech. It was in this context, namely the need to question the past and to transform the university libraries to meet the needs of the future, that this study was undertaken. As Flaherty (1990: 99) comments, the claims of the past demand to be reconciled 'with the social forces dictating a different institutional future.'

## 2 Background and statement of the research problem

The province of Natal, renamed KwaZulu-Natal in 1996, is situated on the east coast of South Africa. The University of Natal<sup>4</sup> was unique in South Africa for many years in that it was split between two geographically distant main campuses, in the cities of Pietermaritzburg and Durban. This dual nature provides a unique perspective to the investigation of the development of the University's library services. The first University Librarian, Dr H. Coblans, referred to the 'administrative complexity' involved in the management of a multi-campus library system (Coblans 1949: 35). Nearly 50 years later a team tasked with investigating the University of Natal's libraries concluded that the two libraries had developed 'too independently ... As a result there is very little, if any, sharing of ideas and strategies' (University of Natal, Library Task Team 1998: 31).

The central research problem of the study was to document the development of the libraries of the University of Natal from their colonial roots, through years of political turmoil, to the merger with the University of Durban-Westville and, in so doing, to discover whether this authoritative statement from a highly placed University Task Team is true. Through an examination of the historical records the study attempted to understand how and why the situation described above came about. An attempt was also made to discover whether the personalities of the different University Librarians played a significant role in the development of the two libraries. These two issues constitute sub-problems which provided foci for the development of the study and assisted with the selection and interpretation of the historical records.

To address the central research problem and the two sub-problems, four research questions were posed:

- What administrative problems were encountered and how did the dual-centred nature of the University affect their development?
- What level of financial support did the University provide to the libraries and was this sufficient?

1. This article was based on the results of a PhD dissertation submitted to the Information Studies Programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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4. The Natal University College achieved full University status in 1947 to become the University of Natal.

- What impact did the introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) have on the development of the libraries? and lastly;
- What services were offered to users of the libraries and how did these differ between the two centres?

The broad approach to the study was interpretative. Contrary to the positivist research paradigm which argues that the world operates 'by laws of cause and effect' that are observable and measurable (Henning 2004: 17), the interpretivist accepts that 'all theory is revisable' (Henning 2004: 19). Events are therefore understood 'through mental processes of interpretation which are influenced by and interact with social contexts' (Henning 2004: 20).

The interpretivist research paradigm emphasises 'small-scale research' (Clough & Nutbrown 2002: 16). Texts are analysed 'to look for the way in which people make meaning ... and *what* meaning they make' (Henning 2004: 20). The researcher of history, by critically examining historical sources, represents the past through interpretation, looking for meaning in records and interpreting this meaning as it may be understood in relation to the 'broader contemporary context' (Shep 2005: 163).

### 3 Methodology

Given the nature of the research problem, the most suitable methodology was deemed to be the historical research method. Historical research may be defined as the gathering of significant information about an event or series of events and the interpretation of the data collected. The social role of history, which lays stress on the analysis of information and the elucidation of 'causes and consequences' (Shep 2005: 162) is emphasized. Historical research is distinguished from chronology in that while chronology is confined to the setting down of events in the order of their occurrence, historical research is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of historical events in context. It should also be borne in mind that historical records 'only allow, at best, a partial picture of the reality of past events' (Shiflett 1984: 390).

Information on the University libraries was gathered from primary sources, such as letters, library committee minutes, memoranda, newsletters, photographs and reports as well as secondary sources. Oral testimonies assisted in verifying information pertaining to the written record, shedding light on certain events and providing added insight.

### 4 Scope of the study

The study was limited to the investigation of the historical record of the libraries of the University of Natal. Part of its value lies in the consolidation and interpretation of scattered, ephemeral material and unpublished information. Primary material was obtainable in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Archives, in library files and in the manuscript collections of the Campbell Collections. Oral testimonies were also used to assist in the verification of the written record. Comparisons with other university libraries in South Africa have been made where relevant but an in-depth historical analysis of university libraries on a national scale lay beyond the scope of this study.

