UQL Cyberschool — collaborating with secondary schools to connect their students with university library services and resources

This paper was presented by Heather Todd, Director of Learning and Research Services, The University of Queensland Library at IFLA WLIC 2016, at Columbus, OH: Connections. Collaboration. Community. Session 80 — Metropolitan Libraries with Academic and Research Libraries and School Libraries.

By Nicole Slinger and Diane Nibbs

Background

The University of Queensland Library (UQL) has been offering a program for secondary schools for over 15 years. This program, UQL Cyberschool, is funded by the UQ Library and connects schools and their students to university library services and resources. It aims to ease the transition from school to university, whilst also providing benefits to Years 11 and 12 students and the University. It aligns with the three pillars of learning, discovery and engagement, which underpin the Mission, Vision and Values as outlined in The University of Queensland Strategic Plan 2014–2017.

UQL Cyberschool has received a number of awards in recognition of its services to secondary schools and was also a finalist in the Australian Awards for University Teaching. In 2016, the service received the Citation Award from the Queensland School Library Association, for outstanding contribution to the wider field of teacher librarianship.

UQL Cyberschool was officially launched in August 1999 and started with a program involving three local secondary schools being offered substantially discounted access to an online database. This was expanded to allow subscription access to all Queensland high schools. UQL Cyberschool currently has 765 member schools across Australia and overseas.
Schools may join the UQL Cyberschool community for free and access many free and high-quality information resources through the UQL Cyberschool website.

https://web.library.uq.edu.au/library-services/services-for-secondary-schools

Structure
The UQL Cyberschool team consists of two part-time coordinators and is situated within the Learning and Research Services team of the University Library, sitting within the Client Services area.

The University of Queensland Library supports the University’s aims to attract the best students, prepare them for their transition to University study and retain first year students. Cyberschool plays an integral role in this aim, easing the transition from a one-room school library to a 15-branch university library with over 2 million items, which can often seem daunting to first year students.

The University can see the worth of having over 2000 prospective students visit the campus a year as part of the Cyberschool program. Raising the aspirations of prospective students is a major benefit to the University and the Library as it will increase the numbers of people placing UQ at the top of their preferences for university courses. One student attending the St Lucia campus as part of a Cyberschool ‘Outreach Program’ visit was overheard saying, ‘I don’t care if it costs one million dollars, I’m coming here’.

Students will also be better prepared and have prior knowledge of the actual Library surrounds and systems, having previously attended for a research skills training session or tour during their secondary school years. Improved information and critical literacy skills, learnt during Cyberschool classes, should not only improve the quality of incoming student skills but result in improved secondary school outcomes.

Within the University Library itself, Cyberschool staff work closely with other areas of the organisation, including the Information Literacy team, who have specialist skills in providing training and support in IT skills and digital literacy and the development of online training tools and
content creation for online modules. This team can be called upon to aid in all Library projects, as recently occurred and will be outlined later.

**E-resource purchase service**

Databases and e-book collections are expensive and, as a result, most Queensland high school libraries have limited research resources. Teachers and students need access to quality online information resources at an affordable price. For geographically isolated students and schools, the issues are compounded. Although the Internet provides a vast range of information resources, finding appropriate and reliable information for effective learning and teaching can be challenging. The UQL Cyberschool has identified these needs in secondary school communities and is helping them to access up-to-date and advanced **electronic databases and eBook platforms** at the most affordable price. It is sharing the University’s expertise in information literacy, which helps schools remain aware of changes, updates and new products in this space and is providing training and professional development for teachers and teacher librarians. Staff of UQL Cyberschool are qualified teacher librarians with over 25 years’ experience. The program engages students by providing first-hand experience of university research materials and methods both online and in face-to-face classes. It directly enhances student learning by providing access through its web page to scholarly online resources. The UQL Cyberschool provides free trials of

*Legal Studies teachers attended a professional development session on ‘Freely available sources of legal information’, hosted by UQL Cyberschool*
commercial online databases to schools to enable them to select the products suitable for their students’ information needs. This is all made possible through the user-friendly website and via an online request form. It assists school library staff by providing an advisory service, negotiating discounted pricing and facilitating access arrangements with vendors. There is no financial incentive for Cyberschool and all payments are arranged directly between the school and vendor. Cyberschool advises all member schools of new products, packages and special deals via their electronic newsletter service.

