Introduction

Established in 2000 and modeled after the Wharton School of University of Pennsylvania, the mission of Singapore Management University (SMU) is to generate leading-edge research with global impact and produce broad-based, creative, and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy. SMU education is known for its highly interactive, collaborative, and project-based approach to learning, and for its technologically enabled pedagogy of seminar-style teaching in small class sizes.

SMU is home to over 9500 undergraduate and postgraduate students and comprises six schools: the School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law, and School of Social Sciences. SMU offers six bachelor degree programs in Accountancy, Business Management, Economics, Information Systems Management, Law, and Social Sciences, as well as a growing number of postgraduate, doctoral, executive development, and professional programs.

The SMU Libraries (Li Ka Shing and Kwa Geok Choo Law Libraries) strive to serve as a vibrant hub for learning, research, and interactions amongst members of the SMU community. Leading this vibrant learning and research hub is Gulcin Cribb, who became the University Librarian at SMU in 2012. Prior to joining SMU, Cribb was the Director of Libraries at Ozyegin University in Istanbul, Turkey, and Director of Information Services at Bond University in Australia. Cribb is internationally well-known for her extensive experience in leading Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) at universities and has published extensively in the use of technologies in teaching and learning and strategic management.

In the following interview, Cribb shares with the readers the new and changing roles of academic librarians in the information age, as well as why she continues to write and publish even after she has already reached the peak of her career in the field of librarianship.
Could we begin this interview by introducing yourself—for example, your professional and educational background, what did you study at university, do you come from a family of librarians?

My name is Gulcin Cribb, and I am the University Librarian here at SMU.¹ My undergraduate degree was in English Literature and Language—I obtained it in Turkey. Then, I went to the United Kingdom, and did some graduate work in Linguistics in Australia later on at the University of Queensland.² I also did a postgraduate degree in Library and Information Science at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT),³ and those were my professional qualifications. Much later on, I decided that I needed more management qualifications, so I undertook postgraduate management studies as part of an MBA at the University of Queensland. I highly recommend that people get MBAs and things like that if they have aspirations for leadership positions. I then did various other senior leadership programs in Australia. I do not come from a family of librarians, but many of my family members are in academia.

Was there any reason why you left Turkey and decided to pursue your education further in England and Australia?

I got married in England and my husband is Australian. We decided that England was too cold, so we moved to Australia!

What are the major advantages of getting MBAs or other professional certificates?

I guess it depends on what kind of career track you want to take. I think that if you want to be in a leadership position, management qualifications are necessary. If you want to take more of a specialization—for example, Chinese literature or research data—it may not be a good idea to get the management qualifications. In that case, you would need more scholarship. But, these things are changing. The things I did in my career may not be relevant today, but these qualifications certainly helped me in my career.

Have you always worked in libraries? Did you have any other nonlibrary careers?

Before I got my library qualifications, I worked briefly as an English teacher and as an interpreter because I am bilingual in Turkish and English. But, I have worked in university libraries for most of my career, which is almost 40 years. I also taught in the library school at Hacettepe University\(^4\) in Ankara—I was a lecturer there for a couple of years.

**Can you tell us more about your path to becoming a University Librarian?**

In terms of where I worked, I worked at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library\(^5\) in London. Most of my career was then spent at the University of Queensland libraries, 17 years. Then, I was appointed as University Librarian at Bond University at the Gold Coast. At Bond University,\(^6\) I was asked to be in charge of an organization merging the library and IT. Then, I was invited to help set up a new university in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2008, which was set up by the then new President of the university, Ozyegin University. I accepted this position because I had worked as a consultant for Bilkent University\(^7\) in Turkey for 2 months in 2006, and the Dean of Business there became the President of Ozyegin University who invited me to help set up the library. This was a good opportunity for me because my elderly parents were living in Istanbul at the time, so it was nice for me to spend some time in Turkey and also be involved in a start-up.

After I completed this project in Turkey, I decided to come back to Australia in 2011, and I was then offered my position at SMU at the end of that year. So, Singapore is the fourth country and the ninth university where I have worked!

**Was it difficult to travel around and work in different parts of the world over your career?**

It can be challenging, but I look at it like this: university libraries are more or less the same wherever you go. They are a part of the university ecosystem. I’ve been fortunate to have worked with some very good presidents and provosts. Singapore is a wonderful place to be in!

