AN AFRICAN DREAM?

E-information services at the University of Pretoria’s Veterinary Science Library (Service Unit: Veterinary Science, Academic Information Service)

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Abstract: This presentation will highlight the need to move to an e-environment for veterinary and animal health information users in Africa. Problems will be featured as well as practical solutions and success stories. The University of Pretoria’s e-initiative to extend learning to distance students gave impetus to the introduction of portals - in various formats. The Academic Information Service, Service Unit: Veterinary Science (the library at the Faculty of Veterinary Science) extended the learning horizon, making information available to users beyond the campus e.g. private practitioners needing information for Continuing Professional Development purposes, post graduate students (including a disabled student as well) doing distance learning courses as well as students in other African countries.

Unique products developed for this market will be described, such as the African Goat Web, the Ostrich Web, the African Wildlife Web, and the Arnold Theiler digitisation project. These products were developed as an aid in providing information on topics that are rapidly increasing in popularity.

Portals to enable registered users of the Academic Information Service to access e-information with the least effort and confusion such as the "Library in your Office " will also be featured. This very basic portal allows the user to access some of the more important information resources for veterinary use and then afterwards directly connect to UpeXplore, the Academic Information Service’s OPAC catalogue or the electronic journal collection of the Academic Information Service or the automated article requesting system run by SABINET (South African Bibliographic and Information Network).

The development of the library’s electronic newsletter which serves as an user education and information aid for wider, off-campus usage will also be discussed.

The overall management of these e-products via the Infoportal of the Academic Information Service with the help of Greenstone Digital Software (a suite of software for building and distributing digital library collections) is helping to turn the African Information Nightmare (P. Lor) into the African Dream.

Introduction

The University of Pretoria (UP) (http://www.up.ac.za) is striving to become the University of Choice in South Africa. It is the largest residential university in the country. This year there are more than 34 000 residential students on the campuses of the university and almost 10 000 students are enrolled for post graduate studies. Furthermore there are more than 28 000 additional students enrolled for the university’s distance education courses.

At the Faculty of Veterinary Science the effects of the amalgamation process (the country’s two veterinary faculties, UP and Medunsa amalgamated to form one National Faculty under the auspices of the University of Pretoria) are fading away and the issue of increasing quality research is enjoying high priority. There is also a marked increase in the number of registrations of postgraduate students who have become involved in research programmes in various departments. The increase is 56% more than last year’s registrations. This means that more and more students are working from outside the campus and they also need access to and training in using the available information resources.

To accommodate the information needs of all the clients on campus and off campus the Academic Information Service (University Libraries) had to start moving
towards an electronic environment. At this point in time, various products, for example the e-journal collection, the e-reserve collection, the service units’ web pages etc. have already been developed by the Academic Information Service (AIS.) At the Veterinary Science Library, which is a service unit (SU) of the Academic Information Service (AIS), this situation led to the development of further e-products to enhance our services. In this way we are supporting the AIS’ E-Information Strategy, helping the University to realise its E-University vision.\(^3\)

**Products**

**Library in your office** ([http://www.ais.up.ac.za/vet/virtlib.htm](http://www.ais.up.ac.za/vet/virtlib.htm)) \(^4\)

By listening to our users we tried to respond to their needs by designing a product which they could understand. We started by designing a website where we explain the difference between the various products and services and where we supply access to these products where ever the user is - thus the title “Library in your Office”. On this page we state that you only need 2 steps to get the required information.

**Step 1:** Lists relevant databases.

Use the list of selected databases to do a literature search. Databases such as CABDirect, Agricola, Medline, Toxline, Zoological Record, Wildlife Worldwide, Pubmed, Biological Abstracts, Merck Index, Focus on Vet Med and Science, etc. have been selected for this list from the wide variety of databases the University subscribes to. Some of the Databases are available on Internet as well as on our CDMenu system (Zenworks software)

**Step 2:** Explains how the hard copy can be obtained by

1. Checking on UPexplore (the University’s OPAC catalogue) to see if it is in the VET library
2. Using Tyds@Tuks (e-journal collection of the University of Pretoria) to get an electronic version and
3. Requesting the article or book via Magnet, Sabinet’s (South African Bibliographic and Information Network) ([http://www.sabinet.co.za](http://www.sabinet.co.za)) automated article/book requesting system. At this point there is also an instruction sheet and/or an online demo available to guide the user through the process of requesting.

Access to these products is by IP authentication while on campus. Off campus usage usually requires passwords but we are in the process of training our users to make use of an Innopac (III) gateway.

This very basic type of portal is well received and used by our clients – on campus as well as from outside campus. Lecturers as well as students use this page. It can even be used from outside the country as the website is available on the Internet. With this product we try to make our resources easily accessible to our clients. \(^5\)
The next problem we encountered was that of keeping our clients informed about changes in our products and services. To solve this problem we started a newsletter in printed format but soon realised that the distance users were left behind. To communicate with them as well the newsletter was then also published in e-format. The e-newsletter is well received and widely read. Unfortunately there are still a few clients who do not read the newsletter but I am positive that we will eventually get them interested as well.

