Leiden University Libraries

Ex Libris Services empower a leading European university to take greater control of its data

Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University Libraries chose the Alma platform for its flexibility, governance, ongoing support and sophisticated analytics – and the community that comes with it.

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Leiden University Libraries

Leiden University Libraries (UBL) includes the University Library, the Social and Behavioural Sciences Library, the Law Library, the Science Library, the Asian Library, the NINO Library, the Walaeus Library for medical studies (LUMC), and the Wijnhaven Library in The Hague. The Academic Historical Museum is part of UBL, and there are offices in Jakarta, Indonesia, and in Rabat, Morocco. The history of Leiden University's libraries goes back to 1575, when Prince William of Orange donated a copy of the Polyglot Bible to Leiden University. Nowadays, the vast scientific paper and digital collections comprise millions of books, journals and other library materials. Furthermore, UBL provides access to special collections of international allure. Among these are medieval manuscripts, archives, old prints, maps, sketches, drawings and photographs from all over the world.

Ex Libris Services Empower the Library

UBL has been an Ex Libris customer since 2002, starting with SFX and MetaLib, and a bit later with Aleph; continuing through to Primo in 2011 and Alma, which was implemented in 2016. While the comprehensive capabilities of the Alma library services platform were at the heart of the decision to upgrade, the implementation process and the support ever since confirmed for the UBL team that they made the right choice.

"We still talk about the Alma implementation," Bas said. "We were admittedly very skeptical about meeting the deadline with such a complex project, so imagine our shock when we not only went live right on time but did so on a strict delivery schedule!"

Bas credits the smooth implementation to Ex Libris Services' planning, scripts and project management. They provided clarity about what needed to be delivered at every stage, which made it possible to stay on track and meet the milestone demands of even the most ambitious timeline. Cooperation with Ex Libris consultants, a very good working relationship, and knowledge delivery during the implementation phase were also very important to the project's success, according to the UBL team.

The ongoing services Ex Libris provides to Leiden University include periodic knowledge-building sessions. As the Alma system is heavily geared toward the end user, empowering them with more options and control, the training offered by Ex Libris has been invaluable in facilitating a shift away from dependence on system librarians and IT. Building Alma expertise that crosses departments allows for tighter cooperation and improvement in UBL workflows.

About Leiden University

Leiden University was founded in 1575 and is one of the leading international research universities in Europe. The University has seven faculties and a campus in both Leiden and The Hague. Our motto is Praesidium Libertatis – Bastion of Freedom. Leiden University is an internationally oriented, comprehensive University. Our scientific research and teaching inspire one another, and this cross-pollination shapes our contribution to society. With our research, we work to gain a fundamental understanding of the world and the people around us. In our teaching, we train our students to become analytical thinkers and critical world citizens who can apply this knowledge to make the world a safe, healthy, sustainable, prosperous and just place. Where possible, we endorse and apply the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. We distinguish five broad clusters of science areas and one overarching research theme (Artificial Intelligence): Fundamentals of science, Health and wellbeing, Languages, cultures and societies, Law, politics and administration and Life sciences.

In response to more urgent issues, challenges, or disruptions, the UBL team has found Ex Libris to be very effective. Bas praised the 24/7 monitoring center's reaction time and their proactive support. In addition, the UBL team maintains regular contact with a dedicated Ex Libris support person who can look into specifically urgent, repetitive, or unusual issues as they arise.

Putting it all into practice

The support UBL receives from Ex Libris has led to many successful projects, improvements, integrations, and adaptations.

In one case, the Alma Customer Success Manager reviewed UBL workflows for electronic resource management and shared some optimization advice and guidance. Similarly, the UBL team enjoyed close assistance implementing the license manager tools within Alma.

Alongside helping UBL make full use of Alma features, Ex Libris provides the support and assistance needed for implementing new functionalities within the system.

The Library Takes Control

Among the primary considerations guiding Leiden University Libraries is maintaining control over their data, giving them the flexibility needed to use, share, and gain insight from all of their resources.

Owning the data

UBL was able to efficiently migrate a number of large library collections into the Alma system thanks to the level of data governance the system provides. This includes both maximum control of the metadata and flexible import-export capabilities.

The library has also been able to easily repurpose the metadata of physical objects to describe digital versions of the same items. This has been particularly valuable for many digitization projects, which are gaining momentum in recent years, especially among UBL's special collections.

"With Alma," Bas said, "we fully own our metadata and administrative data, which we have used to do all kinds of very important things in the last couple of years."

