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Singapore Management University Libraries Strategic Plan 2021-2025

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Singapore Management University Libraries Strategic Plan 2021-2025

By Bethany Wilkes, University Librarian, Singapore Management University
Libraries



Change and more change

Like many libraries, Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries closed their physical libraries early in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. SMU transitioned courses and to working online in late March 2020. Singapore underwent a 'circuit breaker' from 7 April 2020 – 1 June 2020, and all campus facilities were closed. Since then, the physical libraries have progressively reopened. Working from home has been the default mode, with 75% of staff returning to campus as of May 2021. Seating capacity in the Libraries remains reduced due to safe distancing measures.

During similar transitions, academic libraries around the world have experienced a range of significant challenges including implementing health and safety measures, providing access to materials, launching and enhancing digital services, moving teaching and learning activities online, navigating personal

trials, and more! Throughout these manoeuvres staff have consistently demonstrated dedication, flexibility, and creativity.

Strategic planning now?!?!

While COVID-19 complicated our already-VUCA environment, at SMU there were simultaneously circumstances that presented an opportune time for strategic planning. There was recent leadership change across the University in 2019, and I joined as University Librarian in end March 2020. SMU developed a new strategic plan (*SMU 2025*), and the Libraries' previous strategic plan expired. Colleagues in the Libraries were excited to explore new opportunities, tactics, and alignments.

As the new University Librarian, I viewed strategic planning as a way to show commitment to collaboration and inclusion and hone our focus together. If we did not seize the chance to leverage on fresh leadership, closely align with the SMU strategic plan, and capture colleagues' enthusiasm, it would be a loss of momentum and opportunity. It was also an occasion to empower colleagues to establish future directions and goals during a time when Covid-19 presented forced changes that they had little, if any, ability to affect. Strategic planning opened the doors for agency and future-looking during a time when the present was extraordinarily unpredictable.

Staff investment and innovation

SMU Libraries' goal was to design, develop and implement an inclusive strategic plan for 2021-2025. The highlights of the process were investment and innovation by the Libraries' staff. Throughout the process, all staff participated in activities through which, among other things, they shared their hopes for SMU Libraries, conducted environmental scanning, reflected on the Libraries' context and community stakeholders' evolving needs, and examined fundamental elements of the University's strategic priorities. Colleagues also engaged in activities that resulted in new Vision and Mission statements, explored segmented stakeholder needs from the perspective of the stakeholder, and identified new potentialities through guided approaches. These activities promoted their investment in the institution and in the outcomes of the strategic planning process; one colleague noted that the experience gave them a "sense of belonging to the organization."

Additional engagement included an external facilitator, who enthusiastically and effectively conducted two workshops online, the University's Library Advisory Committee, and the Provost. The *SMU Libraries Strategic Plan 2021-2025* was launched at the beginning of 2021.

Planning in the face of unpredictability

While strategic planning is not a new activity for libraries, the context of the development of this strategic plan was unique. Planning amidst a pandemic necessitated new thinking. As Peter Drucker's widespread quote proclaims, "the

greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday’s logic.” Colleagues were challenged with viewing the future through a new lens. They shared comments like “the COVID situation presents challenges but it's also an opportunity for libraries to transform....”

The significance of the University’s priorities of digital transformation, sustainable living, and growth in Asia, which are integrated into the Libraries’ strategic plan, were underscored by COVID-19. Other areas were also brought to the forefront, as they were at other libraries, such as the value of physical learning spaces as a service, shifting collections, building digital capabilities, digital *everything* relating to teaching, learning, and research support, open science opportunities, flexibility in systems and staffing, the importance of collaboration and partnerships, and, again, more! Empathy and awareness around mental health were also accentuated. These recognitions contributed to the Libraries’ strategic directions and goals, such as those addressing user-centred discovery of resources, emerging research trends and technologies as part of research support, advocating and integrating open resources into collections and practices, virtual spaces as active environments, development and well-being of staff, and flexible staffing models for new and emerging environments.

While addressing immediate needs and shifts during COVID-19, SMU Libraries also moved to set its future strategy. The strategic plan is a result of teamwork and provides shared directions and goals to advance SMU’s Mission and our users’ success in emerging environments, accommodating adjustments as local and global situations evolve. Planning during extreme unpredictability may be risky, but we are continually reminded that change is constant. The risk was worth the benefit of approaching the unknown future with a cohesive strategy as #OneSMULibraries.

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