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Creating value for all: Joint academic library in the service of five universities

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Abstract

Purpose: – This paper describes and analyses practices of a joint university library as a model of cooperation between universities.

Design/methodology/approach: – The paper is a descriptive case study on the benefits and challenges of collaboration based on experiences of one joint library.

Findings: – In the 2000–2010s, Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences have undergone structural changes, becoming public corporations. The ideal of the government policy is an effective, productive, entrepreneurial university with lean infrastructure and support services. One solution in pursuing cost-effectiveness and efficiency are joint regional libraries. In Vaasa, the five university units share a joint academic library, Tritonia. Tritonia offers library and information services that consist of print and digital information resources, researchers' support services, pedagogical and technical support for digital education, and learning commons for its five universities.

Originality/value: The paper describes service production and its development and presents an existing model for cooperation in joint libraries of several academic institutions that are becoming more common.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Financial models, Joint libraries, Library mergers, Quantitative indicators, Finland

Article Classification: Case study

Introduction and background

Resource sharing and collaboration have been key traditions throughout the history of libraries around the world. Libraries spread their resources via interlibrary loans, share library systems (Gunnels, Green & Butler 2012), print archiving, and digital repositories (Machovec 2013, 199), and form common consortia in licensing e-resources (Maceviciute 2014, 290). The most comprehensive forms of resource sharing and collaboration are shared premises, mergers, and joint libraries. This case study describes the benefits and the challenges of collaboration, experienced by Tritonia, a joint academic library of five universities located in Vaasa, Finland.

In discussions of the 21st-century research literature, collaboration is often presented as something positive: a possibility to greater extensibility, easier adaptation of projects, increased trust, deeper knowledge, and achieving goals and making investments (Peterson & Breivik 2001, 118) unachievable by a single institution (Henry & Smith 2013, 63–64). There are several benefits and collaborations: larger human and material resources; reduced fixed costs and duplicate operations; enhanced services and service effectiveness; networking and funding opportunities; enlarged customer base and client reach; visibility and impact; brand and/or reputation; and shared burden of funding (Peterson & Breivik 2001, 121–123; Mackenzie, Penniman & Woodsworth 2013, 35–36; Agee 2014, 522, 527–528; Kenefick & DeVito 2015, 339; Skellen & Kyrchenko 2016, 146; Münster 2017, 176). Still, two of the main reasons for collaborations are resource sharing and cost savings (Smart & Stewart-Fullerton 2013, 245). Nowadays even resource sharing is mostly motivated by cost savings (Muhonen, Nygren & Saarti 2011, 202; Rozum & Brassaw 2013, 202; Münster 2017, 192). However, without staff reductions, savings achieved by economy of scale are often minimal (Agee 2014, 527 – 528, Kenefick & DeVito 2015, 335).

Higher education has changed radically over three decades under the pressures of tightening public funding; the introduction of competitive resource allocation at national and international levels; the transition of higher education into a mass industry; diminishing student demographics; high customer expectations; and changing perceptions on the value of higher education (Hormia-Poutanen et al. 2011, 600; Muhonen, Nygren & Saarti 2011, 204; Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 117–118; Maceviciute 2014, 284, 577). The changing perceptions on the value of higher education is a part of the ongoing legitimacy crisis of the welfare state and the fall in popular support for governmental institutions caused by the ideology of New Public Management that was seen as a better way to provide public services (Steane, Dufour & Gates 2015, 263–264) by focusing on market, output, and consumer orientation and flexible, lean management (Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 133; Düren, Landøy & Saarti 2017, 477).

The operational environment of higher education has become an ongoing tempest and competition (Juntunen et al. 2013, 244). Academic libraries are embedded in this ecosystem and must adjust to changing requirements and expectations (Machovec 2017, 577). They face growing challenges from the declining economy, deteriorating administrative support, increasing patron demands and fiscal accountability, as well as the expanding competition from both technology and retail industries (Kaspar & Macmillan 2013, 113). Libraries are not perceived as full-fledged organizations within universities, and therefore they need to prove their value and justify traditional or new investments that are or will be made in them (Kostagiolas et al. 2013, 268). The library must struggle for resources allocated by the university by demonstrating the value it adds to the university, reporting in detail what the library has achieved and how it contributes to institutional outcomes. Gone is the traditional trust that a library is a “universal good”. (Muhonen, Nygren & Saarti 2011, 201–202.)