As a result of this service, database vendors have supported the program with sponsorship of professional development events, provision of publicity and training materials, as well as funding products each year to our ‘Outreach Program’ schools. The UQL Cyberschool has been able to act as a facilitator and negotiator to increase understanding and awareness of these areas on the school, database publisher and vendor sides.

On-campus visits

While some schools only use the virtual services, many do visit the St Lucia campus. Training sessions provide a learning opportunity for senior school students at their point of need by tailoring the session to specific research assignments that the students have at that point in time. This makes the experience authentic. Research strategies are taught and access to academic resources is facilitated to produce better quality assessment. Afterwards students stay to use print books and experience a little of the University campus.
The time spent on campus encourages students to consider the possibility of engaging in tertiary study in the future; therefore, it is an aspiration building experience that also improves immediate outcomes for them. Students are also encouraged to return to UQ Library on an individual basis in the future.

Cyberschool classes also align with the five core principles of the UQL Information and Digital Literacy Strategic Framework, including collaboration with schools, alignment with secondary curriculum, innovative development of information literacy skills, sustainable delivery and review and evaluation of programs.

Class teachers book these training sessions for students through the UQL Cyberschool web page and send a copy of the assignment task sheets. In 2016 alone, UQL Cyberschool delivered 98 classes to 1986 students. This has grown since 2002 when 42 school groups were given training in the use of the catalogue and UQL Cyberschool page, for a total of 1029 school students.

Although the majority of classes are held in the Social Sciences and Humanities Library (SSAH), classes can also be hosted in the Law, Music or Sciences libraries, giving students an insight into other library spaces around the University campus.

For classes who have previously attended training, self-guided visits can be booked through UQL Cyberschool. In 2016, 22 schools brought groups of between 15 and 100 students for these visits. Detailed instructions are sent to participants before they arrive to ensure the best use is made of their time on campus. If schools are visiting other areas of the University, they may just want a tour of UQ’s libraries and this can be accommodated. Ninety-seven tours were conducted in 2016.

**Access to the Library collection**

UQL Cyberschool offers a free borrowing program for Years 11 and 12 students whereby local students are able to borrow books from the University Library. The number of registered borrowers has grown from 427 in 2014 to over 600 from 38 schools this year.

Membership is free and registration is online. Year 11 students receive a two-year membership. Parental indemnity for loss of resources is agreed upon during the registration process.

Off-campus activities

As schools are not always able to visit the UQ campus, Cyberschool staff also attend schools to conduct presentations and training workshops for both secondary students and teaching staff. These presentations and workshops raise awareness of online resources and the importance of critical and information literacy skills in researching online materials, and demonstrate to teachers how these resources can be integrated into the curriculum.

The time spent on campus encourages students to consider the possibility of engaging in tertiary study in the future; therefore, it is an aspiration building experience that also improves immediate outcomes for them. Students are also encouraged to return to UQ Library on an individual basis in the future.

Professional development for teacher librarians and teachers

To support ongoing professional development for teacher librarians, the UQL Cyberschool provides an annual full-day seminar for school staff from South East Queensland, regional and rural areas and interstate, charged at minimal cost.

With the inaugural seminar held in 2003, speakers who focus on ‘big picture’ trends and ideas for educators and librarians are sourced. On average, between 80 and 120 teachers and teacher librarians attend the day.

Several vendors sponsor the day and they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their products and participate in a trade display event. In 2016, the theme was From Adolescent Brain to Entrepreneur and addressed research into the adolescent brain; how educational institutions are using this evidence to teach our students and how these skills will lead to jobs in the emerging entrepreneurial workplace. Attendees saw the link between Makerspaces, robotics, coding clubs and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in their schools, with the result being start-ups and other business ventures beyond school.

The vast majority of attendees at the seminars have rated the sessions’ quality as excellent, and many of the participants stated that they took away practical ideas for use in their teaching.

In 2017, UQL Cyberschool’s seminar will focus on Digital Literacies and Digital Disruption and the effect of these on education and the workplace. Additionally, the inaugural professional development day for Legal Studies teachers has been held, which combined the expertise of the UQ School of Law and UQ Library. Teachers left with many ways to involve the University in their teaching of secondary school Legal Studies classes.

