Introduction
Philip Kent shares some insights, drawing on his experience leading the Library at the University of Melbourne, which consistently appears as the highest-scoring Australian university in international rankings. As University Librarian at the University of Melbourne, Kent commenced at the University in March 2009, following an extensive career in universities and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australia’s national science agency. Philip joined Melbourne at an important time.

Following the Information Futures Commission and the development of a 10-year information strategy for the University, the Library was reinvigorated under his leadership. Its history as a repository of vital research and cultural collections remains central to the role of the Library. A number of significant cultural collections, including the University Archives, the largest non-government archive in Australia, and the Grainger Museum are also included under Philip’s leadership. In addition, the Library is developing innovative learning spaces to support the learning and teaching strategies of the University, as well as providing appropriate technologies to support student learning. In doing so, Kent outlines the challenges for the library in serving a research-intensive university in the 21st century.

Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself, your professional training, and education background? For example, like, what did you study in university? Do you come from a family of librarians?

My educational background commenced at the University of Queensland, Australia.¹ I completed a Bachelor’s degree in Arts at the end of 1978. Originally, I was train to become a journalist. But it was still

¹ The University of Queensland, Australia—Homepage. Available from https://www.uq.edu.au/.
early days in journalism. Most jobs in journalism required working dreadful hours at newspapers, editing in the middle of the night, etc. I then planned to study education—that is to become a secondary school teacher in History, English, and Geography.

And then by total accident, in my last semester, through a friend I was offered a part-time job in a college library. So, I worked part-time nights and weekends. I really enjoyed the work. Soon I realized there were probably better career prospects at that time in libraries. I decided to undertake a part-time degree in librarianship at Queensland, which is now Queensland University of Technology. Ultimately, I ended up working there as well in the library.

I don’t come from a family of librarians. I completed the graduate diploma of library science from Queensland University of Technology. As a result, I am qualified for associate membership of the Library Association of Australia (now ALIA). Then, about 15 years ago, I completed an MBA, which seemed to be an important tool to have at that time. To some extent, it would probably be useful to earn a qualification in the technology area these days.

**EMBA versus MBA—was the EMBA program equally popular during that time?**

I completed an MBA, not an EMBA. A number of my colleagues also completed them (MBAs). There was a perception that librarians didn't know a lot about management, and by getting an MBA, you could perhaps position yourself better in your institution and profession. I particularly enjoyed the strategy subjects and some of the more technical subjects like financial management. So I guess it helped me ultimately become a CEO in libraries.

**Could you tell us about your path to becoming the University Librarian (Director) at the University of Melbourne?**

I started my career in librarianship in Brisbane in academic libraries, and then I went to work for CSIRO in Melbourne, the national science

---

2 Queensland University of Technology—Homepage. Available from [https://www.qut.edu.au/](https://www.qut.edu.au/).


organization. So, I became very involved in systems projects, and I ended up working more in IT. The library was merged into the corporate IT services area at CSIRO, and I ended up building digital libraries and automating services.

I spent a large amount of time working in IT. When I finished my MBA, I thought I wanted to try something different. And so, I ended up working in risk and audit, which again was quite different from librarianship. I was like an internal management consultant. I completed many reviews, on topics like change management projects, legal compliance, as well as risk assessments for 2 years. But then I came back to libraries as the CEO.

In addition to being able to formulate strategic plans, what are the other skills that you learned from your previous MBA programme, which ultimately contribute to your current work as the director of a major academic library?

The MBA increases your analytical skills, and enables you to look objectively at the organization as a whole—how it is functioning, and how it is serving the community as a whole. Also, you learn “soft” skills through organizational behavior, organizational development, and other human resources subjects. It also taught me broad management and leadership skills required to become a leader. They also taught me important strategic skills.

At the same time, you need empathy. You need to understand how organizational learning takes place, including how to mobilize staff, and how to motivate people to work together as a team. These days, commentators are also saying that workforces in the future will be less rigid, less structured, and much more multidisciplinary. If you look at what other work organizations are doing, for example, big banks and big corporates, they are putting a lot of emphasis on innovation, including opting for more modern, open structures, so that people are able to think and work creatively.

As a leader, you need to make choices or decisions because we cannot do everything. You also need to understand how the whole strategy process is working out, including what new skills and resources are necessary. In other words, you have to identify strategies that could put you and your organization in a good position, working out how you leverage them to the best impact for the community you are serving. For example, when I first came to the University of Melbourne, I discovered our library had amazing resources. But I did not know what rich, rare, and special collections were held at other university libraries in Australia. I
determined this as a unique point of differentiation for us—that is something that really makes this university and the library special, or many other university libraries in Australia don't have at scale.