The academic libraries need to convince the universities of their broader capabilities in the networked world. The universal challenge facing all libraries is digitalization of information: the working environment of researchers, teachers and students is more and more online (Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 132; Maceviciute 2014, 291). Academic libraries have a strong role in the development of open science; institutional repositories; research literacy education; open access, including research data; and even e-publishing. If libraries manage to prove their value, efficiency and legitimation in researchers’ support, they may grow into a significant player in research work. (Maceviciute 2014, 292–297.) Academic libraries need to redefine their role from second-string student support entities (Oliveira 2018, 43) to proactive change agents, integrating themselves into evolving teaching and learning processes (Muhonen, Nygren & Saarti 2011, 204).

University policy in Finland

The Finnish university system consists of 14 academic universities and 23 universities of applied sciences. The academic universities practice research, give research-based education, and promote the efficiency of research in the society. The universities of applied sciences are multidisciplinary, regional universities that offer practical higher education and conduct research, development and innovation activities in response to labour market needs. During the 2000–2010s, Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences have undergone structural changes, becoming public corporations, limited companies or foundations. All universities have wide autonomy, freedom of research and education, including right of decision in matters of internal administration. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017.)

The Finnish universities are autonomous actors responsible for developing their research, education and other operation, but the Ministry of Education and Culture directs the universities and acts as their main financier. This autonomy also means that the universities have responsibility in decision-making in matters of internal administration. As libraries are seen as a part of the internal administration, they are financed by their universities. (Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 120.) The development objectives set for the universities are based on strategic objectives appointed by the parliament of Finland, and the parliament allocates the basic funding between the universities on the basis of education, research, and development activities, in practice based on the number of degrees, publications, and projects. The universities allocate the received financing internally based on their own strategic choices. The main objective of the Finnish university policy is to develop specialized, cooperative, internationally competitive, high-quality universities that react flexibly to regional needs. The universities are expected to develop the quality of their education by utilizing digitalization, by increasing cooperation in support services and infrastructure, and by increasing the efficiency of high-quality research, for example via open science. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017.)

The ideal of the government and educational policy is an effective, productive, entrepreneurial university with lean infrastructure and support services. The support services include the libraries that support university teaching, studying and research, and in addition are common libraries open to everyone. One solution in pursuing cost-effectiveness and efficiency are joint regional libraries. A joint library is a library for two or more independent universities. It is not an independent organization in the legal sense. Instead, its operation is based on a contract between its universities. The library's management, economy, and services are stipulated in the contract. The aim of joint libraries is to offer more extensive and diverse services than former independent libraries could offer on their own. The Finnish joint libraries are located in municipal centres and they are the only, or at least the largest, academic libraries in their region, thus supporting information needs of local individuals and businesses. (Palonen et al. 2014, 224–226.) In Vaasa, Finland, the five university units – University of Vaasa, VAMK University of Applied Sciences, Åbo Akademi University, Hanken School of Economics, and Novia University of Applied Sciences – form the joint Tritonia Academic Library.

The development of Tritonia

Vaasa is a middle-sized Finnish town with population of 68.000, 69 % of whom speak Finnish, 23 % Swedish and 8 % other languages as their mother tongue (Vaasa: Tietoa taskuun 2017, 7). In proportion to the population, Vaasa is the largest university town in Finland with its ca. 13.000 higher education

students. Its educational flagship is the University of Vaasa that is a Finnish-language independent university with 5.400 students. The two Swedish-language universities of Finland, Åbo Akademi University, located in Turku, and Hanken School of Economics, located in Helsinki, offer part of their education in Vaasa, ÅAU for 1.100 students and Hanken for 500 students. Besides academic universities, there are two universities of applied sciences in Vaasa, the Finnish-language VAMK University of Applied Sciences with 3.200 students, and the Swedish-language Novia University of Applied Sciences with 2.400 students. (Vaasa: Tietoa taskuun 2017, 29–30.) All five higher educational institutions in Vaasa offer part of their education in English.

For a long time, efforts were made to merge three academic university units in Vaasa into one joint bilingual university. Strong political forces argued to preserve the Swedish-language university units as part of their own universities, and in the end, there was no merger. However, in the 1990s, the universities decided to build a joint library, and in 2001, the Tritonia Academic Library constituted a visible, concrete example of cooperation between two languages and three universities. Tritonia became a separate unit within its universities, and was granted a fairly independent status with its own board, consisting of representatives from all three universities. The agreement between the universities formed the basis for the cooperation and the costs were allocated according to the amount of students and staff, the literature and property, the staff position and the library management. The cooperation agreement stipulated that the biggest university was to maintain the infrastructure (data communication network, accounting etc.) and employ the library director that would manage the library and the staff, which remains employed by the universities. The three merged libraries differed in size, services, collections, languages, and culture. They were all part of their organizational environment, had their own OPACs and their own e-resources, although the amount of e-resources was still very limited, but there was a common belief that the importance and synergism of the e-resources would grow. (Flemming 2011, 96–97.)