Outreach Program

In 2014, an Outreach Program aimed at providing schools in need with free access to online resources was introduced, aiming to provide quality, online resources to schools
in regional and isolated areas with a view to encouraging students from these areas to consider undertaking a university degree on completion of their schooling.

The program targets students from schools in low socio-economic, rural or isolated areas, and/or those with a high Indigenous student population. Working in partnership with some of our vendors, UQL Cyberschool helps students gain free access to commercial, online e-resources that would have otherwise been unattainable for their school.

All UQL Cyberschool member schools are invited to apply for the program. Applications are then assessed by UQL Cyberschool staff and successful applicants provided with access to a free e-resource for a calendar year. Participating schools have ranged in geographical location from the northernmost point of Queensland to northern New South Wales, spanning 2900 kilometres.

Teachers taking part in the program are surveyed, via print surveys, towards the end of the year, to establish the efficacy of the program for student learning outcomes.

Now in its fourth year, extensions to the pre-existing Outreach Program have been made. A number of students from rural Queensland and northern New South Wales have visited the St Lucia campus for an ‘on-campus experience day’.

Seven schools have brought a group of students (university aspirants) to experience the St Lucia campus first-hand. Cyberschool funded buses and morning tea for the visiting groups.

Visits commenced with a tour of the whole St Lucia campus, generously guided by staff from the Office of Prospective Students and Student Equity (OPSSE). Highlights of the tour included visits to the Advanced Engineering Building, Global Change Institute and the Student Union precinct (shops and food!).

Cyberschool staff then conducted a library research skills lesson. Students were given the opportunity to search the UQ website for information on possible future study options and course prerequisites. This was followed by a session looking at online sources of information and using databases. Search tips such as phrase searching, truncation and wildcards were also provided.

Free time during lunch allowed students to visit places of interest such as the Great

Students will be better prepared and have prior knowledge of the actual Library surrounds and systems, having previously attended for a research skills training session or tour during their secondary school years. Improved information and critical literacy skills, learnt during Cyberschool classes, should not only improve the quality of incoming student skills but result in improved secondary school outcomes.
Court, Antiquities Museum and bookshop before departing.

The year 2016 saw the Outreach Program expand further with the inclusion of a road trip by Cyberschool staff. It was determined that the schools could be better supported by an on-site visit, which took in five schools in a 900-kilometre return trip.

The aim of the school visits was to provide support to library staff in the implementation, promotion and use of the electronic products (databases or e-books) donated to the school via the Outreach Program. We were able to work with teacher librarians and students and show them how to make the best use of both the donated products and other freely available online resources.

The personal visits are very much appreciated by rural teachers and teacher librarians who often work in isolation to provide information resources for their students. As a result of these visits, some schools subsequently subscribe to their first database. In these communities, the visits raise the profile of universities and awareness of educational opportunities for school students, many of whom would not have previously considered tertiary education as an option for their future.

Interaction with other UQ areas

UQL Cyberschool staff recently identified an issue with the coordination of secondary school involvement across the University campus. After surveying UQ schools, it was found that 38 are currently offering services to secondary schools; however, very few of them were aware of what else was being offered. Teacher librarians are well equipped to view the workings of an educational institution as a whole instead of as individual faculties. UQL Cyberschool has initiated a shared calendar and twice-yearly meetings with these 38 UQ schools and expect this to enhance services offered by UQ as well as facilitate equity amongst secondary schools.

As a result of this coordinated approach, UQL Cyberschool staff are frequently asked to contribute to various UQ schools’ programs, and co-teach or run specially prepared sessions. As previously mentioned in this paper, the fact that Cyberschool is situated as part of the University library structure has many benefits. For example, the UQL Cyberschool staff were involved with the production of resources for the UQ School of Law, which runs a pro bono service for secondary schools. By involving the Library’s Information Literacy team, podcasts, video and possible webinar resources have been produced. One will assist students in remote locations with research skills, another gives guidance to students visiting the University library in their own time and the third outlines free resources for Legal Studies students.

All schools within Australia can become a member school of UQL Cyberschool for free, by joining online via our website.

References


UQL Information and Digital Literacy Strategic Framework.