I had to develop strategies to “unlock” those rare and special collections and to utilize them in special ways. So, after I came to this university, we placed strategic emphasis on that area, because that area makes us very different. For example, we have been able to integrate those rare and special materials into our teaching programs.

Obviously, all these primary collections, as raw materials, are fabulous for research. The ability for both graduate and undergraduate students to have such hands-on experiences with research materials is absolutely unique—they wouldn't get similar experience in many other universities. So strategy-wise, it is really all about making choices and deciding a way where you should concentrate your efforts and resources to get the best impact for your institution.

**Could you describe your current roles, and areas of responsibility as the University Librarian at Melbourne?**

When I came to Melbourne, I came as the CEO of a very large library. It had a number of nontraditional areas within the library, for example, museums, galleries, etc. I also had responsibility for a group called Learning Environments, looking after the learning management system and technologies such as lecture capture that are used in classrooms across the university. That area was responsible for developing new learning spaces, and I also had the responsibility for records management.

Both learning environments and records management were moved as part of various re-structures. So the library became a little bit more traditional through losing those additional functions. I also have embraced a broader role over the last 3 years. I am still the University Librarian, and have the overall strategic responsibility as the most senior librarian in the university. But at the same time, the university went through a major re-structure, which split the strategic from the operational arms of the university. And so, I am now working in what is called the Chancellery, which is the group that works with the Vice-Chancellor. We were responsible for organizational strategy, policy, external relationships, our brand, and compliance.

I said earlier, I am essentially responsible overall for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums at the University of Melbourne. However, I don’t have day-to-day operational responsibilities over the people working in those galleries, museums, etc. They report directly to faculties or service
organizations. But I have overall responsibility for strategic planning and policy development for galleries, museums, and collections at a whole-of-university level.

What are the services and special collections deemed to be the highlights of your library?

The Library has about 3 million physical items. Historically, it was about the number of volumes held in a large research library. But with the current electronic environment, and particularly with so many e-books being easily accessible online, we librarians and library services are gradually moving away from size to being more about effectiveness. At the same time, it is difficult to judge, measure, and monitor the quality or effectiveness of library services within the digital environment. It is hard to measure which libraries are more successful than others. But certainly, our printed collections are still really important. We probably have one and a half million e-books now. We spend about 90% of our budget on electronic resources, and that is obviously the way of the future. But we still have large numbers of printed volumes, and surprisingly, some of them are heavily used.

While many libraries have witnessed an obvious decline in circulation, we still have high book loans when compared to other university libraries in Australia. That is possibly because we are a research university. The ratio between undergraduate and graduate students is about 1:1. We have moved towards a more North American university model. That means the types of required resources are changing as well. Perhaps, part of the reason is due to the fact that not all books are being digitized yet, and that is why we are still seeing a fairly strong usage of printed resources.

Can you describe the overall staffing structure of your University Library?

There are two functional groups within the Library. One is called Scholarly Information, which very much looks after the front-of-house services, the facilities that are extremely popular with students. We have been very successful in re-developing our physical library spaces. This is what has been variously called the Learning or Information Commons initiatives that are happening around the world. At Melbourne and in Australia we have been very successful in refurbishing our library spaces.

The other is called Scholarly Information, the area that some people call information or digital literacy. In American universities, they call it user education or library instruction, but Australians call it scholarly communications or information literacy. We work very closely with academics on teaching into regular credit-bearing courses. In the old days, librarians
have traditionally taught in those subjects, particularly around information resources and discovery. Now, we tend to work more closely with academics in developing short tutorials, quizzes that can be built into the university curricula, and the library materials to become part of the courses and embedded into the online learning management system. Under this system, students can discover relevant materials or learn about issues such as scholarly writing and plagiarism.

We have about half of the library's workforce in the Scholarly Information area with a primary focus on teaching and learning partnerships, and all the face-to-face services. The other side, called Research and Collections, focuses on supporting the academics and postgraduate students in the various steps within the research cycle. Other important responsibilities such as library systems, technical services, and special collections also sit in the Research and Collections area. Essentially the structure here involves two Directors supporting the University Librarian.

*How do University of Melbourne versus University of Sydney versus RMIT University different in terms of the users' need, expectations, and their attitudes to what the respective library services?*

Although we are different in terms of our missions, I suspect that our undergraduate curricula are very similar across the three universities.

There is only one university in Australia that doesn’t have a law school. Universities in Australia have become very similar to one another, because universities are becoming more comprehensive in order to meet student demands.

There are eight universities in Australia that make it into the top 100 universities in the Times Higher Education rankings. Those eight universities have higher entry standards and strive for higher standards in terms of the overall curricula and performance.