The restructuring of the Finnish higher education speeded up in the end of the 2000's. The new university law came into force in 2010 and changed the universities' position from state universities to independent corporations under public law. The universities of applied sciences in Vaasa, VAMK and Novia, were not part of Tritonia in 2001, but a possible merging was part of the planning at an early stage. Concrete cooperation between these libraries and Tritonia was initiated in 2003, and the final agreement on the merging of the library activities of the universities of applied sciences with Tritonia took effect in 2010. The universities of applied sciences in Vaasa became equal members of Tritonia, including all its services. (Flemming 2011, 98–99.)

Tritonia at present

Tritonia's original vision still forms a basis for collaboration, although the number of universities has been extended from three to five (Flemming 2011, 100). Tritonia supports learning, teaching, and research of its universities by offering library, information, and research support services for students and personnel, and pedagogical and technical support of digital education for personnel via the service centre EduLab. Each member of the library staff is an employee of her/his respective university, but works under joint management. In 2016 Tritonia's organization was reformed by organizing the operation of Tritonia into five units that operate over the borders of the host universities: Administrative and Marketing Services, Local and Web Services, Information Resource Services, Educational and Research Support Services (including publication services), and EduLab. (Tritonian johtokunta 2016.)

According to the current agreement, Tritonia's common expenses – staff expenses, real estate expenses, and operation expenses – are defined in its budget. The universities agree on the division of costs yearly. In addition to common expenses, the universities have separate expenses related to Tritonia's services, such as e-resource license fees. (Svenska handelshögskolan et al. 2012.) The growth of digital information resources, separate networks, portals, and e-resource license agreements specific for each university create challenges. The Finna portal, launched in 2016, brings together Tritonia's OPAC and the five university-specific e-resource portals in one interface. However, e-resources licensed for a specific university are available only via the university's own Finna portal. Thus, Tritonia's Finna portal in reality consists of six portals: the joint Tritonia portal, shared by all library patrons, and university-specific portals of Tritonia's five university units.

Besides customers, stakeholders such as shareholders, boards of trustees, or parent organizations, need to understand, internalize, and appreciate the organization and service (Mackenzie, Penniman & Woodsworth 2013, 30). The partnership of different organizations is a constant balancing act in order to keep the responsibilities and the burden of running the library fairly distributed (Agee 2014, 528). An evidence-based approach to service processes helps the library management to focus on what is being done to service products and staff to focus on quality improvements. Above all, measurable indicators enable an objective foundation for discussions, especially when forced to make tough decisions. (Juntunen et al. 2013, 244.) The Finnish academic libraries register their yearly statistics in the national Research Library Statistics Database. For joint libraries, especially the statistics for the usage of e-resources is troublesome. Some data are not definite for Tritonia, especially not the usage of the universities' e-resources. Comparisons to other universities and units are hard to make, since some of Tritonia's statistical data do not give an accurate picture of the entire field of activities. (Flemming 2011, 100.) The print books are registered as Tritonia's common property. The electronic books, journals, and databases are registered according to the university. The e-resources of Åbo Akademi, Hanken, and Novia are shared by each university as a whole, which means that the usage of databases cannot be observed in part of the university units in Vaasa. Tritonia has actively worked for development of the national compilation of statistics in order to pay attention to the different forms of cooperation between research libraries in Finland. An improvement is about to happen, as more and more joint libraries are being founded. (Flemming 2011, 101.)

Originally, the universities negotiated the allocation of Tritonia's funding determined by the number of students and staff members in each university unit in Vaasa (Palonen et al. 2013, 232). In the new Tritonia Agreement from 2012, the costs are shared in proportion to the number of FTE students and the number of exams at the university units in Vaasa. Additionally, the circulation statistics are included in the resource allocation model. However, these traditional indicators need to be evaluated and revised urgently. Alternatives and ideas on development of relevant, objective, available, and transparent indicators are needed. The circulation is no longer the essential indicator of library functions as a significant amount of information resources are available in digital format. Instead, the library's role as learning commons has increased significantly.

