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# Going Dutch

## How an Erasmus-funded trip helped me share experiences with library colleagues in the Netherlands

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In June this year I took part in a week-long Erasmus-funded visit to the Netherlands to share best practice with peers and study their library environments. During this time I travelled to four different cities in five days and visited a total of six libraries – three academic (Radboud University, Delft University of Technology and Utrecht University) and three public libraries (Nijmegen, Delft and Amsterdam).

This opportunity was particularly relevant to me as I'm relatively new to the information profession – I don't have a 'library background' but I've been working for the University of Warwick for two and a half years. As Academic Services Development Manager I head the 'R+D' ('research and development') team within the Library's Academic Services division, so am involved with environmental scanning and identifying opportunities for developing our services. I hoped that working alongside colleagues from different university libraries during this time would develop my appreciation of the international sector as well as giving me an insight into the differences that might exist, and opportunities for different thinking and working. Moreover, like many other university libraries, Warwick Library is currently going through a period of change, with new structures and services to support a new university strategy. As such I wanted to gain an understanding of how others are engaging with their university strategy and addressing the challenges we all face.

### First stop... Nijmegen

Radboud University, Nijmegen in the west of the Netherlands was my host institution and my stay there allowed me to meet a wide variety of library staff, giving us each the opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences. Upon arrival I met with the Library Director and straightaway joined in with presentations

about physical library developments from Information Specialists representing the Library of Science, the Faculty of Law, and the School of Management, as well as the Head of Information Services, and the Manager of User Services.

What interested me most from these discussions was how well integrated information specialists and library staff are within the academic faculties, even in the cases where the faculties do not have physical library facilities located within their department buildings. When I asked how library staff succeeded in marketing information skills training and their face-to-face support to departments I was met with silence: it appears they have little need to promote these services to departments as library support is already embedded within taught course syllabi and is in many ways taken for granted as an essential aspect of a student's overall educational experience. What is 'Utopian' in the UK seemed to be commonplace here.

I also met with an academic from the University to gain their perspective and again they were surprised with the questions I was asking. Was this high level of engagement just to be found at Radboud University? No. I found a similar story at Utrecht. The great shame is that what I perceive as a huge advantage for these universities, with such well established presences within departments, may be gradually disappearing. With academic departments each having differing priorities there is a clear shift towards library provision becoming centrally-located – although fortunately this hasn't yet included the information specialist staff at Radboud, merely the physical resources.

### **The times they are a changin'**

The following days of my visit allowed me to discuss staff training and development. We talked about recruitment and selection in a changing library environment, the future of the profession and of library services, as well as library strategies and their alignment with the university vision, plus trends within the profession across the country. As is the case with most UK libraries, managing change is a high priority and engaging staff with strategy and the broader university vision is being emphasized across all the universities I visited. Radboud has provided a nicely designed tri-fold leaflet communicating their strategic plan to library staff as well as others at the University. Delft TU, another destination on my travels, has created wonderfully artistic 'ambition documents' with pictorial representations which have been adapted into posters for their staff offices as well as a set of playing cards where each goal is laid out with its target audience on the back. I like this idea as it allows easy re-arrangement of strategic aims when talking to different groups with a different focus. This allows people to see which areas are most relevant to their work or current projects. Dutch libraries are also recruiting staff from outside the library profession (people like me!) to add a different dimension to the skill sets of the department.

Other staff training at Radboud University Library is designed to maximise performance, develop skills, work towards greater efficiencies, encourage project work and draw teams together towards a common vision. I will be interested in hearing the outcomes to this programme and their measures of success, especially

relating to the last point as Warwick's Library hosts a number of staff away-days to aid team working, collaboration and communication across the Library.

### **Crystal ball gazing**

During my visit, I gave a presentation to my host institution focused on physical library space developments as well as creative practice within libraries and the teaching and learning sector more generally. I felt it important to demonstrate that creativity should not concentrate wholly on the building of nice spaces, but also on what you do with - and in - the spaces on a day-to-day basis. I, of course, made reference to some of the exciting developments that have taken place at Warwick over the last few years - the remodeling of our main Library building and the development of spaces/services targeted at different segments of our user community: the Learning Grid; the Teaching Grid; and the Research Exchange (1).

Throughout the world, university libraries have been working hard on redeveloping their learning spaces to offer a broader range of provisions aimed at encouraging different ways of working and incorporating newer technologies. The Netherlands is no different: Radboud University has created a Learning Zone similar to our Learning Grid, and this space supports independent study, group working, discussion, eating and drinking, and the use of multimedia technologies including PCs, projectors and even an iTable.

### **Further afield**

In discussing Library spaces, it was apt that I also had the opportunity to travel across to the other side of the Netherlands to visit the awe-inspiring (and 1998 winner of the Dutch National Steel Prize in buildings of steel and hybrid constructions) Delft University of Technology Library. What strikes you first about this building is the enormous protruding steel cone emerging from the structure. The building slopes up from the ground on the entrance side allowing you to walk on what is essentially the roof of the building, predominantly covered in grass with the exception of the stairs. One entire side of the library is completely filled with glass, giving a beautifully spacious and bright feeling to the genuinely immense interior. The Library management is also attempting to go paperless therefore allowing more of a hot-desking type of environment for their staff, which again impacts on space and ambience.

### **The Public Library perspective**

But it is not just the academic libraries that are providing beautiful and exciting library environments. Even the three public libraries I visited (Nijmegen, Delft and Amsterdam) were spacious, colourful, hosted fashionable and unique-looking furniture, and were generally more technologically-equipped than the university libraries I saw. Amsterdam public library is the largest in the Netherlands and its enormous eleven

floors offer a theatre, education room, reading cafes, an exhibition space, a museum and a restaurant with beautiful views over the rooftops of the city. Nijmegen's offers a variety of different spaces and like many others has large multimedia sections, complete with a piano and keyboard in the score-sheet room. Delft's Library Concept Centre won the '2010 Best Library of the Netherlands' award and is on a mission to become 'the world's most modern library'. It has a media centre that combines music, film, literature and art (where artworks can even be borrowed for expositions or for companies to host in the workplace). They've also created a download station allowing users to download information free of charge such as suggestions for reading, viewing or listening to help promote their offerings.

### **Lasting impressions**

So, apart from being impressed by the strength of relationships with their academic communities and the wonders of the physical libraries, what else did I take away from my visit?

Some of the challenges are just the same as those we face. As with the UK, change management is a big issue and supporting staff with new ways of working came up time and time again. Management and project-working skills are as important now in the library profession as traditional information and knowledge management skills. It is essential to have a workforce of diverse strengths with everyone playing their part, and all libraries are keen to increase their spread of skill sets and optimize competency needs. This is where working together with other libraries internationally could be a real strength in sharing good experiences and knowledge to inform future staffing.

Funding is also a problem the world over, not only for public libraries facing threats of closure, but also for the higher education sector facing increasing financial stringency. In Dutch universities departmental libraries are being closed, and in the UK student fees are rising, placing ever growing demands on our resources from our users' increasing expectations. The future is very much uncertain.

But what I really took away from my visit was the professionalism of the library staff. All the libraries I visited are trying to take their services forward, sometimes against considerable odds. All the staff wanted to enter into debate to increase understanding and help us on that collective path. And this (universal quality) is what was of the greatest value to me.

### **NOTES**

1. For more details of our facilities visit [go.warwick.ac.uk/library](http://go.warwick.ac.uk/library)