### 5 Limitations of the study

The study was limited to an investigation of the historical record of the University of Natal Libraries. Comparisons with other South African university libraries were made where relevant. As noted above, an historical analysis of university libraries on a national scale, along the lines of Hamlin's (1981) study, lay beyond the scope of this study.

Another important limitation is that which Wiegand (2000: 21) considers to be the greatest shortcoming of American library history *in toto*, namely the lack of focus 'on the people who used (or did not use) the institution ...'. Undoubtedly an investigation from this viewpoint would enrich the historical investigation of university libraries.

### 6 Overview of the literature

Institutions of higher education existed in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the oldest being in North Africa. In contrast, there are few higher institutions of any great age in sub-Saharan Africa. Rosenberg (2001: 11) argues that until the Europeans arrived in Africa, 'the continent, except for the Islamic North and Christian Ethiopia, remained mostly preliterate.' In addition, as Dick (2004) points out, 'Little has been done to collate solid historical library research already undertaken by Africans themselves ...'; thus making it difficult to trace literature on the history of sub-Saharan African libraries.

In South Africa the first university established was the University of the Cape of Good Hope, founded in 1873 but, as an examining body, it had no need of a library. The oldest South African university library is therefore that of the University of Cape Town (UCT) with roots traceable back to the founding of the South African College in 1829. Fittingly, the first contribution to South African university library history was an article written by R.F.M. Immelmann, University Librarian at UCT from 1940 to 1971 who noted that 'Although the history of public libraries in South Africa has been written up to some extent; the history of scholarly libraries has received very little attention' (Immelmann 1955: 25). He

added that his article was intended as a 'first contribution to the history of such libraries as a preliminary step to a more exhaustive account' (Immelmann 1955: 25).

Despite Immelmann's (1955: 25) optimism, an 'exhaustive account' has not yet been written. Aucamp's (1978) paper delivered at the South African Library Association Conference provided a useful overview of South African university libraries. Articles covering the history of various university libraries were published occasionally in *Mousaion*, *South African libraries*, and its successor, the *South African Journal for Librarianship and Information Science and Innovation*. However, the approach taken in these articles, with some notable exceptions, was descriptive rather than critical. A search of the *Union catalogue of theses and dissertations* yielded only three histories of academic libraries (Pim 1990; Puzi 1999; Shah 1995).

Histories of South African universities were also examined but again, the information on their respective libraries was confined to chronology and statistics. Thus the history of South African university libraries is awaiting 'further investigation before an all-round picture can be drawn' (Immelmann 1956: v). This study of the University of Natal libraries is, in small part, an addition to that literature.

## 7 The founding of the Natal University College library

The founding of the Natal University College (NUC) was fraught with difficulties and political jealousies. A 1904 Natal Government Education Commission advocated the establishment of a University College at Pietermaritzburg with provision for the extension of the College to Durban, but no action was taken until a group of Durban businessmen forged ahead and established the Durban Technical Institute (later renamed the Natal Technical College) in 1907. In 1909, following another government Education Commission, the Natal University College Act 18 of 1909 was hurriedly promulgated and the NUC was founded in Pietermaritzburg (Metrovitch 1929: 13). The roots of the dual-centred University lie in the establishment of these two institutions.

Classes began in Pietermaritzburg in April 1910 in temporary premises until the fledgling College moved to a new building in Scottsville. The tiny contemporary collection of books scarcely merited being called a library. In 1923 University classes were extended to Durban, use being made of the Natal Technical College premises (and library) until the completion of the Howard College building in 1931.

The first library was really established when the widow of Pietermaritzburg businessman, Mr Peter Davis, donated his library and £480 towards the salary of a librarian to the NUC in 1921. The Durban library was established ten years later. Contact between the two fledgling libraries was minimal until the appointment in 1946 of the first University Librarian, newly qualified Dr H. Coblans, who was tasked with forming a single, unitary library system (Coblans 1951:1). The catalyst for the unification of the two libraries appears to have been an offer made by Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1938 for a Library Fellowship. The College had accepted the offer with alacrity although Coblans took up the fellowship only in 1948. Naively it was hoped that the appointment of a University Librarian would immediately result in 'developments in all branches of the Natal University College library' (Natal University College, Pietermaritzburg Library Committee 1941).

