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Theses and Dissertations at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine: A liaison librarian's input.

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Introduction

Today, the shifts in the higher education environment mean academic libraries have to repurpose their services. Changes in accreditation and increased accountability with the use of “metric-driven allocations” (Hiller 2012: 41.) necessitate demonstrating visible value to parent institutions. Still, despite the many challenges of the impacts due to the shifts in higher education, the basic and central role of academic libraries remains constant: to support the teaching, learning and research objectives of host institutions. To this end, many academic libraries utilize liaison librarian programs, one type of an academic library service model to forge connections with faculty, students and researchers, thereby connecting the work of the library to the mission of the university.

On campus, Faculty members are the leaders in research but graduate students also make significant contributions to research output via theses and dissertations (TDs). A wide dissemination of new knowledge is a clear must and one of the several methods available for increasing awareness of and distribution of TDs is the creation of a digital repository containing electronic versions of theses and dissertations (ETDs), together with bibliographic descriptions in the library catalog. ETDs projects on campus thus highlight another area of collaboration and connection between the library and the university community.

This paper, in the context of academic library services and research output, examines a unique service, namely that of thesis and dissertation checking, provided by liaison librarians at the Alma Jordan Library (AJL), the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine (STA) Campus.

Background

The first campus of the UWI, University College was established in 1948 at Mona, Jamaica. A regional university, subsequent campuses were later established at St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago (1960) and Cave Hill, Barbados (1962). Today, the UWI comprises four (4) main campuses: St. Augustine, Cavehill, Mona, and the Open (Virtual) Campus with an enrolment of over 40,000 students.

At the STA campus, there are seven (7) faculties: Engineering; Food & Agriculture; Humanities & Education; Law; Medical Sciences; Science & Technology; and Social Sciences. From 12, 604 students in 2004/2005, enrolment figures at the STA Campus now stand at over 19,000 in 2013/2014 (The UWI STA Campus student statistics, 2013-2014) including over 5,000 enrolled postgraduate students.

The AJL (hereafter referred to as the Library) provides services to a student body, of which over 75% are undergraduates, and contributes to the teaching and research activities of over 900 teaching staff. The Library employs a liaison model (five liaison librarians overseen by a Head of User Services) to facilitate the main delivery of teaching and research support.

Theses and Dissertations at the UWI STA

At the STA campus TDS are currently submitted via a CD –Rom (either Word or PDF format) or DVD along with three (3) print copies, one of which is deposited in the Library. They are housed within the Library's West Indiana and Special Collections Division on a closed access basis and can only be used within that section. Records for all TDs are included in the library's online catalogue. The repository *UWI Space* is a Library led initiative (<http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/>) which contains a growing collection of full-text TDS from the STA and Mona campuses available through IP authentication to staff and students at all the UWI campuses.

At this time, many universities are increasingly requiring or allowing electronic submission of TDs via an ETD system. The UWI STA is now heading in this direction: in October 2013, a proposal with significant Library input to implement ETDs at the STA campus was accepted by the Board for Graduate Studies.

Among the many recommendations included is for the Library provide technical infrastructure for the storage and access of ETDs via the UWISpace. For purposes of quality control, it is also recommended that the Office for Graduate Studies and Research (OGSR) in conjunction with the Library be responsible for depositing the final version of the thesis to the Repository. There are however some major items for resolution such as whether the submission of ETDs will be mandatory or optional; workflows; the mechanisms for alerting students to the impending system; necessary revisions to the deposit agreement to include an embargo option and to the Thesis Guide.

Attempting to implement ETDs on a campus wide basis is a giant step as Project staff at Glasgow University (Greig, 2005) discovered but the UWI STA is committed to providing visibility and improving accessibility to the work of Caribbean scholars both within and outside the region.