**Can you describe some of your current roles and responsibilities as the library director of SMU?**

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\(^4\) Hacettepe University—Homepage. Available from [https://www.hacettepe.edu.tr/english/](https://www.hacettepe.edu.tr/english/).
\(^5\) SOAS Library—Homepage. Available from [https://www.soas.ac.uk/library/](https://www.soas.ac.uk/library/).
\(^6\) Bond University—Homepage. Available from [https://bond.edu.au/](https://bond.edu.au/).
\(^7\) Bilkent University—Homepage. Available from [http://w3.bilkent.edu.tr/bilkent/](http://w3.bilkent.edu.tr/bilkent/).
Briefly, I am responsible for leadership and strategic management of SMU Libraries. I see myself as leading the university library in five major areas, which is no different from other businesses, really. Libraries are businesses these days. So, you are accountable, and you have to manage technology, talent, resources, finance, space and facilities, and stakeholders. That’s what the job is all about.

*When you say that it is like a business, is this because the outcomes have to be measurable? Is it challenging sometimes for educational institutions to have anything measured in numbers?*

Of course, measuring is important, but it doesn’t always have to be in numbers or in quantitative terms. Assessment is done at a more operational level. I see my role as being more at the strategic level than at the operational level. I don’t spend much time undertaking the operational level activities. I have very competent team members, and I work with them very closely in terms of helping them, supporting them, and working with them to take the library to the next level. It is a business—but, art, film, and literature are also businesses. You look at it more in the context of the business of the university.

*What is the concept of your idea of strategic planning for an educational institute in Asia in the 21st century?*

In some ways, it’s no different from any other university—you have to align yourself with the business of the university. Your strategic plan cannot be separated from the university’s direction, mission, and vision. A strategic plan is not just a piece of paper—if it is just paper, it is useless. The strategic plan has to be embedded into everything we do, and we don’t even talk about the strategic plan. The moment you open your mouth and say “strategic plan,” people get turned off because it’s all management talk. You’ve really got to be able to translate it into everyday life in everything we do. I know management talk, but I try to avoid it as much as I can because the people you deal with—you have to be able to talk in their language and you have to understand their language. But, of course, what we do needs to be embedded and aligned within that strategy. We do our strategic plan every 3 years, but it’s the journey of preparing the plan and executing it without having to refer to the piece of paper because it has to be really dynamic, organic in everybody’s day-to-day activities. So, whenever an issue comes up, we can discuss it with our colleagues and ask questions like, “Is this what we have aligned with our vision, our strategy, in what way?”
For example, one of our critical goals in our strategic plan is talent management. It is about sustainability, succession planning, and career paths for our team members, and to make sure that after we move on, the organization is healthy and growing. That is what I understand as a strategic plan rather than management rhetoric.

Can you give a brief introduction to SMU and its library system, its services, and collections?

SMU is a relatively young university—it was established in 2000, so we’re in our 17th year now. We have six schools, and our biggest school is the business school, and we have other schools in accounting, economics, law, social sciences, and information systems. We have 7500 undergraduates and 2000 postgraduate students. Our pedagogy is based on mainly small classes—we don’t have classes that exceed 40–45 students. We also use a lot of experiential and project-based learning approaches.

The library is a very popular part of the university, very vibrant and busy. Last year, we exceeded 1.2 million entries in 1 year. We endeavor as much as we can to be embedded into the teaching, learning, and research agendas of the university so that we are not separate from the business of SMU. The library does not have its own agenda per se—the agenda of the library is the agenda of the university. Space planning is very important for the physical space as well as the virtual one. We undertook some renovations of the library 3 years ago that made the library a really interesting, welcoming, and beautiful space. We just opened our new law library (Kwa Geok Choo Law Library) on January 3rd, and the building has a unique design. We work very closely with students and student organizations. We are a part of the university’s day-to-day activities in teaching, learning, and research.

Can you tell us about your student profiles? Do you have many foreign students from neighboring countries or from Europe and the United States?

The overall majority of our undergraduate population is Singaporean. We have a small number of overseas students from neighboring countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, and Malaysia. For postgraduates, we have many international students. We have a very large global exchange program, so we get over 1000 students every semester from universities all over the world with whom we have Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs). This is to really help with global exposure to our students. Over 80% of our undergraduate students get some kind of global exposure.

Can you describe the staffing structure at the SMU Library?
I would say that we have a flat structure. We’re a small library—we only have about 40 staff members. Twenty-five of them are professionals and the rest are paraprofessionals or technical specialists. I don’t have deputies or anything like that. We use a lot of student workers to work after hours, at the desk or as helpers on projects, so that we can use our professional staff more for research, and teaching- and learning-related activities. We have been making deliberate attempts to reduce our librarians’ operational duties or even desk work, as we want them to spend more time doing high-value work such as working with faculty on research, bibliometrics, citation analysis, teaching and learning, research data, collaboration with other areas of the university, and other things like that. So, we have reduced the number of paraprofessionals and increased the number of librarians over the years.