Coblans (1949: 35) detailed the difficulties he faced in unifying the libraries, noting that,

The Library difficulties that arise are many and often very frustrating. They ... represent in microcosm what is met in trying to integrate the library resources of a region: such matters as local union catalogues, centralized cataloguing and co-operative sharing of subject fields.

Despite these complexities, a clumsy system of governance<sup>5</sup> and ongoing funding and staff shortages, Coblans achieved some success. During his seven year tenure he brought order to the Library's organization, increased the holdings and, importantly, introduced the concept of in-depth subject oriented user education. In this he was years ahead of his time.

Mr J.W. Perry, who succeeded Coblans in 1954, built upon these foundations. Under Perry's energetic leadership the University Library prospered despite continued financial hardships and ongoing shortages of qualified staff. The libraries were at this time managed by a trio of well-educated, professionally qualified and experienced men.<sup>6</sup> Perry, as he was to do years later at the University of the Witwatersrand (Musiker & Musiker 1998: 60), increased the holdings considerably, acquiring specialised materials so that the Library's collections began to resemble collections befitting a scholarly institution.

Trouble began with the appointment of Mr S.I. Malan, the first (and only) Director of Libraries at the University of Natal. His autocratic style of management (Pugsley 2008) led to repeated clashes with Pietermaritzburg Librarian, Mr R. Brown, and with the Pietermaritzburg Library Committee. It seems likely that these personality differences were the root cause of the ongoing administrative problems experienced during Malan's term of office. Malan's resignation in June

5. A joint library committee was subordinate to two local library committees.

6. Messrs H.L. Maple and L. Milburn, Deputy Librarians in Pietermaritzburg and Durban respectively.

1967 precipitated the end of the unitary library system at the University. From 1972 onwards the two Librarians became responsible to the Vice-Principals of their respective centres, the Joint Library Committee becoming defunct in 1971, and the Chairs of the local library committees reported directly to Senate. In 1973 the separation of the academic activities of the two centres set the seal upon the division of the library services.

A close working relationship was revived only in the mid-1990s when a collaborative journal purchasing project aimed at rationalising subscriptions was instituted. The relationship was reinforced in 1998 when, as a result of changes in the University Executive Management Portfolios, the two University Librarians were required to report to the same Deputy Vice-Chancellor. Independent assessor Hayes (1998: 2) noted that this was a 'positive step for developing a single direction for both libraries ...'

The historical record thus highlights the many difficulties involved in the administration of a dual-centred library system. In order to be sustainable, institutional support and commitment is required, not only with respect to adequate funding and sufficient staff, but also as far as institutional goals and strategies are concerned.

## 8 Financial support

'The Natal University College began its history ... under the most stringent financial limitations' lamented Brookes (1966: 118). Consequently, the Library, too, was plagued by severe financial constraints:

In its earlier years the Natal University College suffered cruelly from lack of funds to buy books – with results which can still be felt [in 1965] – and even in later years higher salaries versus more books have formed a kind of pull-devil-pull-baker struggle (Brookes 1966: 120).

Coblans was fiercely critical of the way in which both the University and the Ministry of Education funded the Library. He noted in his submission to the Holloway Commission of 1951 that library expenditure as a percentage of total University expenditure fell well below the minimum 3.5% recommended by British and American authorities. On the other hand, the Commissioners (1951: 93) did not consider that the demands of a multi-centred Library warranted a 'higher State grant.' To compound matters, the University regularly appropriated the portion of the State subsidy earmarked for library needs. Perry pointed this out in his 1959 annual report, noting that in 1958 and again in 1959 the University had appropriated £2 and £6 per student respectively, to repay itself for the financial burden that it had borne 'to a disproportionate extent' in previous years (University of Natal Library 1959: 1).

