

# BULCO and The University of Amsterdam Library

Leveraging Mobile  
Apps to Engage  
Patrons



When academic libraries go mobile: Two early adopters of the Ex Libris Library Mobile app discuss the challenges, benefits, and winning tactics for implementing a branded library app

*"The implementation of Library Mobile app allows us to be more available to our students and to provide them with all the necessary support."*

Eric Lams, Director of BULCO

*"For us, one of the key elements in choosing an app for our library was the universal model, which enables almost instant implementation at an affordable price point."*

Driek Heesakkers, Project Manager, Library of the University of Amsterdam



## About Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale (BULCO)

**BULCO** (The Library of the University of the Littoral Côte d'Opale) is a multidisciplinary library with collections distributed over four sites (Boulogne-sur-Mer, Calais, Dunkirk, Saint-Omer). You will find in our libraries all of the documentation that you need (manuals, reference works, reviews, maps but also DVDs, BDs, novels and more) on physical copies or within electronic resources.



## About The University of Amsterdam Library

The **UvA Library** is an inspiring and hospitable study, research, and meeting space, both offline and online, for researchers, lecturers, and students. We collect, store, manage, and select information from sources worldwide. We offer a platform for students and researchers to share past and present sources and for making the information and sources available to a broad group of users. We provide our users with assistance tailored to their specific needs so that they can find, within the extensive range of available information, the right sources for use in education and research. In this way, we further advance the reach of our knowledge and help improve the quality of higher education.

## Spotlight on mobile in the academic library

Academic libraries are at the forefront of their universities' digital transformations. As a result of their consistent investment in digital resources and services, many academic libraries were better equipped than other institutional stakeholders to deal with the sudden increase in demand for online services brought on by the pandemic. Nevertheless, with hybrid and remote learning continuing at many universities, librarians at these institutions find themselves facing new communication challenges, including:

- Increasing the visibility and value of the library within a cacophony of online messaging
- Meeting emerging needs for increased online services
- Offering better digital user experiences for patrons

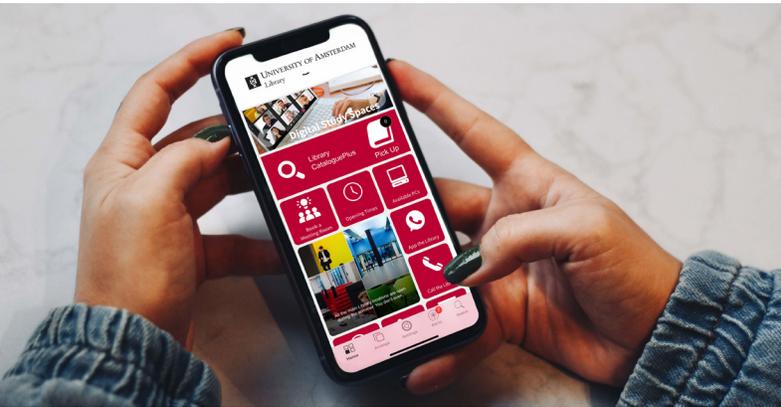
One way that libraries are addressing digital messaging challenges is by enhancing their mobile offerings. Two institutional libraries in Western Europe, [The University of Amsterdam Library](#) (UvA) in the Netherlands and [Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale](#) (BULCO) in France, have introduced a library-specific mobile app, powered by [Ex Libris Library Mobile, to help streamline patron engagement](#). Having deployed their apps at the start of the fall term, both UvA and BULCO are leveraging the mobile app to expand their digital offerings and promote the library among their university's patrons.

We spoke with Driek Heesakkers, Project Manager, Library of the University of Amsterdam and Eric Lams, the director of BULCO, to understand their motivation for adopting a mobile app and learn more about the strategies they've employed to successfully deploy and market these apps to their patrons.

## Why a mobile app?

For both institutions, the transition to online learning led to an increase in demand for digital services.

While both UvA and BULCO had mobile-friendly websites that linked to Ex Libris Primo - the institutions' discovery software - both libraries felt they needed a dedicated channel not only for sharing information but for communicating directly with patrons.