One can go to RMIT to become an electrician or a plumber, as well as becoming an accountant, etc. They teach in vocational as well as higher education sectors. In my opinion, universities like University of Sydney and Melbourne aim to provide a broader educational experience to equip students for diverse careers. In a sense, RMIT is preparing students to have a career immediately upon graduation. At Melbourne, 50% of our students continue as postgraduates.

*Could you describe your typical day of work? Is there ever a typical day at work?*

I joke that if I ever stop going to meetings, I will have to be re-trained! So, most of my days are very busy. I have back-to-back meetings
from 9:00 a.m. till 5:00 p.m. Generally, seven meetings a day, but it could vary. It is about working with other senior colleagues and communication. Some meetings are longer than others. Meetings with other senior staff involve influencing, negotiating, and prioritizing. I also like to get out of my office and to move around, and I like to go and visit people in their offices.

I find business here at this university is often transacted over coffee. I meet people at coffee shops and the faculty club, and talk through issues. In addition, we have many events—particularly with libraries, galleries, and archives such as a new exhibition opening or public programs with guest speakers.

People are questioning the value of universities, including complaining about the cost of student fees. Universities have to justify ourselves more and more, and to consciously contribute to the general public. For example, our library hosts public programs, lectures, and activities. These programs are often held in the evening and lunchtime.

Could you describe your management and leadership style? Since mentorship is such an important theme in leadership, could you explain your experiences with both mentorship and leadership? And what is your philosophy behind your management?

You can have all your resources and strategies worked out. You could have beautiful library buildings. You could have the most wonderful library collections. But without competent and capable staff, you cannot produce the services that are absolutely necessary for meeting the users’ demands. It is really important to make strategic choices, because we simply don't have all the money to do everything, nor all the staff. We don't necessarily have staff with all the new skills to do what we have to do.

As a result, we need to be very targeted in our workforce, in our design of jobs, and also try to make sure that there is a good pipeline of staff. In other words, we need to provide our staff with possibilities and opportunities to grow and to develop their careers. This means your job as the CEO is to lead your team to work more collaboratively. In order to achieve this, the director or CEO must be accessible, and constantly reinforce the direction we as an organization are going, and why we are going in that direction.

Thinking constantly about adding value to our organization is about celebrating successes with staff as a team, and congratulating people publicly, especially staff who have made a positive contribution to the organization.
We have a number of library mentorship schemes in Australia. Aurora is an innovative program. It is a separate, not-for-profit organization with a board. It has a great track record in developing staff with potential from libraries and archives across Australia and New Zealand. We always try to send at least one person to their program every year. They tend to be the “bright young things” that are coming up through the ranks who demonstrate potential. They are often early-career staff with good prospects. I have participated in some of those annual programs—participants appreciate the involvement of senior people from the profession. Generally, we talk about our own careers and the lessons we have learned. We tell stories. Stories are really powerful in conveying learning, and make it more personal and interesting. I participate as a mentor, observing, giving feedback, and making myself available to those on the course.

Similarly, we have a mentoring program here in Melbourne conducted across the university and state libraries. It is a professionally structured scheme, including mentoring. We start with workshops about how to be a good mentor and to be a good mentee. There is a committee that works hard on matching the mentors and the mentees. I was involved last year as a mentor. It’s often hard to get university librarians to commit the time. I can’t do it every year but attempt to participate every alternate year. I mentored someone who potentially could aspire to be a university librarian. It is important that participants have access to senior professions in a safe environment where they can test ideas and discuss issues. Mentorship programs encourage and develop staff, and can lead to identifying formal courses such as MBAs, other staff development, or professional training courses. Leadership training develops “soft skills” and self-awareness.

In your opinion, what traits and attributes do most successful library directors have in common.

I don’t think everyone has the same blend of traits and attributes, since we are all different. We have meetings of the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), and the group of university librarians from the eight research-intensive universities several times each year. When we get together, we are not all the same. But I guess some of the important traits and attributes are around leadership, and being able to

provide a compelling story about what the library is, its role, and its achievement, also to articulate how the library is supporting the institution. Generally, you have to be able to talk and present to your audience with excellent presentation skills. But you also need other skills, for example, empathy, interpersonal skills, and good communication and political skills.

More importantly, you also need to have good management skills in order to be able to manage over 200 people. At the senior level in a university, it is equally important to have good networking skills and the ability to “play on the world stage,” so to speak, to be able to form good contacts around the sector worldwide with similar universities, in order to share knowledge and information and learn from one another.

Why is it important for an academic library to be on the international platform?

Because we are a global economy now! Globalization is happening all around the world. When I visit the University of Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Berkeley, UCLA, etc., all their librarians are confronting exactly the same issues. That is why various groups have come together to form consortia or collaborations.