Library Scrutiny of Theses and Dissertations

At the UWI STA, the Library is directly involved in the thesis submission process. Mandated by the UWI's Academic Committee since the late 1980s, all approved theses must undergo Library scrutiny to ensure student compliance with the Thesis Guide regarding format, arrangement, abstract, references or bibliography (UWI Thesis Guide, 1998: 16). One crucial aspect of thesis checks is the examination of the utilized citation style. The Thesis Guide recommends various style manuals (latest editions) according to Faculty. For most Faculties, more than one style is recommended: e.g. for the Faculty of Humanities & Education, three different styles are recommended: APA; Chicago and MLA.

Librarian involvement in the thesis submission process dates back to the late 1970s (Clarke, 2000) when librarians at the STA campus routinely checking bibliographies in theses also uncovered errors in title pages, abstracts, and the compilation of content pages. Incorporating inputs from the Universities of London and Edinburgh, the Library later collaborated with the Admissions Office at the STA campus in the production of an official thesis guide in 1985.

Currently, thesis checks are responsibility of the liaison librarians with the Head of User Services enacting the role of Thesis Coordinator.

Process

Thesis checking is an activity performed at all the UWI campuses each with their own separate processes. This paper is only concerned with thesis checking at the STA campus.

TDs are streamed for Library approval checks according to Pre or Post Examination stages and via the OGSR. The process to be completed in 30 days involves the Library certifying a thesis as acceptable once it complies with the requirements of the Thesis Guide and recommended style manuals. A form to this effect is sent to the Registrar's Office (UWI Thesis Guide, 1998: 16).

Approval is based with reference to : the UWI's Thesis Guide, the relevant style manual and a Library checklist that includes the following criteria: title page; paper; margins; font; pagination; line spacing; justification; collation; abstract length and style; keywords; tables; figures; and table of contents. Recommended corrections and revisions are noted via the check list, one copy of which is sent as feedback to the student and another to the Thesis Coordinator who sends an official thesis acceptance/non acceptance form to the OGSR.

Practices at other Universities

Online searches and interactions with colleagues abroad have revealed that at no other university do liaison librarians perform individual thesis checks at either the pre or the post examination stages. The UWI STA thus appears to be unique in this respect.

For instance: at the University of British Columbia, The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies reviews the thesis's format during its preparation; at California Lutheran University, the final corrected copy of the thesis is submitted to a technical reader (a paid service) on library staff; at both California State and San Francisco Universities, the University Thesis Dissertation Reader verifies theses comply with university regulations, format uniformity and style consistency; at The University of Florida, the Graduate School Editorial Office offers guidance on format and reference systems etc. and also provides referrals to editors and formatters for hire; at Dalhousie University, Graduate Studies undertake thesis format checks prior to thesis defense; at Illinois State University, TDs are submitted to the Graduate School for format check; at Binghamton University, the Degree Completion Assistant at the Graduate School reviews all theses and dissertations to ensure that formatting requirements are met. At the University of Otago, it is the supervisor who advises on whether the elements within the thesis are complete and consistent including title page; table of contents; acknowledgements; abstract; appendices; list of references; cross-references; tables; illustrations; captions; notes; page numbers; margins; headers; and footers.

Discussion

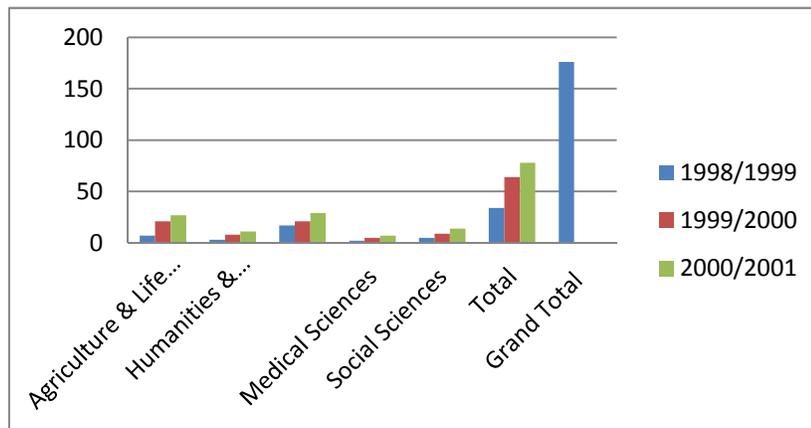
For most universities, student numbers alone would dis-allow individual thesis checking. Furthermore, given the availability and abundance of online citation tutorials, they might view such checking not only as an unnecessary activity but also as a non- library function. The international norm, and one currently practiced by the Library at the STA campus, is for libraries to provide thesis support via its services for Graduate students that include research consultations; document delivery and inter-library loans; publications on referencing, thesis preparation and academic writing; training and support for EndNote; online style tutorials; instruction in the use of research tools; locating appropriate print and electronic resource; and style workshops.