Like his predecessors, Malan deplored the inadequate budget. Comparing expenditure on library materials per student between seven South African university libraries in 1962, he argued that in real terms the two University of Natal Libraries received less than all other South African university libraries because Natal's expenditure was artificially inflated due to the necessity of purchasing duplicate materials. In the same year Kennedy (1962: 83) recommended that the University increase the annual book vote and provide for an extra *ad hoc* grant to improve deficiencies in stock. His recommendations went unheeded by the University authorities.

During the 1970s the University of Natal, along with most other South African university libraries, felt the twin effects of an unfavourable foreign exchange rate and inflation. Attempts to reduce duplication of titles between the two centres as well as between university libraries in the region met with limited success. Schauder noted that, where journal titles were duplicated 'journals were needed locally' (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg Library Committee 1976: 2) and could not be cancelled.

South Africa's worsening economic situation resulted in government subsidies to the universities being drastically cut in 1984 (*The role in society of the University of Natal, 1989 onwards* 1989: 1). Sanctions, the declining value of the rand and price increases of academic publications contributed to the sluggish growth of university libraries in South Africa with one exception – the 'bulging budgets' (Suttie 2006: 285) of the University of South Africa (UNISA) made it the fastest growing university library on the African continent (Du Preez 1990: 352). However, by the late 1980s, even UNISA's 'privileged position could not cushion the blow' (Suttie 2006: 304). Due to the government's separate education policies for different racial groups, the number of universities in South Africa had swollen to 22 by the end of the 1980s, too many for the economy to support. In order to balance the budgets, both the Pietermaritzburg and Durban libraries were forced into large-scale cancellations of journal subscriptions and had to follow extremely conservative budgeting policies.

The 1990s saw little improvement at the University of Natal. An executive investigation into library funding revealed that, although the libraries had been 'meticulous in avoiding over-expenditure' (Walker 2003: 4), the University's allocation for library materials had 'steadily deteriorated' (Walker 2003: 2). An enforced large-scale cancellation of journal subscriptions was narrowly avoided by the provision of a special *ad hoc* grant by the Natal University Development Foundation in 2002 (Kaniki 2002: 1).

A sub-theme which runs through the study is the struggle to maintain journal subscriptions in the face of ever-rising costs. Perry rightly considered journal subscriptions to be an essential stimulus to research and scholarship (University of

Natal Libraries 1960: 1) but as the proportion of expenditure on subscriptions rose, so attempts were made to contain it by sporadic cancellation exercises. The battle against rising subscription costs was not, of course, confined to the University or even to South Africa only. Data provided by the Association of Research Libraries (2000) show that, from 1986 to 2000, library expenditure on journal subscriptions alone increased by an alarming 192%. The real issue, contends Merrett (2003: 210) is the greed of commercial publishers who have exploited the 'nature of the fissures and faults in academic life' to their advantage, taking 'donated knowledge' from academics and selling it back to university libraries at enormous profit to themselves. The answer, he states, lies in universities themselves claiming 'rights to the knowledge they produce' and finding ways to 'disseminate it in an economical way ...' (Merrett 2003: 213). Until this is done, inflationary journal subscription prices will continue to dog the efforts of university libraries to provide journals to support the academic endeavour.

Thus the problem of insufficient funding was also related to a bigger problem, namely, that of the economics of information provision, as argued by Merrett (2003) and others.

## 9 Information and communications technology

The discussion centering on the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on the University Libraries has three aspects, namely, the automation of collection management, the introduction of alternatives to print-based information retrieval and thirdly, the development of telecommunications.

The automation of collection management was begun in 1981 in Pietermaritzburg and 1984 in Durban and was almost complete by the early 1990s. Brown (1968: 11) predicted in 1968 that computers would 'probably cause a complete reassessment of the philosophy of librarianship.' He was right, not only in the sense that the automation of processes such as the acquisition and cataloguing of new materials and the procedures for lending library materials removed much of the drudgery attached to these tasks, but also in the sense that the time of professional librarians was freed up to serve users.