Library Mobile app UvA  
Copyright: Nathana Rebouças-Unsplash

"At UvA, approximately 25% of our patrons still need to access physical resources," says Heesakkers. "Although we do send students emails to let them know their books are ready to be collected, we've found that students don't always engage with the emails we send out." The library was also eager to use the app to make key library services, such as its BookSwap marketplace and finding study spaces, more accessible to students on the go.



maBULCO's events feature

For BULCO, the decision to go mobile was informed in part by changing attitudes towards mobile services. Conversations with librarians, patrons, researchers and other library stakeholders convinced Lams that a library app was needed to address current patron expectations from mobile.

"Following a survey carried out among our patrons, and in view of the health crisis that is affecting us, we have chosen to set up a mobile application to be as close as possible to our students, allowing them

to benefit from the services of the library from their smartphone," Lams explains. "The implementation of Library Mobile app allows us to be more available to our students and to provide them with all the necessary support."

## Adopting a Universal Library App

Funding continues to be a pressing issue for academic libraries in the fallout from Covid-19. For both Heesakkers and Lams, choosing a universal app - an app with a single listing on app stores that delivers a customized experience per client - allowed their library to cut costs without compromising on the patron experience.

"We were looking for a cost-effective way to introduce a dedicated library app with an institutional profile that integrated tightly with Ex Libris Alma," says Heesakkers. "For us, one of the key elements in choosing an app for our library was the universal model, which enables almost instant implementation at an affordable price point."

Universal apps can additionally be configured more quickly than bespoke apps. "In light of the exponential growth in demand for digital library services, we needed an app in place in time for the Fall 2021 start of term. With the help of Ex Libris technical project managers, we were able to get the MaBULCO app up and running in 8 weeks", explains Lams.

## Gauging the user reaction

At BULCO, the anecdotal response to the introduction of the app has been positive. "Our patrons are happy that there is a way to access their library card and discovery services within a familiar smartphone or tablet environment. At the same time, our librarians are excited to be able to communicate with patrons online without having to involve marketing or IT colleagues," says Lams.

UvA is tracking patron attitudes towards the app through user analytics. The app has had over 1,700 signups in the two months since its launch, with approximately 50-100 new installs per week, and around 30% of users returning to the app on multiple days within a two-week period. With these initial encouraging findings, the library is exploring further ways to engage more of UvA's 40,000 students through the app.

## How academic libraries can successfully launch a dedicated mobile app

Both UvA and BULCO are still in the preliminary stages of rolling out and fine-tuning their mobile apps. Nevertheless, both already have advice for institutional libraries that are considering launching a mobile app:

- **Start with getting management onboard.**

"Aligning the relevant management stakeholders to the opportunities and benefits of the app is critical for implementation and beyond," says Lams.

- **For the best user experience, listen to your users.**

It's hard to delight users if you don't have their input. UvA started with a soft launch of the app and got useful feedback from student employees of the library before the main launch to the entire student population. "The 10 student employees we spoke with advised us to focus on our core messaging instead of trying to pack the app with tangential resources and services," explains Heesakkers. Plans to review the app with a larger

group of students are on hold due to Covid-19 gathering restrictions.

- **Sidestep silos to get the support you need.**

Though interdepartmental collaboration can be challenging at academic institutions, UvA librarians have greatly benefited from conversations with the admins of the institution's central app. "We are fortunate that we have an open communications department," says Heesakkers. "It has helped us understand the role of the library app as opposed to the central app, and how not to overwhelm students with library communications."

- **Market the app from day one - and keep going.**

Both BULCO and UvA employed a variety of communication materials and strategies to make patrons aware of the new library app. Among the tactics these libraries used to promote the app were bookmarks, posters and banners with QR codes to download the app and social media campaigns on the institution's Instagram channels.



Inside BULCO

### About Ex Libris Library Mobile

Ex Libris, Part of Clarivate, is a leading global provider of cloud-based solutions for higher education. Offering SaaS solutions for the management and discovery of the full spectrum of library and scholarly materials, as well as mobile campus solutions driving student engagement and success, Ex Libris serves thousands of customers in 90 countries. Visit [www.exlibrisgroup.com](http://www.exlibrisgroup.com) to learn more about Ex Libris Library Mobile.