Current international practices further indicate that the student, the supervisor and/or the Department share the responsibility for thesis quality whilst the Graduate Studies Office and the student are responsible for thesis presentation.

In the past, liaison librarians at STA had fewer theses to check so thesis checking was not a major issue.

As Figure One (1) shows from 1998-2001 only 176 theses (Clarke, 2000) were submitted at the STA campus.

Fig. 1 Theses submitted at the UWI, STA 1998- 2001 (Clarke 2000)

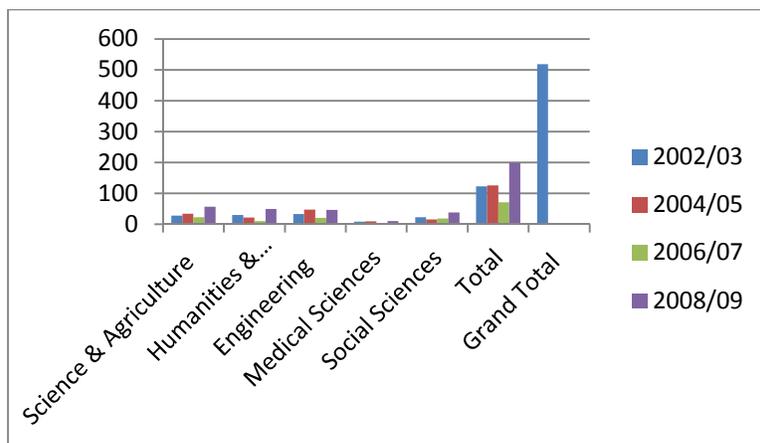


However, post 2001, graduate student enrolment increased and so did thesis checks. Yet though student numbers have risen, there has been no accompanying increase in the resources devoted to thesis checking. There are also no existing internal evaluations or data to provide some evidence of the possible negative impacts of the increased thesis output upon the service quality of thesis checks. Moreover, the Library has never conducted a cost benefit analysis of the thesis checking service to determine its ongoing sustainability.

For the post 2001 period, readily available statistics were not easily available or accessible which meant data had to be manually harvested. This was done by going through the Library's print Administrative files covering the period 2002-2013. The files were sectioned according to academic year but not according to Faculty which made data gathering a lengthy process. Extracted numbers were then tabulated into Excel.

Figure Two (2) depicts checks for the seven (7) year period 2002-2009 where librarians performed 518 (includes multiple checks of a single thesis) thesis checks. Figures for pre and post examination checks were not available as thesis approval forms were not so marked.

Fig. 2 Librarian Thesis Checks 2002-2009 (The Library. Administrative Files 2002-2009)



When pre and post examination checks were instituted in 2010, figures for three year period (2010-2013) jumped to 520. The number includes multiple checks of a single thesis (Table 1).

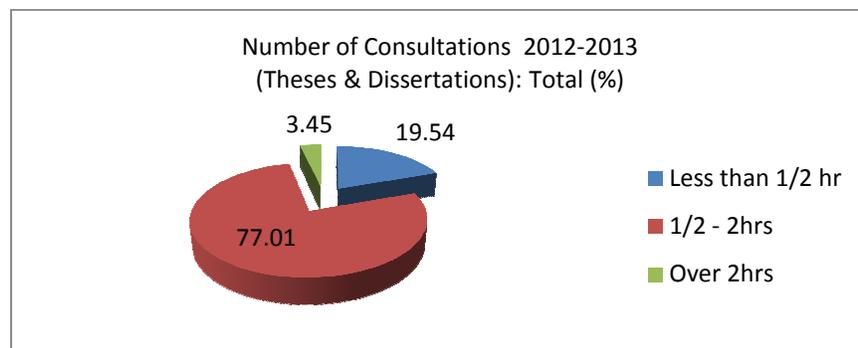
Table 1: Librarian Thesis Checks 2010-2013 (The Library. Administrative Files, 2010-2013)