We have an initiative called “FYE (First Year Experience) librarians” where we employ new graduates Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS) from the library school, and train them to focus more on the first-year students and more of the frontline work, so that we can assign our more experienced research librarians to higher-level duties like research support, scholarly communication, and embedded information literacy.

We don’t have a traditional library structure—we don’t have such a department as technical services, acquisitions, serials, or anything like that. We have outsourced a lot of our technical services operations. We do less and less of the backroom operations and instead, we do mostly frontline and interacting with the faculty. We have a collaborative system of initiatives, projects, and task forces so that a lot of the decisions are made by those project groups and task forces. Team-building and working as a team are very important. We want to make sure that people are able to work across the whole library rather than in their own department. So, we try to avoid the “silo” department structure as much as we can because we’re too small to have separate departments.

*Can you give a brief introduction to the collections of the SMU Library?*

We do not do collection-building in the traditional sense. We stopped doing it about 4 years ago because we build our collection based on “just in time” rather than “just in case” principle. Our collection is really patron-driven. We are fortunate not to have inherited large legacy print collections. We have a small collection of about 60,000 print materials, but our electronic collections are over 400,000. I think that 95%—98% of our
journals are electronic—we try not to subscribe to print journals because we want to make sure that our users can access the materials. So, collection development does not work the way it used to in the past, but the most important thing is to exploit the collection and the resources—whether we own them or not—in such a way that the faculty and students can get access to whatever they need in the most seamless way possible. We put a lot of effort into our systems, interfaces, tools, and user experience to maximize usage and access. So, we have an arrangement with various vendors to load MARC records for books (electronic and print) on our catalog so that we would purchase them if somebody clicks on the link twice, which means we do not have to go through the old acquisitions process.

You mentioned working together with faculty on research. Could you describe a little more about this?

In terms of what the professional librarians do, they work very closely with faculty in terms of helping them with their publishing, citations, bibliometrics, and working with them to teach their students how to do research. It’s not just about searching and locating materials, but the training programs must be embedded within the curriculum.

Can you describe your typical day at work, or is there a typical day?

Well, there is not a typical day at work at all! I usually have lots and lots of meetings during the day—the meetings could be with my team members, the university management, finance, a project team, or a function. For example, today, I went to a lunch where the President had an event for those who were involved in the new law library project. It’s a very good opportunity for networking and collaborating with other parts of the university. I also do a lot of writing, reading, and asking questions—I write, publish, and present both locally and internationally.

Why is it important in your position to continue to write and publish?

I sometimes write with one of my colleagues or get invited to give presentations to various library groups. I think that it’s important because you can share your research. I think that sharing your research and activities with others, listening to other people, and understanding what they are doing is very important for my position. I am often asked to be on panels, too. They all take time.

Which professional associations are you affiliated with and how do they inform you about your work?

I am on the standing committee of Academic and Research Libraries at International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.
I have been involved with this group for a very long time. I am also a member of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)\(^8\) and have been a member since 1983. I am also on the editorial team of the *Singapore Journal for Library and Information Management*\(^10\) and a member of the Library Association of Singapore.\(^11\)

I feel that as a professional librarian, it is very important for me to be a part of the professional associations, and contribute to professional developments and to sustainability. Also, I learn a lot from young people. Just because I’ve been around a long time doesn’t mean I know everything! I learn something everyday. I read at least two or three articles or blogs a day. I just love learning about what new things are happening both in our profession and in higher education around the globe.

*Could you describe your management and leadership style?*

I think that leadership has a lot to do with mentoring and coaching. Especially in the last 10 years or more, I have seen many young librarians develop. It gives me great pleasure to see them grow and get new positions. So, I try to give them as much support as I can. Succession planning is important so that whatever one does, one needs to make sure that we have put in place measures to help people develop themselves. We have a very participatory and collaborative environment here, and I am very fortunate to have a bunch of very creative and innovative individuals in my leadership team. We work together, and it’s usually them coming and saying to me, “We just did this or we are working on this, etc. What do you think?” We just work it out.

I often see my role as opening doors for them, facilitating things, and introducing our people to others—making sure that they build those connections. I also think that it’s very important that I’m a member of university-wide committees or task forces. I really enjoy mentoring staff—not just within my own library, but also within other sections of the university.

*How does your multicultural background contribute to your work as a library director? Do you think that it’s an advantage?*

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\(^8\) IFLA—Homepage. Available from [https://www.ifla.org/](https://www.ifla.org/).