However, a question which has not been answered satisfactorily is the issue of the choice of different library systems by the two libraries, despite the insistence by the University's Academic Planning and Policy Committee (University of Natal 1975:1) that there should be a joint approach.<sup>7</sup> Why did the University authorities allow this to happen? It is apparent that the decision in Durban, unlike in Pietermaritzburg, was not taken by library management alone. Decision-makers included the Durban City Council (which donated funds) and the Durban centre's Computer Services Division. It seems that other interests, aside from library interests, were served by this decision. Barely five years later, in 1989, Durban's DOBIS/LIBIS system had to be abandoned due to excessive costs and lack of local expertise. The Urica Integrated Library system, which had been installed in Pietermaritzburg in 1982, was installed in Durban as well.

In 1979 an alternative to print-based information retrieval, the DIALOG database (located in the United States of America) was linked to the Science and Engineering branch library in Durban, foreshadowing enormous changes in the way researchers – scholars and academic staff – sought information. At first the service enjoyed limited support due to cryptic search protocols (Straw 2001: 5) which required the intervention of a librarian and high costs but, within a decade, the new Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) technology required librarians to re-think their services. CD-ROMs were an ideal medium for the storage of very large indexing and abstracting databases and their convenience of use, requiring only a microcomputer and an optical disc reader, meant that they rapidly became popular with library users. As user demand increased, the libraries replaced printed abstracting and indexing publications with CD-ROMs. The new medium required different interventions from subject librarians. Not only were they required to be familiar with the databases but they also needed to have knowledge of operating systems and 'general computer troubleshooting' (Straw 2001: 7).

The development of telecommunications, too, gradually changed the way in library services were delivered. The linking of both campuses to SABINET, the national bibliographic database, allowed library users in the two centres to interrogate both online catalogues. At last Coblans' vision of a union catalogue for the University of Natal libraries was realised although perhaps not in the same way as he had envisioned it. Lamentably, for those who required access to both catalogues, one problem was never solved until the University merged with the University of Durban-Westville (and the catalogues had, perforce, to be merged) – the necessity of juggling between two separate computer catalogues, one on each campus.

The University of Natal acquired Internet access at about the same time that the 'digital revolution' (Breeding 2006: 2) in libraries began – in the mid-1990s. Initially use of the new service was limited to staff and postgraduate students but, once it was opened to all, usage increased exponentially as users found that a vast quantity of information was but a click

7. The Urica Integrated Library System, developed in South Africa, was chosen for Pietermaritzburg while the DOBIS/LIBIS system, developed at the University of Leuven, Belgium, was chosen for Durban.

away. Both libraries were cautious in their approach to the new medium of information delivery. Insufficient bandwidth and unreliable response times, especially in Pietermaritzburg, meant that CD-ROM databases remained the preferred medium. The introduction of a 'premium' telecommunications service improved internet access considerably and resulted in an increase in the usage of electronic journals which, prior to this, had been seldom used.

By the end of 2003 users of the University libraries had begun to rely on the growing number of electronic resources. Although in no way replacing traditional library collections, electronic resources had, for many, enhanced their access to information.

## 10 User services

It is interesting to chart the changing nature of the context in which the University libraries served their users. The first librarian, Captain D.A. Henry, ran the library on quasi-military lines (Brown 1973). Strong emphasis was placed upon rules and regulations while guidance in the use of books was provided by academic staff only.

Coblans was well ahead of his time in his belief that the Library had a 'formal teaching function' which should be adapted to the level of the student, from a general orientation for first year students to a 'narrower subject approach' (Coblans 1949: 40) for post-graduates. Unfortunately his attempts to introduce a series of weekly lectures for M.Sc. and fourth year Engineering students were strongly resisted by lecturers; the same problem was articulated by the Acting University Librarian in Pietermaritzburg, Ms C. Vietzen, in 1973 (University of Natal Library, Pietermaritzburg, *Librarian's 12<sup>th</sup> annual report 1973*: 5).

Perry, successor to Coblans, was well aware that the Library staff was not doing enough to bring users into contact with the Library's resources but, he noted, the amount of time spent on processing books left little time for other activities (University of Natal Library, *Annual report 1958*: 2). However, he ensured that the practice of lecturing to Engineering students on information sources was resumed in 1957 and in 1958 employed a Bachelor of Science graduate to handle queries in the science and technical fields. During Perry's term of office a user education programme for medical students was introduced as well.

