UWTSD

Unifying Library Services Across Several Small Campuses

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

A newly merged university, part of the Higher Education library consortium in Wales, adopted Alma as a cloud-based solution for coordinating services and collections across multiple libraries.

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> *"Alma affects all aspects of our work, not just collections."*
>
> Alison Harding, Executive Head of Library and Learning Resources at UWTSD

About Wales Trinity Saint David

University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) is a merged institution, formed from several smaller higher education institutions in Wales. As a result, the university has several small campuses and around 8,000 full-time equivalent students. The three main campuses are located in Swansea, Lampeter and Carmarthen, with a fourth campus in London and learning centers in Cardiff and Birmingham.

UWTSD has three libraries in Swansea, and one each in Carmarthen and Lampeter, as well as library services in London. The university library system provides a wide range of resources online, including e-books, e-journals, specialist databases, online newspapers and more. The total staff of the UWTSD library network consists of 46 people, including both full- and part-time employees.

UWTSD is also part of the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF), a consortium of all the higher education institutions in Wales, along with the National Library of Wales, Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, Natural Resources Wales, and the Open University in Wales. This extends the resources UWTSD can offer its students, as well as providing access to UWTSD collections to students at partner institutions.

Big Challenges for Small Libraries

The merger of several institutes of higher education into UWTSD, in the space of just four years, naturally had its challenges in terms of coordination and coherence.

UWTSD's several small campuses and libraries are geographically dispersed, with each location bringing its own organizational cultures, operating systems, and modes of communication into the mix. The primary challenge for the library, therefore, was making services consistent and collections accessible across the newly unified university.

The various legacy print collections had to be made more available to all UWTSD students, which required a greater emphasis on remote accessibility. Pre-existing digital-first policies were usefully extended in the merged library, but challenges arose regarding availability, pricing and content in the new configuration.

UWTSD also faces challenges specific to smaller libraries, such as chronic time and budget constraints on finding and adopting purpose-specific solutions for all its needs. A smaller staff than is typically available at larger libraries also has its costs, such as more limited services and library hours. For the same reason, library staff members often find themselves wearing multiple hats, such as managing library services for students and negotiating with vendors, which might be undertaken by more employees at larger institutions.

The technical staff supporting the library is also often under pressure at smaller academic institutions, having to manage its responsibilities with few personnel and modest budgets. For UWTSD libraries, these limitations made it harder to keep pace with the latest technological developments across its dispersed campuses and patchwork of systems that required constant support.

The UWTSD library needed a more updated and comprehensive management system. The departmental goal was to focus more on making as much content available to faculty and students as possible, with less emphasis on print and more focus on electronic delivery.

Moving to the Cloud for Better Management

The previous system required client installation on all staff PCs at each of the UWTSD libraries. Given the challenges of coordinating across its newly merged constituent institutions, the university decided that its library services should be moved to a cloud-based centralized management system.

At about the same time, the WHELF consortium was also considering adopting a next-generation system. The motivation for WHELF institutions, like for UWTSD, was better and more comprehensive management of all resources (print, digital and electronic) in a centralized system. After an exhaustive two-year process, Ex Libris Alma was selected for adoption across all WHELF institutions.

As part of their due diligence, UWTSD library leadership saw Alma in use at other academic institutions and inquired as to their successes with the product. The positive feedback received was reflected in the selection of Alma following the WHELF Shared LMS consortia procurement exercise.

Of particular note among the UWTSD team was Alma's unique combination of comprehensive resource functionality and robust analytics. In addition, the solution's capability to integrate smoothly with the university's other systems was important to its successful deployment. Currently, Alma is integrated with the UWTSD student information system and some legacy catalogs, and an automated workflow was created using Alma APIs for easy interaction with resource vendors.

Expected and Unexpected Solutions

Transitioning all the UWTSD libraries with their various legacy systems to Alma was a large, complex project. However, the Ex Libris team provided a meticulous implementation plan and support, as well as ongoing support. According to John Dalling, Head of Collections at UWTSD, the project team was very surprised when Alma was ready to go live precisely when planned. Library leadership and the project team also praised Ex Libris on-site support and its responsiveness to all their queries.

Essentially replacing two library management systems and two discovery layers, Alma was at the heart of a broader structural transition and had a significant impact across the university.

Cloud-hosted

Alma's cloud-hosted system has been key in bringing the previously separate libraries and their teams together. It has made it easier to work together, providing mutual support and common training through a unified, centralized system.

The impact of a cloud-based system has also been felt in enhanced remote accessibility. The library staff are able to both manage the library and provide services with much greater flexibility. For students and faculty, the ability to access the resources they need from anywhere, at any time, and from multiple libraries has essentially made the UWTSD libraries available 24/7 and more convenient than ever.

Centralized

UWTSD has used Alma to centralize its collections, resources and loan management, replacing separate purpose-specific solutions, extending capabilities, and saving time and effort. In the Alma-based environment, for example, UWTSD is able to support interlibrary loan directly from the library management system for the first time.

Alma centralization also allows the system to provide more automation of routine tasks. This relieves some of the pressure on library staff and frees them to focus more on the services they provide.

Cost-effective

Alma is also helping UWTSD reduce IT and maintenance costs. As a next-generation solution, Alma is periodically and automatically updated in the cloud and the latest features are immediately available to all users. This ensures UWTSD libraries are always adapting to technological developments without the need for constant IT support. In addition, the Alma development team has been responsive to user suggestions, which have been seamlessly implemented at the UWTSD libraries.