The African Goat website (http://www.ais.up.ac.za/vet/goatweb.html)
The need for information on African Goats arose when the importance of the African Goat as a production animal in Africa was emphasized in the curriculum and in research projects. Our solution for this problem was creating a website. The lecturer discussed this need with his information specialist and together they decided what should be made available on the site. He supplied the initial information and we developed the website and made it available on the Internet.

This page provides
- Access to an up-to-date list of African Goat experts,
- Links to conferences (past and future)
- African Goat societies
- African Goat research centres
- Links to full text books, articles, a thesis and conference papers.

Both the information specialist as well as the lecturer provide information to keep the website updated. This page is widely advertised in the media and with the help of a counter we can track the number of visits to the page.

The Ostrich Website (http://www.ais.up.ac.za/vet/ostrich.htm)
The Ostrich website was developed after we published the first edition of the Ostrich Bibliography. At first this page merely served as a marketing tool but as time went by we realised that outside users had an increasing need for ostrich information and it was expanded to a full scale information website. With the completion of the 2nd update we decided that the contents pages as well as certain sections e.g. Nutrition, should be made available electronically. Clients may request hard copies of the references and we supply them in paper format or electronically with costs paid by the requestor.

When the University of Pretoria implemented the Ariel system for the sending and receiving of articles we at the Service Unit: Veterinary Science very soon discovered that we could also use this system to send articles to clients’ e-mail addresses. At first we experimented with Docview for the receiving of articles on the clients’ side but found Imaging which is part of the standard Windows installation more than suitable for this purpose. This process opened up the pathway for sending articles via e-mail to anybody anywhere in the world.

Arnold Theiler project (http://www.ais.up.ac.za/vet/theiler.htm)
Another project which started as a very basic information page for public use has grown into a huge digitisation project.
In South Africa the grade 4 school syllabus includes a section on important people in various fields. Sir Arnold Theiler, founder of our faculty, is one of these people and we were constantly contacted for information on his life and work. We then decided to place information suitable for a grade 4 scholar on a website. This website contains a few pictures which we digitised, a short overview of his life and also a list of all the awards he received during his lifetime.

Once we started scanning the photographs we realised the wealth of original documents in our possession. These documents include personal correspondence in the form of letters and postcards, original articles by Theiler, stacks of photographs etc. We decided to digitise this material to ensure conservation and also availability for the future.

This digitisation project forms part of the AIS’ E-Information Strategy (Text Centre)

Infoportal (http://infoportal.up.ac.za)
The Academic Information Service of the University of Pretoria developed an academic portal called “Infoportal” which can be personalised by every user to suit his needs. This portal creates the ideal environment for managing and organising all the above-mentioned products and services. It allows the user to

- create direct links to the various products,
- create virtual groups which is a most effective tool for running a COP, (Community of practice)
- diarise events and meetings of the virtual groups
- read his web based e-mail
- access the e-journal collection
- access the e-books collection
- update his personal information on the LDAP server

The content of the Infoportal is placed there and kept up-to-date by the Information Specialists of the AIS. It is the ideal tool for lecturers and their postgraduate students, enabling fast effective communication between them and also with their Information Specialist. Postgraduate students in other parts of the country can also form part of these virtual groups.

Other projects
The AIS is looking at a global (open source) search engine, Library services as a portlet, Meta-data standards for UP, a Taxonomy/thesaurus for the UP Portal etc. for the future. E-Scholarship is also being implemented at UP by the AIS with the focus on electronic theses. We started making veterinary theses available in 2002 and will be involved with helping students to present their theses in e-format. (UpeTD – http://ais.up.ac.za/upetd.htm)

At the Veterinary Science Library we are working on a website for Veterinary Legislation in South Africa, a Rhino website, a Wildlife Rehabilitation website and also a website with the dental formulae of various animal species.
The Faculty of Veterinary Science of UP is the only veterinary school in the country. It serves a growing number of postgraduate students located all over South Africa as well as other countries in the Southern African region. The electronic delivery of information to these students is therefore essential.

The process of supplying e-information and e-services is an ongoing one. As the needs occur we will attend to them. It is therefore of the utmost importance to be in close contact with our clients. Whether they are lecturers, students, private practitioners, pharmaceutical companies, outside users even outside the country; we will listen and try to make it easier for them to access the required information. We want to take the nightmare\(^8\) out of retrieving information and turn it into a colourful and viable African dream.

References

5 Basile, A J. Making the Internet manageable for your users (and yourself). In LaGuardia, C. ed. *Recreating the academic library: breaking virtual ground*. 2000;169-192