During the 1960s, in keeping with international trends (Hamlin 1981: 145), more attention was paid to library orientation and user instruction although the cataloguing of materials remained a primary task for the qualified library staff. In 1966 Malan was certainly considering automation in order to free staff time for the task of assisting library users (University of Natal Library, *Annual report 1966*: 10). In 1969 Durban Librarian Scholtz and Deputy Librarian Pugsley suggested in a report that there might be a connection between student failures and ignorance of library resources (Scholtz & Pugsley 1969: 1). However, it was newcomer Schauder's<sup>8</sup> radical re-organisation of staff in Pietermaritzburg which changed the focus from routine housekeeping duties to user services.

At first Pietermaritzburg subject librarians were expected to catalogue and classify library materials as well as provide subject specialist services. However, the introduction of automated cataloguing relieved them of many manual routines and allowed them to focus in particular on the development of user education programmes. Gentil (1999: 31-32) records that at the Life Sciences Library in Pietermaritzburg, the persistence of the subject librarians resulted in the incorporation of library instruction into the curriculum.

In Durban user services developed differently with the appointment in 1976 of a Library Instruction Officer to provide 'regular and intensive library instruction' (Calvert 1976: 8) to all students, regardless of their course of study. In 1987 a subject librarian service, organised differently from the service in Pietermaritzburg, was introduced. In keeping with general trends in South African university libraries, a separate centralised technical processing section was retained although, in retrospect, the decision did not suit the University's perpetual cash-strapped situation. The arrangement relieved the subject librarians of routine processing duties, but the Durban Library, unlike the Pietermaritzburg Library, was never able to increase its complement of subject librarians.

In 1983 the lifting of government restrictions on university admissions resulted in a steady increase in the number of black African students enrolling at the University. Under the government system of apartheid, state funding of black African education had been low, resulting in poor quality secondary schooling, lacking both laboratory and library facilities (Suttie 1990: 99). These students were termed 'disadvantaged' as they entered university lacking the skills required for autonomous study. Disadvantaged students required special attention when it came to learning how to use a library and innovative ways of assisting such students had to be developed. The University of Natal was not unique in this respect. Most of the 'historically white'<sup>9</sup> universities were accepting students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who

8. Mr D. Schauder was appointed University Librarian in Pietermaritzburg in 1974.

9. One of the ways in which South African academic institutions were divided was by race. Those institutions intended to serve the white population were, on the whole, better resourced (Darch, Rapp & Underwood 1999: 26).

had never set foot in a library before. Suttie (1990: 101) strongly criticised the 'technocratic elitism in academic libraries' which tended to discourage the educationally disadvantaged student. In the same vein Bell (1989: 22) noted that:

The Apartheid system has left both black and white culturally void with respect to each other and administrators, lecturers and librarians have been thrown into the deep end as regards understanding and knowing the recipients of their teaching efforts ...

Further changes in the delivery of user services were precipitated by the introduction of Internet access in the mid-1990s and the proliferation of electronic information resources. Websites were designed to integrate service delivery and new training interventions were introduced. In Pietermaritzburg 'modularised training sessions' (University of Natal Library, Pietermaritzburg, *Librarian's 40<sup>th</sup> annual report 2002/2003*: 11) on specific topics such as an introduction to journal literature were introduced while in Durban the *UND Libraries newsletter* ran a series of articles intended to make searching of electronic databases easier for students and academic staff.

Thus librarians in the two centres rose to the challenges posed both by new ways of accessing information and a different student population. Gone were the days of preoccupation with 'library mechanics' (Kennedy 1970: 9). As Hay (1990: 16) commented, subject specialisation in libraries has 'definite advantages in coping with change.'

## 11 Conclusions and implications of the study

This section addresses the conclusions and implications of the study for policy and practice and research.