Future possibilities for Tritonia

Digitalization challenges the traditional configuration of physical library space (Lenfield 2015). Accessing, creating, and supporting digital content drives both physical and virtual changes. Libraries are reinventing themselves as content becomes more accessible online and their role becomes less about housing collections and more about connecting learners and constructing knowledge (Maceviciute 2014,

288; Holland 2015). Libraries become important as intellectual, social, and cultural spaces in the physical and virtual sense. New library spaces should immerse students' scholarly digital content and connect them with supporting expertise and services. (Dewey 2008, 85–86.)

Libraries redefine themselves, their services, business models, and missions (Inayatullah 2014, 25). It is argued that the traditional library functions are becoming marginalized as student support services are merged and library spaces are increasingly technology-enabled meeting places. However, Nicholas et al. (2011) imply that user education needs are actually greater than ever, as the “Google generation” does not necessarily have increased information or digital skills. Users of the new learning-rich spaces often need support to be able to use the technology effectively and gain maximum value from it. (Hurst 2013, 405.) Digital literacy skills, including ICT, information and media literacy, may be some of the most transferable skills for future professionals. Academic libraries should show their value in education, providing proper resources, maintaining digital repositories, and giving students and faculty that meeting place of learning and accessing knowledge found nowhere else on campus (Cerbo 2011, 189). It is not enough for libraries to support learning and teaching, but they must truly foster learning and research as well and be partners in these areas (Delaney & Bates 2015, 32). Libraries and librarians should become community builders acting in both digital and physical environments (Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 133). The redefined core functions of libraries could include: (1) building e-research collections and contributing to a virtual research environment both nationally and internationally; (2) emphasizing kite marking, quality assurance, trust metrics, and relevance ranking; (3) managing institutional digital assets, ensuring their bibliographic integrity and making value added content available; (4) teaching information literacy; and (5) giving policy and standards advice to faculties (Law 2009, 66).

Paradoxically, libraries as physical places become more important in the digitalized world. Printed books are still important, but digitalization offers additional pathways to learning. Students and teachers no longer need a library simply for access. Much of the information that was traditionally available from libraries is now easily accessed from the internet. Instead of collections-based services, they require a place that encourages participatory learning and allows co-construction of understanding from a variety of sources. In other words, instead of being archives, libraries are becoming learning commons, flexible, open environments that merge the physical and digital fostering interaction, collaboration and knowledge creation in a world of peer-to-peer information sharing. (Robinson 2009, 8; Tuominen & Saarti 2012, 133; Kaspar and Macmillan 2013, 117–118; Inayatullah 2014, 25, Maceviciute 2014, 288; Holland 2015).

Many research libraries have developed or are planning new kinds of physical and virtual library spaces. Examples include research commons, reading rooms, labs and collaborative spaces for collaborative and virtual research. Other libraries have renovated grand, historic spaces specifically for quiet, contemplative study. (Dewey 2008, 93.) Bold new academic libraries feature as service desks, collaboration spaces, and technology access points consisting of loud rooms, quiet rooms, and spaces that offer to the entire campus community specialized technology (Agresta 2014). 21st century rare book libraries form an eclectic mix of spaces: stacks and reading rooms, exhibition halls, lecture theatres, digital-ready classrooms, office space for visiting scholars, and conservation and imaging workshops (Lenfield 2015). Academic libraries' learning commons designed according to wishes from students and faculty serve the need for quiet and inspiring study spaces, offering reading rooms meant for quiet study, as well as spaces to gather, work, socialize, and be alone in a crowd (Dewey 2008, 93). Learning commons often house non-library services such as IT services, writing and tutoring centers and makerspaces where students and staff can test new technologies (Ludwig & Bullington 2007, 374; Gardner et al. 2013, 149; Sheffield et al. 2013, 162; Blummer & Kenton 2017, 329; Lee 2017, 108–109).

Also the significance of traditional library spaces and services remains strong. Lux et al. (2016, 109, 114) explored use patterns of an academic library and found out that patrons still come to the library building for library reasons more often than for non-library reasons: the majority of patrons only visit one destination and the primary purposes for which patrons come to the library are studying and the use of library materials.