Integration

Another aspect of their library management system that UBL leadership considers extremely important is integrations, such as with vendors, real-time acquisition, EDI, central indexes, and the like. It is yet another way in which Alma provides the library greater control over its own data and resources.
Alma's out-of-the-box integrations and rich APIs make it possible

for UBL to manage workflows, data and unique processes as the library sees fit, now and in the future. An important example of this arose in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the integration of Alma and the UBL locker management system. UBL uses lockers, rather than a staffed lending desk, for loaning out physical items, which meant that the library could continue to safely lend out books to patrons even when the pandemic hit. The ability to integrate cloud-based Alma and the locker system became supremely helpful in maintaining continuity.
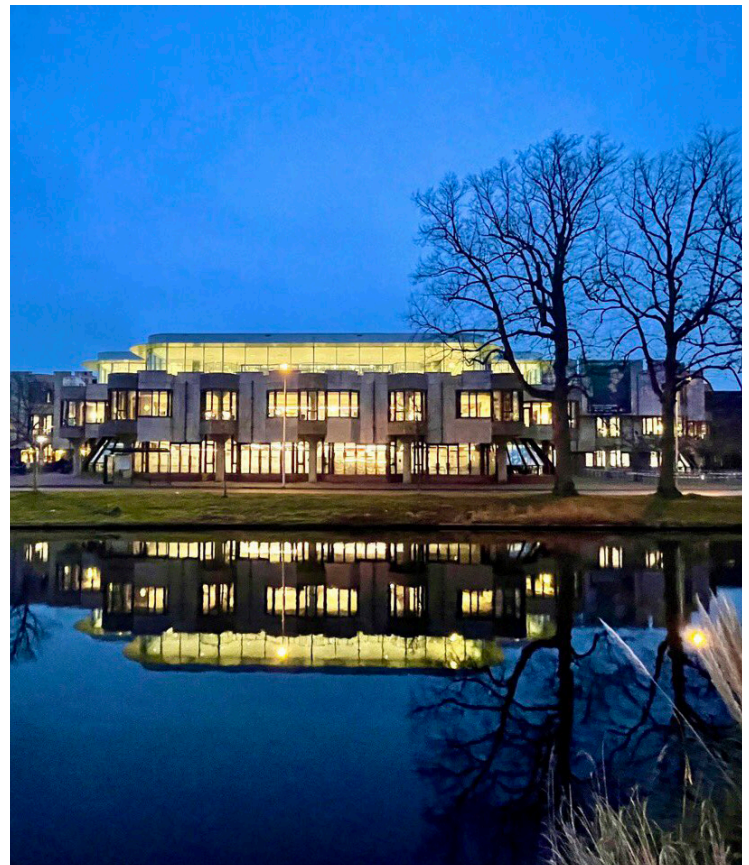
Analytics

UBL sees the Alma analytics capabilities as another uniquely valuable feature, built upon the comprehensive visibility and control the system provides. With a wealth of data and insights, librarians are able to easily create more informative and useful reports.

The UBL team has created a number of analytic dashboards, as well, "which allow for deep dives into the collected data on a very sophisticated level," according to Bas. "Analytics is especially helpful in combination with other data, which can then reveal performance indicators such as staff productivity."

In the final analysis

Bas succinctly summarized the feeling at UBL both before making the decision to go with Alma and now, years later: "The list of things we like about Alma is quite long – and getting longer, as we still have more to discover."

The Value of a True Community

Beyond the technology and the formal support offered for Alma customers, Bas said that Ex Libris "has fully realized the idea of a user community."

UBL leadership has expanded its contacts with colleagues from other institutions – such as KU Leuven, the University of Manchester, the University of Liège, and others – at the IGELU conferences. Bas noted that "the community feeling is very strong at those conferences, with a very good, friendly atmosphere," which creates mutually beneficial relationships. UBL and other Alma users then share ideas, tips, best practices and experiences, in order to help one another and to expand each other's horizons.

UBL team members have also reached out to the Alma community through the dedicated listserv. By asking questions in that forum, they can discover if others are struggling with the same challenges and get help from their colleagues or from an Ex Libris representative.

"There are some very good technical people on the listserv giving tips on, for instance, integration profiles and analytics," Bas observed. "And a number of times, we are also able to answer others' questions. "We have a number of developers who are very active on the Developer Network."

Bas said that he sees "quite a lot of stuff going from ideas on the user forums to real-world Alma developments by Ex Libris. I think it is quite unique, in terms of development cycles, to see those ideas actually appearing in the release notes."