### 11.1 Conclusions

As noted above, the central research problem of this study was to document the development of the libraries of the University of Natal in order to arrive at an understanding of how the libraries developed. A further intention was to discover whether the statement made by a highly placed University Task Team, namely that 'the two libraries had been allowed to develop too independently ...' (University of Natal, Library Task Team 1998: 31) was true or at least partially true. This statement formed one of the sub-problems which the study attempted to address. The second sub-problem was related to whether the personalities of individual University Librarians played a significant role in the development of the libraries.

As shown, the fledgling libraries were originally run as completely separate entities until the appointment of Coblans as University Librarian in 1946. Pietermaritzburg, the older of the two libraries, was better stocked and better staffed. In contrast the Durban library was dispersed across three different venues. Not only was its structure more complicated than that of the Pietermaritzburg Library, but resources were also more thinly spread. The unitary library service flourished for 22 years, during the tenures of Coblans and Perry, despite severe financial restrictions. A change was wrought with the appointments of Malan and Brown as Library Director and University Librarian, Pietermaritzburg, respectively. It is apparent that the administrative difficulties experienced during these years were due in great part to the differing personalities and management styles of each, eventually resulting in a division of the library services.

The separation of academic activities between Durban and Pietermaritzburg in 1973 consolidated the division of the library services. Each centre was functionally separate, with a Vice-Principal in charge of each. The two libraries followed the lead of the parent institution and developed independently along separate lines. It was only when the University Executive was restructured in 1997 (forced by economic necessity) that a concerted effort was made to unite the two libraries again, although this time as a federal rather than a unitary system, each operating independently of the other but with a single reporting line and similar strategic directions.

It may therefore be concluded that the Library Task Team's criticism as quoted above is true and furthermore was a reflection on the University itself. Pertinent here is Hattersley's comment on 'the acrimonious jealousy' that had long 'embittered relations between the two towns,' and the unspoken fear in Pietermaritzburg that the Durban centre, situated in a bustling seaport, would make such rapid progress that it could eventually claim to be the seat of the undivided university (Hattersley 1960: 36). The fear was not unfounded. The Durban centre of the University grew very rapidly and, within the space of 30 years, there were more than twice the number of students in Durban as there were in Pietermaritzburg.

The two University of Natal libraries also held quite different positions in the wider South African academic library milieu. The Pietermaritzburg Library was comparable in size to libraries such as Rhodes University in Grahamstown whereas in Durban the scale of operations indicated that there was a more natural affinity towards the other big South African universities such as the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand (Barraclough 2003: 3).

The second issue which this study set out to investigate was whether the personalities of individual University Librarians had a significant influence on the development of the libraries. The historical records show that this was the case, particularly in the earlier years during the existence of the unitary library system. Coblans pioneered the blueprint for the unitary library system, struggling against what may, at times, have seemed impossible odds. Under Perry's

enthusiastic leadership all aspects of the library service were expanded, despite many difficulties, but sadly the problems of Malan's tenure overshadowed his achievements. He was an efficient administrator under whose direction the library services were considerably expanded and improved but despite this his management style undoubtedly contributed to the demise of the unitary system Coblans and Perry had worked so hard to build up.

Following the demise of the unitary library system, the influence of individual personalities on the library services became less marked, the focus tending to shift more towards issues, trends and events. The interaction between senior library management in the two centres was less regular than it might have been following the disbandment of the unitary library system. With the benefit of hindsight both libraries would have gained from a greater measure of co-operation as, for example, when the system of subject specialist librarians was introduced or when the choice of a computerised library system was made. This lack of interaction was less a function of different personalities than a manifestation of the way in which the University itself functioned during these years.

### 11.2 Implications for policy and practice

The research problem which was central to this study focused on the development of the University of Natal Libraries with particular emphasis on their dual-centred nature. It was found that the criticism that they had been allowed to develop too independently was true and that the lack of evidence of an holistic approach to library services was a reflection on the University itself. A university library does not exist in a vacuum; it is an integral part of the institution which it serves. It has been noted above that the Carnegie Library Fellowship provided the impetus for the formation of a unitary library system and that, for over 22 years, the system worked. While personalities undoubtedly played a part, it would be unfair to blame the collapse of the unitary system upon Malan alone. The deferment of the decision by the University's Joint Library Committee to fill the post of Director of Libraries resulted in the tacit acceptance of a library service operating separately in the two centres. Irwin (1966: 20) notes that if 'history itself teaches us anything, it is that life is a constant succession of turning points ...' The Joint Library Committee's indecision was one of those turning points. Would the unitary library system, if it had been allowed to continue, have survived the separation of the academic activities of the two centres in 1973? We will never know.