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Robust analytics

UWTSD library leadership has made significant use of Alma analytics in managing collections effectively across the institution's various libraries. When consolidating and moving various collections, the library staff used Alma analytics to determine which assets should be retained and which could be downsized. In addition to providing a clear view of how often resources were borrowed, Alma allowed collection managers to drill down further and discover what types of users (students, faculty, researchers) were accessing which resources, from where, and when.

Alma analytics has become an important tool across the various library departments. Customer Services and Academic Services, for example, often work with Lisa Toyne, Systems and Digital Content Librarian, on analytics reports needed for their processes and initiatives. In order to further leverage the analytics features, Lisa created several widgets for users to independently create reports on lost books, e-book usage, and more, which she has shared in a common online folder available to librarians across the university through Alma.

The Alma analytics feature has also allowed UWTSD to compare its library data with other libraries across the United Kingdom and set institutional benchmarks.

Collaboration

In addition to bringing all the UWTSD libraries together, Alma has facilitated collaboration among all WHELF institutions. This allows libraries to coordinate purchases for the most cost-effective results and creates the potential for future collaborative collection development.

For the first time, UWTSD is also able to have ongoing conversations with other Welsh libraries about how they are using their library management systems. The library leadership noted that this has helped UWTSD make faster progress in taking advantage of what Alma has to offer.

More broadly, UWTSD is an active member of the international Alma user community, taking part in conferences, monthly events, and knowledge sharing. The library team has made use of online common folders (such as within Alma Analytics and the Metadata Editor), where Alma users of all sizes from around the world share templates, guidance and new ideas.

Then came Covid-19…

The Covid-19 pandemic hit Higher Education hard, with closed campuses and a hurried transition to remote solutions. In some regards, the shift was an acceleration of a trend toward remote learning and digital-first resources that was already underway in academia.

The cloud-based, centralized Alma system made it possible for UWTSD library services to continue operating relatively smoothly even after Covid-19 restrictions took effect in the UK. Library staff have been able to quickly shift to the new work-from-home situation, as they can easily log into the system remotely and carry out most of their regular tasks.

The pandemic has also increased movement to expanding e-resources collections at UWTSD, which was already gaining more focus at the university library. The staff has devoted a lot of time during the crisis to gaining access to more e-resources, in order to meet the current needs of faculty and students.

UWTSD library teams have been able to meet most requests for resources despite the Covid-19 restrictions, leveraging Alma for searching many collections and managing alternative supply options. Even if a requested item was completely unavailable, UWTSD academic services generally managed to obtain a similar resource.

According to Alison Harding, Executive Head of Library and Learning Resources at UWTSD, the library has become much more visible to the rest of the university as a result of the sudden and massive move to online services. As faculty and administrators are working remotely, they find themselves more directly and more often in contact with the library, raising awareness of what librarians do and what the library has to offer, especially in terms of teaching, analytics and customer services. The capabilities of Ex Libris Alma have contributed to this significantly, helping the UWTSD library demonstrate its true value to the institution's decision-makers.
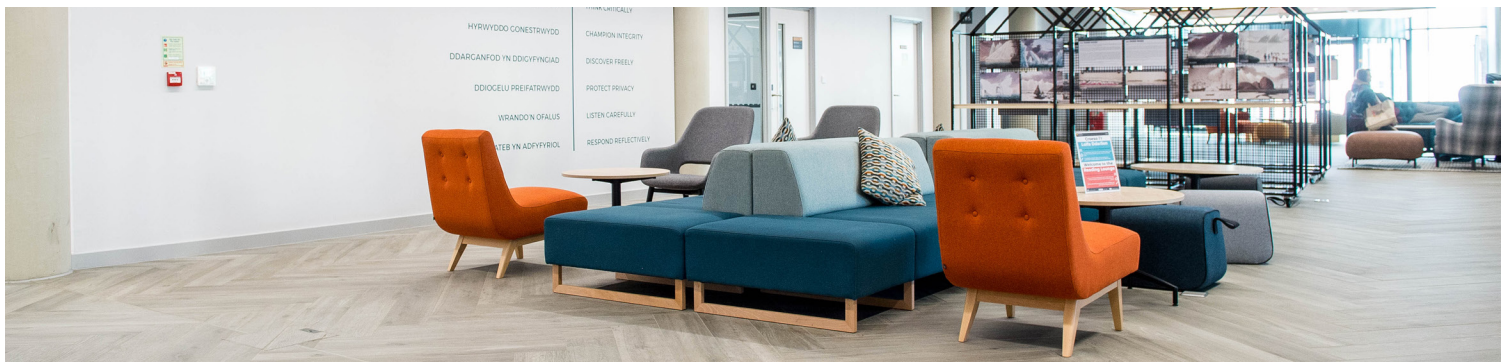
Rethinking the Academic Library

UWTSD library leadership does not see signs of a return to the pre-Covid-19 norms in terms of remote access and electronic collections, so longer term solutions are a must. This includes exploring options for working even more digitally in the future. Budget constraints are also expected to force universities to rethink content in the modern library, which is likely to include more open access, "Plan S", collaborative content creation, and other options.

"If publishers don't shift their model, libraries are going to find it increasingly challenging to build up appropriate collections," Alison explained. This will be true for small, medium and large libraries. Many of the larger institutions are already walking away from negotiations with traditional vendors due to the high costs, and Alison believes smaller institutions, such as UWTSD, may be forced to do so as well in the near future.