My library is involved with others in the Pacific Rim region. I hosted that annual meeting here in Melbourne last year. That group started out as a group particularly interested in East Asian collections. The members of the group come from institutions in locations around the rim of the Pacific Ocean that experienced Chinese immigration. We all teach East Asian Studies and we all have some amazing collections of East Asian materials. So that geographic grouping has worked very well for us.

As the General Director of the University of Melbourne, which part of your job do you find most rewarding and which part of your job do you find most frustrating?

In my experience, frustrations always come from insufficient resources, as it is incredibly competitive. It can be ferocious, as everyone has great aspirations, wants new buildings, wants more money for online resources, etc. Also, you find that people are not always as cooperative as you wish—because of resources shortages, people are increasingly more competitive and combative. Someone said to me once that the fights were so vicious because the rewards were so small in universities!

What I find most rewarding is, for example, when I worked at CSIRO, I was working with extremely bright people. I went to our faculty club and there was a Nobel laureate sitting there having his lunch. Also, there are times when I see the library is actively contributing to the success of the university. When the University wins awards; and when
eminent scientists or professors earn rewards and recognitions for their work, I like to think that they have achieved that because of the help of the library.

So could you describe the current information landscape, and how is this new information landscape reshaping the learning, teaching, and research practices of the university community as a whole. In addition, how is this new information landscape shaping the professional services provided by your library?

Today many people are talking about disruption, and how the world is changing. A lot of that is about technology. Nowadays, people spent a lot of money on their tuition fees. Because they can move more easily around the world, students that might have gone to the United States to study are now choosing to go somewhere else. They can afford to do so, and they do take their money with them. Universities in Australia have something like 36% international students. Compared to 20 years ago when there are not so many international students, the current market is much more competitive. People are looking closely at university rankings to choose their academic destination. Eleven years ago, university rankings were only starting to become important. Whereas now, everyone I talked to says: “My university wants to be in the top 50 universities in the world.” But the problem is that there is not enough space for everyone to be in the top 50! So it is very competitive.

One of the impacts of technology is the move to online education. This brings the potential for people to study at a university somewhere else in the world. People don't have to be restricted to the university that's physically in the same town, city, or country. People can choose “where” they want to study. Big moves toward online education provide a real challenge for the future. It also changes research activities, particularly the move to digital humanities and new electronic ways of working (e.g., e-science, e-research, etc.) being carried out across national boundaries.

All of these environmental changes are pervasive, and very much changing the types of services that libraries are providing. There is increasing demand to provide open access resources that are free. You simply cannot compel students to buy textbooks. We need to find other ways of doing that, and libraries can help identify resources and contribute them to the university community.

Similarly, most Australian university libraries now have copyright services, in order to advise academics on resources that can and can't be used in their courses.
Throughout your career as a librarian, did you have any regrets or second thoughts?

Not really. It is an exciting place to be, particularly in university libraries. I particularly felt for the public libraries in the United Kingdom in particular, and to some extent here in this country where they have closed down many public libraries, purely for financial reasons. So I guess I am lucky that I have not been working in those areas. Many academic libraries are still playing central roles in supporting their university to achieve its mission. For this reason, as long as we continue to change or evolve, we probably will survive. But I still love my job, despite those days that are difficult and problematic, including having to work with people who don’t always understand what we are doing, are deliberately making things difficult or being competitive, etc. But in general I find my career very rewarding.

If a young person was inspired to become a librarian and asked you for advice, what kind of advice would you give to her?

This has in fact happened to me a couple of times recently. Some people I know have been thinking about getting a PhD or completing a degree in librarianship. Interestingly, in one case, this person has done both. I would still recommend the field to people. There are bright opportunities in librarianship, even though people say we will need fewer librarians in the future because everything is on the Internet these days. There is a future if you are savvy about the underlying values and principles of librarianship; if you really believe in things like freedom of information, privacy, etc.

The space where librarians play is through their “soft skills” in helping people navigate the information world. These are the types of roles that will survive.

Do you have anything to add before closing this interview? For example, would you like to say something inspiring to our readers?

I am a glass half full, not half empty, person. I tend to have a positive outlook on things. There are always great opportunities for librarians to add value to our organizations. We can provide wonderful services that can transform people’s experiences in universities, whether they be inspirational spaces for students to study or innovate, or it is really high-quality resources that ensure their awareness of all the latest thinking in their academic disciplines. All such things help provide a really positive future for libraries and librarians. Libraries are fundamentally at the center of academic or scholarly institutions, even since the medieval times!
Philip Kent at the University of Melbourne Campus.

Philip Kent in the Rare Book Room, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne.
Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne c. 1959 at time of opening.

Study Lounge, Frank Tate Building, The University of Melbourne, 2009.