These same wishes were expressed by Tritonia's patrons in Tritonia's client surveys in 2016–2017. The top-5-list of the most important library services included study spaces (21 %), computers (15 %), group study rooms (13 %), quiet reading rooms (12 %), and wireless network (12 % of the answers). The American students' wish to "be alone in a crowd" (Dewey 2008, 93) was in Finland expressed as a wish to "be alone without looking lonely". In 2001, Tritonia was the first library building in Finland to be designed as a modern learning environment with group study rooms, computer labs, and reading rooms accessible 24/7. Presently, Tritonia's premises are renewed according to patrons' wishes by adding both quiet reading rooms and informal common rooms and teamwork spaces. The library premises are being refurnished with flexible furnishings for group and individual work, counters and stools for quick e-mail, and soft furnishings for comfortable study and collaboration. The video conference premises, meeting rooms, and IT labs are being made over so that their furniture and equipment are easily movable and adaptable, and premises are suitable for different purposes and activities, like hybrid teaching that combines classroom education and distance education. Soundproof cubicles for one-on-one video-conferencing and tutorial sessions, as well as mobile audio/video conferencing equipment are on the wish list.

As they refine their mission, libraries will also have to change how they measure success. If academic libraries', including Tritonia's, main function in the near future is their role as learning commons, should patron counts be included in the indicators of success, and even in the basis for the allocation of funding? The importance of admissions, gate counts, and room counts might be growing. Just one gate counter at the main entrance of the library premises does not provide enough information. More detailed information about the use of different library premises is needed. In joint libraries like Tritonia, the challenge is defining the patrons of different universities. For example, a library card reader that gives access 24/7 to library premises would provide the patron group information needed.

Information professionals should act in a more entrepreneurial style and find ways to add value and show the impact of their work by going beyond the traditional parameters of the library. They need to respond more acutely to their users' needs, develop capabilities to build better profiles of their users, expand their metrics, and change how they measure success (Corwin et al. 2009, 9, 12). Academic libraries need to modify assessment from user satisfaction to meeting unarticulated needs. The challenge lies in maintaining relevancy through communication, and this should involve meaningful communication to all potential users. (Delaney & Bates 2015, 32.) Information control and self-service is important to customers, but they must be balanced with the provision of specialized services to meet individual needs that go beyond a minimal level of service. Academic libraries should adopt a boutique-like service model in order to provide unique, effective, responsive, personalized, user-driven, and technology-enhanced service. (Kaspar and Macmillan 2013, 113–119.)

Conclusions

Tritonia's strengths and opportunities as a joint library are many, but so are its weaknesses and threats (Figure 1).

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern library space • Extensive collections • Specialized personnel • Technical and pedagogical support for digital education • Forum for cooperation for five universities • Equal services for all universities • One and only university library in its region • Public academic library open for all • Tritonia brand 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economy based on the division of costs agreed yearly by the universities • Separate networks, portals, and e-resource license agreements specific to each university • Different service, budgetary, and statistical needs of the five universities • Each member of the library staff is an employee of her/his respective university
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider technical and pedagogical support services for digitalization of the universities • Exhaustive open science services • Inspiring learning commons • Makerspace for students and staff • Personalized, boutique-like services for each university • Added value for all five universities 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different needs, interest, and economic resources of the universities • Not succeeding in creating sense of fair play between the universities • Lack of trust with and between the universities • Falling behind in organizational changes • Failing to react proactively in the changing information landscape

Figure 1 A SWOT analysis of Tritonia

Tritonia offers a neutral, inspiring meeting place and a forum for cooperation with equal services for students and staff of five universities in Vaasa in Finnish, Swedish and English. It is empowered by the joint resources that consist of modern library spaces, extensive collections, specialized personnel, and technical and pedagogical support for digital education. Besides the universities, Tritonia serves residents and enterprises in Vaasa as the only university library in the region.

Five organizations from two separate university sectors have different service, budgetary, and statistical needs. The publication and research support services that are important to the universities are less important to the universities of applied sciences, focusing on practical higher education. Similarly, digitalization and distance education are emphasized within the universities, while the universities of applied sciences accentuate classroom teaching. This is reflected in the information literacy education planned and implemented by Tritonia. The education for the universities is based on blended learning with emphasis on distance education, while the education for the universities of applied sciences is mostly traditional classroom teaching on request of the faculties.

Tritonia as a joint support service must create added value for all its universities. It needs to offer equal services, create sense of fair play, and build trust with and between the universities. Tritonia must stay up-to-date in organizational changes, react proactively in the changing information landscape, and also offer personalized services for the benefit of each university, thus enhancing democracy, life-long learning, entrepreneurship, and open science. These components create a unique brand of Tritonia, and a vision Tritonia wishes to remain faithful to even in the future.

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