Despite the fact that this is an history of a university library rooted in a 'first world' culture (Darch & Underwood 1999: 285) there are lessons to be learnt which could be applied to other institutions, provided one bears in mind Irwin's injunction that 'such lessons as history can teach are inconclusive, uncertain and double-faced ...' (Irwin 1966: 14). It should be remembered that university library policy is always rooted in the policy of the university itself. Thus a library service in any university is shaped to a large extent by the parent institution. The new University of KwaZulu-Natal, in company with other merged institutions in South Africa,<sup>10</sup> is a multi-centred university and thus a library service has to be delivered on several campuses. The University itself has to be committed to idea of a unitary library system with multiple service delivery points.

Technological advancements and the fact that libraries are increasingly becoming part of an interconnected network (Gorman 2000: 3) simplify service delivery in a multi-centred library environment. The difficulties Coblans wrestled with become things of the past. A networked integrated library system allows for a single bibliographic database which can be updated online in real time while the sharing of subscriptions to electronic journals and databases should mean that the obtaining of journal articles by library users is seamless. Sufficient funds are, however, required to maintain the system at optimum functionality. The repositioning of the two University of Natal libraries under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor responsible for research benefitted the libraries financially, ensuring that the University's library service was aligned with one of the University's major strategic thrusts.

The integration of different libraries, each with its own idiosyncrasies and its own ethos is complex and potentially divisive. However, knowledge of the problems and pitfalls encountered in the creation and maintenance of a unitary library system, gained through a study of the historical record, can be used to advantage in developing future strategic directions.

### 11.3 Implications for further research

Immelman's (1956: v) view that the history of South African university libraries 'awaits further investigation ...' is supported by Suttie (2006: 284) who makes a strong case for researching libraries 'from the vantage point of social and cultural history.' In-depth, detailed historical analyses are required. Institutional histories are of little help as they provide at best sketchy details on the development of their libraries. This disappointing fact was also noted by Hamlin (1981: x)

10. Other examples are the University of Limpopo (two campuses), formed from the merger of the University of the North at Turfloop and the Medical University of South Africa (Medunsa) near Pretoria; and North West University (four campuses), formed from the merger of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of the North-West.



who expressed astonishment that 'so many otherwise reputable historians can write extensive histories of their alma maters with hardly a reference to the library except possibly that a building was built ...'

Topics covered by the study suggest numerous areas for future research into university libraries in South Africa. Shiflett (1984: 402) argues that 'Library history is a rubric that covers a myriad of topics associated with libraries and other information systems.' One topic which immediately suggests itself is an investigation of the history of the library at the former University of Durban-Westville, the University of Natal's merger partner. Such a study would provide insight into the type of library service offered by one of South Africa's so-called former 'historically disadvantaged' institutions and provide a useful comparison to the history of the University of Natal Libraries. There is also the consideration that, if research is undertaken into the histories of more South African university libraries, a larger project along the lines of Hamlin's (1981) history of university libraries in the United States would be feasible.

Biographical studies of leading figures in South African university libraries, similar to those conducted by Dick (2001; 2002) on Coetzee and De Vleeschauwer respectively, would provide insights, not only into library history but also into South African social, cultural and intellectual history. Other areas of research which suggest themselves are studies on staff development in university libraries, the architecture of library collections and how these have developed over the years and the development of user-orientated subject-specialist services. Lastly, as mentioned above, an historical investigation into university libraries as seen from the users' point of view would be of help in identifying new ways to meet future challenges.

This study endeavoured to document the history and development of the University of Natal libraries and has charted the trends and meaning of specific events in the history of two libraries in one institution. It remains for similar studies to be conducted on other libraries so that a meaningful body of knowledge can be built up on the historical development of university libraries in South Africa.

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