2010	Faculty	Pre Exam	Post Exam	
	ENG	0	11	
	SCI/AGRIC	3	16	
	HUM/ED	2	33	
	SOCSCI	1	12	
	MED. SCI	2	2	
	Total	8	74	82
2011	Faculty	Pre Exam	Post Exam	
	ENG	1	7	
	SCI AGRIC	18	13	
	HUM/ED	6	19	
	SOCSCI	8	30	
	MED. SCI	13	5	
	Total	46	74	120
2012	Faculty	Pre Exam	Post Exam	
	ENG	4	11	
	SCI/AGRIC	22	25	
	HUM/ED	18	21	
	SOCSCI	15	20	
	MED. SCI	4	8	
	Total	63	85	148
2013	Faculty	Pre Exam	Post Exam	
	ENG	6	5	
	SCI AGRIC	24	37	
	HUM/ED	25	23	
	SOCSCI	18	19	
	MED. SCI	2	11	
	Total	75	95	170

Embedded in the university's regulations and thus directly involved in the thesis submission process, the Library has thus over the years provided full support to the UWI's teaching and research activity as well as contributing to quality assurance and quality enhancement. Still, even if one views the checking of TDs as assisting and promoting research productivity, is it the most effective and efficient way to achieve that end? And with regard to the quality and sustainability of the thesis check service, given the range of the liaison librarian's other responsibilities (Cramer et al., 2012: 278) "...will a liaison [librarian] have time to do it all and [to] do it well?"

The given figures for thesis checks do provide some measure of the checks performed by the liaison librarians but these figures by themselves do not reflect the many individual thesis consultations via e-mail, Skype and office visits nor the time expended. For instance, for the academic year 2012/2013, liaison librarians had thesis consultations ranging from half an hour to two hours which accounted for 77.01% of the total number (261) of consultations offered (Fig. 3).

Fig.3 (The Library. User Services. Report, 2012-2013)



It is no surprise therefore that time management has become a major challenge for liaison librarians at the STA campus. The labour intensive nature of thesis checks signify less time is being allotted to other responsibilities and work load issues are a source of rising concern. Personal observations as a liaison librarian together with anecdotal evidence based on conversations with colleagues and discussions at User Services meetings reveal that liaison librarians feel overburdened: they deal with the information needs of a broad range of students, from undergraduate to research student, not only that of Faculty. Assigned subject areas span multiple disciplines so they need to develop and maintain a good knowledge of information resources in those areas. Other significant responsibilities include accreditation and program reviews; collection management; staff management (appraisals, support and development and training); embedded Information Literacy (IL); professional and administrative work; participation in library teams, university committees and working groups, and additional project work.

Another major concern is that the pre and post examination check stages have not reduced the number of thesis checks. They have merely added another administrative layer to the process. This is because one thesis at both stages usually involves multiple checks. Students are asked to consult with liaison librarians during the write up stage and before formal submission to avoid repeated checks, but many fail to comply, resulting in the increase of post examination checks (Table 1). Post examination checks are problematic as energies and resources are expended performing checks for students who have already graduated (a post-examination thesis can undergo multiple checks before being granted full library approval). Also, if the student has already graduated what is the inducement for him or her to make any revisions at all?

For students, accurate and consistent referencing is an important skills requirement. Yet how can they develop these skills when an entire bibliography is set out inaccurately or inconsistently and liaison librarians have to make the necessary amendments? There are no internal guidelines recommending the level of detail for citation checks for instance amendments to a section only as an example for students to follow. Another area of concern is that liaison librarians are expected to have in depth knowledge of at least three citation styles, due to the various styles used by the different faculties and also because they fill in for colleagues on leave. But how many styles can one expect a liaison librarian to master? It is already difficult doing a thorough job with the variety of styles recommended by the thesis guide since each style is now a complicated set of standards given the new modes of communication.

