



AFTER THE FLOOD: THE LONG TALE OF RECOVERY, COOPERATION, AND COLLABORATION

The National Library of Australia's **MONIKA SZUNEJKO** shares the dramatic story of the Australian National University Chifley Library flood, the resilience of the library team and the positive outcomes of the disaster recovery initiative.

In February 2018, 27 days after the Blue Shield Australia Symposium held at the National Library of Australia (bit.ly/2KZtUAK) and the signing of the DisACT (Disaster ACT) Letter of Intent on Cooperative Disaster Preparedness for cultural institutions in the ACT region, the Chifley Library at the Australian National University was hit by a flood of devastating proportions.

Severe storms lashed Canberra suburbs on Sunday 25 February causing flash flooding. Waters entered the Chifley Library building from nearby Sullivan's Creek, mixed with water from the library's plumbing, and flooded the ground floor of the building as contaminated water. Flood waters reached one metre in height and struck with an intensity that pushed furniture across the floor. The flood affected

the entire ground floor of the Chifley Library building – the busiest of ANU's five libraries – resulting in the loss of over 110,000 monograph volumes, almost 10,000 microforms, and thousands of serials, official documents and other materials. Metres of packed compactus, rows of cabinets of microform, service equipment, 40 study spaces, staff tearoom and amenities, and the air-conditioning plant for the building were all housed on the ground floor. The week of the flood was humid and warm, and the collections spared from flood waters were soon affected by mould.

The university's disaster management protocols kicked in and responded to the immediate impact. The contents of the library's disaster management bins were deployed, including the three sets of gumboots contained within. However, the extent of the damage to the collection meant that decisions had to be made on a major scale. The scale meant that the helpful offers from DisACT members were not used, as the extent of mould and spores was extraordinarily high, encompassing hundreds of thousands of titles. Valuable professional advice was received from expert conservator Kim Morris. An external company managed the salvage, disposal, and clean up. Dehumidifiers and fans were working 24x7 for around two and a half months to reduce the spore and moisture in the environment.

And yet, the library gods were smiling: 2,024 books were on loan at the time, some collections already housed in other areas of the library were spared, and some collections had already been weeded, making identification of loss more focused. The Australian National University Library had recently completed a full data refresh on the Australian National Bibliographic Database (ANBD) and could easily determine which items were unique in the national collection.

Immediately post-flood, University Librarian Roxanne Missingham and staff of the ANU Library experienced another inundation – of support and offers for help.

Individuals, libraries, academics, industry partners and alumni offered assistance ranging from immediate access, to offers of collection materials, alternative resources, and one kind offer of space in a domestic freezer if it was needed. ANU Library staff from the other five library branches on campus cared for and hosted colleagues with morning teas and pamper packs of essential oils to counter the acrid smells of the flooded basement as staff worked to retrieve items.

As a result of the flood, the library was closed for three weeks. In that time, staff were relocated and provided Chifley services out of other branches – including daily retrievals out of other floors of the Chifley Library.

Woroni, the student newspaper of the Australian National University, asked the question, ‘When it loses 100,000 books, what does a Library do?’ (bit.ly/2J9lnh3) The answer to that question is to do what libraries already do: collaborate and share.

Librarians are practical people and the ANU Library immediately launched a series of strategies to meet the immediate needs of the ANU community and mitigate the initial impact of the loss on the academic community. Replacement of short-loans was fast-tracked, free inter-library loans for all students and staff were expedited, use of ArticleReach was encouraged, BONUS+ was opened up to undergraduates, semester two orders for course materials were fast-tracked, reading lists for all affected disciplines were reviewed and re-ordered, relationships with other research libraries were strengthened to facilitate access to resources, research students and academics were contacted and provided with support appointments with liaison librarians to ensure access to collections and bibliographic support, and an hourly free shuttle service began running between ANU and the National Library of Australia. All to fill the gaps in collection access.

Libraries Australia performed a collection analysis on the lost collections of the Chifley Library, mapping the collections against holdings on the ANBD, and found that there were no uniquely held items lost in the Chifley flood.

Then the ANU Library requested a special interlibrary loan: a staff member from the National Library of Australia was seconded to ANU to assist with the flood recovery project, with the insurance collection valuation, and to help coordinate internal activities associated with identifying the collection rebuild processes, ensuring academic engagement, and negotiating with stakeholders about the collection rebuild. On top of business-as-usual activities, post-flood service changes, and additional work to reconnect the ANU community with access to collection material, the library simply needed more assistance in the early stages of collection rebuilding to coordinate the

practicalities of preparing data for the library’s portion of the university’s insurance claim.



A vision to build a new library that holds the collection a world-leading research institution needs is well underway, and is led by an engaged community connected to the university’s mission of excellence in research and education.

Disaster management plans often focus on the first 48 hours’ response to disaster recovery. However, disaster management is a long game with a long tail that stretches into every dimension of the library world: customer service, academic liaison, collection development, metadata management, and interlibrary loans. 

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