# Ara Institute

## How Fewer Systems Led to More Control

The New Zealand institute found that Alma's automation, analytics, integration and intuitive interface were exactly what was needed for the optimization of their small library.

> *"Alma pretty much runs itself, while giving you as much control as you need. We almost feel like we're a big library now"*
>
> Claire Brocklehurst, Systems Support Librarian at Ara



*Photo by Michal Klajban*

### About Ara Institute of Canterbury

Ara Institute of Canterbury ("Ara") is a vibrant, progressive, government-funded institute in Canterbury, New Zealand, providing world-class tertiary-level education. Formed in 2016 from the merger of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) and Aoraki Polytechnic, Ara has six campuses throughout the South Island. Each year around 14,000 students enroll at the internationally-recognized institution, including many overseas students. Over 50 countries are represented among staff and students at Ara.

## 'Just Hope It Keeps Working'

The Ara academic library faced two major challenges simultaneously: staff quantity and system quality. One was inherent to the institution's size, while the other was the result of a patchwork of systems and workarounds accrued over the years.

The library used multiple systems, each with different structures and purposes, for managing collections, circulation and administration. This made communication and coordination between them extremely difficult. With some applications hosted locally and others externally, the library also had limited control over their own systemic options.

As the software, processes and makeshift solutions Ara library was using had been adopted over time, no one had complete knowledge of each system's capabilities. The library was often dependent on the expertise and experience of a single individual to ensure functionality and coordination. When that person left the institution, the tribal knowledge left with them. For example, reporting was done through MS Access based on a decade-old format and macros that were unfamiliar to the team.

As described by Claire Brocklehurst, Systems Support Librarian at Ara, the librarians "did not know what we didn't know. Let's just hope it keeps working."

An additional challenge the Ara library faced, which compounded the system issues, was the inherent limitations of being a small organization. Its collection is limited and its staff consists of nine people, with librarians wearing multiple hats and stretched for time. In the disjointed and often manual managerial ecosystem they had, librarians were also unable to provide students and faculty with all the support they would have liked in a timely fashion. Instead, librarian time was taken up by routine managerial and circulation processes.

## The Benefits of Peer Pressure

Librarians at Ara recognized that the management systems in use were insufficient and increasingly inefficient. Ara's IT team was also frustrated with the frequent need to support those systems with installations, maintenance and updates.

In addition, the National Library of New Zealand was on the verge of changing over to a new library management system. This prompted Ara to look for an updated system that had the flexibility to work well with whatever the National Library chose to use.

The search for a new system continued on and off a few years, until the budget became available and the personnel were ready. Ara saw presentations from a variety of vendors; however, the library was already familiar with Ex Libris as they had already been using Primo for several years.

Ara chose to upgrade to Primo VE, which gave librarians more control, better search capabilities and more flexibility. They can now more easily create local electronic collections of all kinds, for example, with convenient web-based access for students and faculty.

The close integration of Primo and Alma, as well as a very attractive pricing proposal, were factors in the Ara decision to adopt Alma. However, more significant for the library was Alma being a library services platform that brought a number of processes previously handled by multiple systems under one umbrella.

"It is nice to have one interface, with one login, that does just about everything," Claire explained. Adding that Alma is easy to

use and "clearly designed for librarians."

Cloud-based and comprehensive, Alma gives Ara librarians control and relieves the previously unavoidable IT burden. Among the benefits highlighted by the library team were Alma's robust reporting, extensive automation, a link resolver, and analytics such as usage statistics for electronic resources.

Initially, Alma appeared daunting to the small library team, because it was so comprehensive and robust. They knew they would not immediately be using some features and that others, used by larger libraries monthly, would be used infrequently. However, the transition was fast and fairly seamless, with Ex Libris providing the same support to Ara as they would to a much larger institution.

For the Ara library, with its modest staff and limited technical expertise, the move to Alma was a major undertaking. Three members of the staff completed the full Ex Libris training program and then helped other librarians get started. This approach worked well, providing the flexibility necessary in a very small workforce. Ara also took the opportunity to change the way the library organizes its collection and to simplify all circulation policies.

As Claire wrote at the time, "I think we can all be quite proud of ourselves: the Little Library That Could."

Ara librarians also turned to the very active community of Ex Libris users during and after the transition, getting real-world advice and assistance from veteran Alma users all over the world. The Ara team is now contributing their own insights to the community, as well.

## A Big Change for a Small Library

The introduction of Alma and upgrade of Primo replaced five different systems previously used by the Ara library. The ability to manage all the library's resources from a single interface eliminated siloes and streamlined processes, while meeting the library's primary goal of ensuring resources are accessible to Ara students.

Ara librarians highlighted the ability to manage Primo from within Alma as a very important feature for smooth, easy and

fast customization and updating. Changes to the collection are immediately visible in the catalogue, so that students and faculty always have access to the most current information.

The centralization and coherence of the Ex Libris solution has given the Ara library team a much more comprehensive understanding of their management ecosystem. With Alma, this understanding translates into greater control over library resources, processes and services, as well as transparency and accountability.

- A sandbox for training employees and for safely testing system changes or customizations.
- Support for all modern metadata and open standards expands the library's options for future collection development.
- Custom reports can run whenever needed, especially for deselection and weeding.
- Patron issues are easier to troubleshoot, with complete, accurate information and tracking of resources.

Ara librarians find all of Alma's features to be easy to use, with no need for specialized knowledge or IT terminology. This what-you-see-is-what-you-get characteristic of Alma makes it easy to share administrative responsibilities among staff members, which is especially useful in a very small library.

Alma is also proving to be a source of cost savings for Ara. With its cloud-based technology, Alma's total cost of ownership (TCO) is less than that of the systems previously in use. Alma requires no real maintenance by the institute's IT support staff, nor are there fees for hosting, software, upgrades, and the like.

In addition to money, Alma has saved Ara librarians time with its streamlined, consolidated and automated processes. These include routine administrative tasks, data entry for resources added to the system, coordination between collections and catalogues, bulk actions, and more. Overdue and lost book notices, for example, are issued automatically when needed, rather than depending on librarian intervention. These automations and optimizations free librarians for more value-added tasks, such as further improving student and faculty access to the resources and other support for teaching and learning at Ara.

"It pretty much runs itself, while giving you as much control as you need," Claire said. "We almost feel like we're a big library now."



*Photo by Michal Klajban*