Queensland Health Libraries Network: bringing it all together

The Queensland Health Libraries Network (QHLN) is composed of 19 public hospital and specialist health libraries across Queensland, Australia, with 16 of these libraries part of a network that uses Alma/Primo. The libraries provide a range of services and information to a community of some 70,000 employees of the public health system in the state. Members of the general public may request documents and books from the QHLN collections via their local public library.

The libraries are funded independently by autonomous health authorities established by the state government and are not part of a university library system. They vary in staffing numbers from five full-time employees to one part-time librarian, with the majority being single or two-person libraries. The library locations are spread over a large geographic area, including metropolitan, remote and rural communities.

The Time Had Come

Prior to moving to Ex Libris Alma, members of the QHLN used four different library management systems. Fifteen of the hospital and health libraries were using a centralized model funded and provided by the state Department of Health. In 2014 support for the funding and administration of the LMS was withdrawn. This decision coincided with the LMS hosting partner, State Library of Queensland, beginning to decommission the system, as they had moved up to Alma.

The Department of Health gave its associated libraries 12 months to find and implement their own systems. In all, 16 libraries decided to create a common network and use the same library system. A working group was assigned the task of identifying the various needs and capabilities of the individual member libraries, and then selecting a suitable system.

In their search, the QHLN group considered several key priorities:
- The system had to be effective across a widely dispersed network of libraries of all sizes.
- The price had to be affordable for all, considering that state funding for the previous system was not reallocated in the new model.
- Vendor support was very important, in light of the lack of relevant technical expertise at most of the member hospitals and health services.

Balancing Diverse Needs

A formal market review concluded with a report to QHLN members that Ex Libris Alma would meet their present and future requirements. Among the key drivers of this recommendation were:

- A cloud-based solution was necessary for such a diverse network, providing ongoing and consistent system updates and support.
- A recognition of the need to manage electronic, digital and print resources in a single, coherent and flexible system.
- Alma and Primo are designed to work together as a single system, simplifying processes and support.
- The ability to add on other systems in the future.

QHLN moved forward with Alma and Primo by leveraging the existing agreement between State Library of Queensland and Ex Libris. The State Library would manage the use, support and annual costing of Alma and Primo on behalf of QHLN, giving the network access to support and expertise that its individual libraries would not otherwise have had.

With 16 libraries of various sizes and specialities, QHLN had to balance the needs of the individual members while ensuring the system was not too complicated. To this end, a governance group of Alma Certified Administrators was drawn from among the QHLN libraries to oversee the administration of the system.

Data from four different library management systems had to be integrated into Alma, which included matching bibliographic records and managing each library's classification systems. In addition, QHLN wanted the library system to provide users a single point of access to all the health information resources available from the government's clinical information portal. The Alma Community Zone collections and records effectively made this possible.

The unified Alma approach to all library resources opened up the opportunity to add digital objects and create collections not previously considered part of a health library's role. These include, for example, documentation and artifacts of historical events in the hospitals and health services, repositories of research articles written by clinicians, and more.

As Alma and Primo brought significant changes to the management of QHLN library resources, librarian training was a key element of a successful transition. As the member libraries are geographically dispersed, Ex Libris provided remote training and workshops that were also two-way discussions of how Alma could best meet each library's operational needs. According to Chris Parker, Manager of Library Services for The Prince Charles Hospital Library, "The workshops were vital to our better understanding of how the system worked."

A Shared Community of Knowledge

While each QHLN library may be considered small, as a network they share Alma system resources and gain the benefits of a large institution. Alma is also flexible enough to cater to the unique operating needs of each library.

As a cloud-based system, Alma frees library staff from routine system maintenance activities and eliminates expenses related to servers. The system is updated regularly, with no need for local or third-party IT support, additional funding, or disruptions affecting library services. Periodic upgrades also make it easier for library staff to incorporate changes incrementally, rather than trying to digest large chunks of information as when systems were less regularly updated. In addition, the cloud environment gives QHLN the confidence of stable availability in the event of local natural disasters, which they have faced in the past, by spreading the risk with built-in backup alternatives.

With Alma and Primo, QHLN easily met another of its major objectives in providing a "one-stop shop" for all health information resources - physical, digital and electronic library collections, as well as the clinical health portal. This has made it possible for member libraries to showcase and highlight their electronic resources, historical artifacts and research. For patrons, the integration of electronic request forms makes it easier to request resources and information that QHLN libraries may not currently own.

QHLN libraries are using Alma Analytics to make their services and processes even better. They leverage reports created by Ex Libris and others in the Alma community, which both saves time and indicates what kinds of reports are possible.
QHLN library staff are pleased with the transition to Alma and Primo, as the single, coherent shared system facilitates the sharing of knowledge, processes and resources. Moreover, each library team uses Alma and Primo in ways that best serve their institution's specific needs, without in any way impacting their colleagues at other libraries in the network.