I think so. I always say that I’m Asian! I was born on the Asian side of Turkey. Even though I’ve lived most of my adult life in Australia and the United Kingdom, I think that having experience with different cultures makes me a lot more receptive to cultural differences. I appreciate it, and I really embrace diversity. I really like the fact that the world is not homogeneous. We have about 14 different ethnic groups within our team—I think that’s fantastic! We have Chinese colleagues from all backgrounds—Chinese, Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean. Isn’t it wonderful?

Is it difficult to manage people of different backgrounds who may have different judgments and values?

It can be challenging, but, I think that’s interesting! One of the things that we try to do here is to appreciate differences rather than just saying that he’s different or she’s different. In fact, those differences add to the strength of the organization, because people come from different points of view. It adds to the diversity and it makes it more fun. I love being in Singapore because it is an amazingly, diverse country.

Since you have worked in Turkey, Australia, and England, how are the students’ and faculty’s expectations and perceptions of a university library different or similar?

As I said in the beginning, universities are more or less the same all over the world. It just depends on if they are an intensive, high-level research institution, or more of a teaching and learning university. The constraints of the country, the political system, the economy all make a difference to this. For example, the systems in the United Kingdom and Australia are very similar, obviously. Singapore is little bit different—it is more business-like. So, there are more expectations and there is a lot more focus for end results. The system is changing in Australia and the United Kingdom, because governments are putting pressure on universities to be more accountable and show their value and so on. In Turkey, in addition to that, there are other constraints such as the volatility of the political system. I was fortunate to work in two universities in Turkey—both of them were like North American universities where the instruction was in English. The political systems and the economic situations do affect this, but at the higher levels, they are all more or less the same. In this day and age, we are all a part of the global ecosystem, and our faculty must publish in high-quality journals. The university’s reputation is also important. At the end of the day, they are not all that different.
What part of your job at SMU do you find most rewarding and most frustrating?

As I mentioned earlier, I love seeing the staff grow and take on new responsibilities, and I like to see them develop their potential and push boundaries. In terms of frustration, I think that I’ve been around long enough not to be frustrated too much! I have seen it before. At the end of the day, you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. If there are challenges out there, there are always ways of getting around them. If you can’t solve a problem, you just find another strategy of dealing with it. There’s no point in getting frustrated. It’s all about remaining positive, getting on with life, and doing the best you can.

What are some of the future directions of SMU and your library?

It’s going to be a new ballgame for us since we’ve never had a branch library before. I think that one of the most important things is to deal with the changing roles of libraries and librarians. We have changed a lot over the last 5 years—as you know, we do not have catalogers or acquisitions librarians anymore. But, we’ve got to change even more. We’ve got to get more into the business of SMU. As somebody said, “We are not in the library business, I am in the SMU business.” Whatever SMU is doing, we’ve got to be an integral part of it. We’ve got to make sure that we carry all of our team members with us so that it’s not just me or my senior colleagues thinking that we are a part of the SMU business. We’ve got to make sure that we work with everyone together in such a way that we all share the same or similar values and vision. It’s very important to have peripheral vision and be aware of what’s going on—not just in libraries, but also in universities and other businesses. So, be open-minded and take on new things and be more open to take risks. As you know, in our profession in librarianship, we have not been very open to risks. I think that we need to be more prepared to try new things. We need to demonstrate value to SMU in whatever we do and be sustainable, in turn SMU needs to demonstrate this to the Singapore community.

You are quite active on social media platforms. Many other libraries have social media, but it’s often difficult to interact with and engage with users on them. What are your experiences in this area?

You can’t expect everything from social media, but we try to be as active as possible. I believe that we are quite good with our social media engagement, because some of my colleagues know how to manage it to engage our students. But, we use a lot of different platforms. We need to be very careful to understand the reach and potential of each platform.
For instance, on April 1, we do an April Fool’s Day prank in the library in association with the students, and we do something for Halloween. Students can see us and expect us to be a bit unusual and approachable. In fact, they say that SMU librarians are cool! I think that the people who work here know what really piques the young students. It’s not always going to succeed, but they try different things.

Would you like to conclude this interview with something inspiring?

Well, I always say that it’s important for us to be passionate and curious. We can’t afford not to be curious and we can’t afford to be complacent about our profession and our work. Lastly, I am really proud to be a librarian, and I love this profession. I think our profession has a great future.

Gulcin Cribb, University Librarian, Singapore Management University.
School of Law and Kwa Geok Choo Law Library.

Kwa Geok Choo Law Library, level 5.
Li Ka Shing Library, The Lounge.

Li Ka Shing Library, Learning Commons.