University of Mpumalanga

Transformative Unification in a Small Academic Library

UNIVERSITY OF
MPUMALANGA

A South African university successfully brought together two academic libraries, located on different campuses and with siloed, manually managed services, in a single, comprehensive and cost-effective platform.

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> *"I tell all my colleagues who ask me about my experience that Alma has been the best management system for our library."*
>
> Zanele Mathe, Library Director at University of Mpumalanga

About the University of Mpumalanga

The University of Mpumalanga (UMP) was established in 2013 as a comprehensive institution. Its main campus is in Mbombela, with a second in Siyabuswa. The Siyabuswa Campus is currently focusing on the training of teachers for the Foundation Phase. The Lowveld College of Agriculture was incorporated into UMP on 1 January 2015. As of 2020, 4,400 students are enrolled at the university.

UMP provides the opportunity to develop a Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) that balances general and profession-oriented education. UMP's comprehensive status allows the university to offer qualifications from Higher Certificates, through diplomas to Bachelor's degrees, and postgraduate qualifications up to the doctoral level.

The University of Mpumalanga's library has a print collection encompassing the needs of all its diverse faculties, in addition to e-books and databases to which it is subscribed. The library now includes 21 staff members who handle all patron requests and acquisition processes.

Two Disjointed, Manual Systems Under a Single Umbrella

As a university that incorporated two existing institutions of higher education, the University of Mpumalanga operated separate libraries, on different campuses, under a single organizational umbrella. Management of library resources and circulation at each of the locations was handled differently, but both were using manual processes. One library was dependent on librarians filling out Excel spreadsheets, while the other used a homegrown application that also required manually maintaining the data.

The inefficiencies of the existing processes were clear. It was very time-consuming to record asset details manually on spreadsheets or within the homegrown register, and such records were notoriously prone to human error. On a daily basis, librarians had to review the records, identify overdue items, and then send out hand-typed reminders to patrons. With the dependency on manual records, it was difficult to know for certain if a missing book was lost, checked out or misplaced. Library Director Zanele Mathe believes that certain items were in fact lost to the university due to mistakes, inconsistency, or a failure to update the records.

Compiling accurate statistics regarding the library collection and its use was extremely difficult in such a system, requiring a manual review of monthly entries on lending, borrowing and acquisitions. And the result was incomplete and unreliable, nor could the data be usefully manipulated in any way for greater analysis. As Zanele noted, acquisition is an investment by the university, but without a way to assess actual use of the resource, it was not possible to "judge the return on the investment."

In addition, the library at the University of Mpumalanga had to take into account the limitations it faced as a relatively small entity. Its collection is limited, as is its staff. In a highly manual environment, the services the library could provide to support students and faculty were also limited, because librarian time was taken up by routine managerial and circulation processes.

The incoherence between the two systems made the challenges even more pronounced, with each location managing resources

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Zanele Mathe, Library Director at University of Mpumalanga

differently, as well as having its own organizational culture and modes of communication. In addition to the logistical problem of maintaining disconnected library workflows, the manual nature of their individual management processes meant that the only way to know what the other campus library had was to make a phone call or send an email.

The University of Mpumalanga built a strategic model that enabled the library to address the urgent issues arising from its disjointed, manual management systems: a unitary multi-campus management approach. This meant no longer treating the two libraries as individual, collaborating entities and finding a library services platform providing centrally managed, coherent workfloaws.

Alma 'Kept Hitting the Mark'

The goal of unifying the libraries at University of Mpumalanga required what amounted to a complete transformation. Therefore, the university considered systems and platforms that were as comprehensive as possible. The other issues considered in assessing potential library systems were: privacy and security; accessibility; integration with other platforms and systems; reporting and analytics; interface ease-of-use; and unified workflows.

Zanele was familiar with Ex Libris Alma from her previous employment at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), which included extensive experience with selection and implementation of the solution. However, she insisted on

a full, unbiased evaluation process for Alma at the University of Mpumalanga, because the institutions are different and operate in different contexts.

Among other aspects, it was critical to determine if Alma was as good a fit for a small institution as it was for CPUT, which has approximately 33,000 students (eight times the student body of the University of Mpumalanga).
The library director reviewed available literature regarding various libraries' experiences and challenges. Then, she invited multiple vendors to present their system's capabilities and features.More than any other solution, Zanele said, "Ex Libris Alma kept hitting the mark." It is a comprehensive, integrated and seamless platform for library services from acquisition to resource sharing. It supports all resource types and all university faculties in a single, coherent metadata framework, as well as being responsive to the UMP multi-campus management prescripts.

In large part, Alma's cloud-based platform provides the bult-in infrastructure needed to quickly unify the library's collections and workflows. It also provides the convenience of allowing remote login for employees and faculty when needed.

As a final step in her rigorous assessment, Zanele compared what she saw from Alma at Mpumalanga with her previous results at CPUT. She saw that the capabilities were the same, regardless of the differences between the two institutions. However, she also noted that there were new features she had not seen before. This confirmed for her that Alma was continuing to regularly improve, with upgrades and advances that would ensure her library remains future-proofed.

A Transformative Solution

After making the decision to adopt Alma, the university library team began working closely with Ex Libris on implementation. This involved preliminary coaching from Ex Libris, as well as guidance from colleagues currently using Alma at their own institutions.

Library staff members were pleased and impressed with the level of support they received both during and post-implementation. The Ex Libris team continues to be responsive and the library staff has a good working relationship with them. Librarians also make use of the Ex Libris Knowledge Center for self-help guidance and, as they are new to the system, hold regular in-house meetings to review selected instructional materials.

As intended, Alma has unified the two libraries and their workflows. Managing all print, electronic, and digital materials in both locations with a single interface eliminates siloes and streamlines processes. Its support for all modern metadata and open standards is also expanding the library's options for collection development.
With its automation of routine processes and cloud-based technology, Alma has proven to be a cost-effective library management solution as well. It has freed up time for librarians to better support teaching, learning and research at the university, while requiring no real maintenance by the university's IT support staff.

Overall, the library has found it easy to quickly adapt to the transformative capabilities of Alma. Among these, University of Mpumalanga librarians specifically highlighted:

- Simple integration with Moodle, the learning management system.
- The offline circulation feature, which ensures continuity even when there are network problems.
- Constant Alma upgrades, which always enhance the platform.

Siyabuswa Library team

Leveraging Alma During a Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected academia in many ways, much as other sectors of public life. Alma has allowed the library at University of Mpumalanga to continue many of its activities despite the restrictions the global health crisis has imposed.

- As a cloud-based platform, Alma can continue to be used by librarians and faculty who are not able to be on campus during isolation or general restrictions on movement. Remote management is easy and seamless.
- As home to one of the few libraries in South Africa circulating physical books during the pandemic, the university has implemented curbside pick up. This has been facilitated with a direct request link in Ex Libris Primo, including an option to select the campus where they will collect the desired item. The request is then seamlessly managed in Alma, which has allowed librarians to continue supporting students and faculty despite the complexity.

- The library staff at University of Mpumalanga noted that the clear benefits of Alma have become even more pronounced in the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Library staff at Mbombela

About Ex Libris

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