At the STA campus, liaison librarians in essence perform the role of copy editors by pointing out grammatical or spelling errors, giving advice on proper formatting to meet the requirements of style manuals and how to integrate and cite sources properly. They are also proof readers when they crosscheck references and citations, identify errors and correct references and citations (via Web searches) and flag missing or incorrect reference information.

For liaison librarians, the traditional individual thesis checking service is not cost effective, and they feel strongly that it is time to do things differently. Why? Because apart from its lack of cost effectiveness, the labour intensiveness of the checks detracts valuable energies and resources from other critical issues such as budget cuts and the need to rationalize subscriptions. There are also other critical user issues requiring their time, energies and focus as revealed by a recent User Services (2014) preliminary investigation: increased demands for Skype and Gmail chat for checking theses and subject queries in addition to basic reference and IL services and reference management software training. Last year when the issue of thesis checking by liaisons was once again raised, based on the feedback received, it does not appear that the Administration is willing to make any changes to the present policy at this point in time.

Recommended Actions

The provision of TDs in electronic format via a repository is a good first step. So too is the proposal to implement ETDS campus wide but the proposal does not speak to the changes requested by liaison librarians regarding thesis submission at the STA campus. Based on the proposed ETD implementation, the Library has a role in the final thesis submission process but it is still required to scrutinize all approved theses.

In view of the concerns outlined, the following actions are recommended:

For the Office of Graduate Research & Studies

To assist the implementation of the ETD system, the Office should develop and introduce interactive thesis templates for front and back matters as well as a master template for the main document to ensure uniformity of presentation and to eliminate repeated checks by liaison librarians. It is further recommended that the Office host Graduate Workshops in collaboration with the Library on the various thesis guidelines including format preparation and the utilization of citation software such as EndNote which has been bought enterprise-wide for the UWI or the free Zotero. And to strengthen and improve the standard of academic supervision, as well as to ensure that supervisors pay closer attention to thesis presentation with respect to the accuracy of references and referencing methods, the Office should host academic advising sessions, to remind supervisors of their responsibilities as outlined in the Graduate Handbook.

For Liaison Librarians

Until the UWI regulations are amended to cease Library scrutiny of all approved these, liaison librarians must continue to provide assistance and awareness to graduate students to minimize citation errors. This can be facilitated via: presentations at Postgraduate orientation sessions; citation style workshops; Information literacy/research skills workshops; individual consultations; Libguides; online tutorials.

Additionally, to cover any gaps on full awareness of the thesis services on offer, they should intensify their efforts to promote those services to students and supervisors. Library services for Graduates might also benefit from a centralized Thesis Support Libguide.

Conclusion

Individual thesis checks performed by liaison librarians have greatly assisted in establishing consistency of style and formatting for TDs at the UWI STA. But despite the significant input in the overall quality control of TDs at the STA campus, the current practice of thesis checking by liaison librarians at the STA Campus is outmoded, unsustainable and lacks cost effectiveness. Current practices elsewhere indicate that at no other university do liaison librarians perform individual thesis checks. Liaison librarians are also functioning as copy editors and proof readers when they check theses and these functions clearly fall outside their remit and role as librarians.

It is therefore contended that the same product quality can continue through the many available online tools that facilitate citation creation supplemented by Library workshops and guides on the various citation styles.

Elsewhere, the Office of Graduate Studies is responsible for establishing format standards and it is their Office that will normally review TDs for formatting to ensure that it meets the institution's standards. In this regard, uniformity and consistency of thesis formats can be maintained via templates in Word or LaTeX formats for front and back matters and for the main document. These templates are according to international practice are the creation and responsibility of the Office of Graduate Studies.

Within the wider environment, many academic libraries (Auckland, 2012; Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013) are now looking to restructure and review their liaison programs to respond to changes in the academic and library landscapes. In light of this trend, it is recommended that the Library conduct its own review and re-assess assumptions about its existing organizational infrastructure and current services on offer.

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