Academic Library Co-operation in the East Midlands of England

The serials and inter-library loans dimension

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Introduction

This paper explores the inter-library loans and serials dimension within the context of a research study which is currently examining the possible cost benefits and cost effectiveness of co-operation between the five major academic libraries in the East Midlands; implications and consequences of co-operation are raised.

Academic libraries are the same as those in other sectors in experiencing increased demand at a time of diminishing resources. Practical solutions to ameliorate the worst effects are constantly being sought; libraries are having to become increasingly aware of the need to be cost effective.

More than twenty years ago Parry(1) advocated that "the entire resource of a geographical area should be regarded as a common pool from which individual libraries could draw" and that theme has been of increasing interest as a possible method of mitigating the harshest affects of resource cuts, culminating in Library Advisory Council and The Office of Arts and Libraries publications (2)(3)(4) which, at a national level, variously identify, examine and suggest co-operative ways forward. The climate is therefore conducive to a more considered examination of co-operation. The question "Is co-operation really a good thing?" though has not been analysed in detail.

There is a vast amount of library literature which has explored the various aspects of co-operation and advocated its adoption, but little work has been carried out into actual cost effectiveness and cost benefits.

Does co-operation/resource sharing offer the universal panacea? Can co-operation save money while at least continuing the same level of service or even improving it? Or is co-operation mistakenly confused with rationalisation? These are some of the questions which require answers. It is interesting to observe that co-operation in library services is usually considered in isolation and independently of the rationalisation of teaching and research.

Without accurate and meaningful information, senior managements of institutions and librarians are reduced to making position statements about the viability of various aspects of co-operation. For example, the statement "it must be easier and cheaper to borrow a serial from a library close by rather than obtain it from the British Library Document Supply Centre" is difficult to prove or disprove.

There is an urgent need to provide accurate information about co-operative activity so that sound management decisions can be made from a position of fact rather than supposition.

The research project

The five major academic libraries of the East Midlands of England are situated on a north to south axis covering some thirty miles: Trent Polytechnic and Nottingham University, in the City of Nottingham; 15 miles to the south, Loughborough University and 15 miles further south, Leicester Polytechnic and Leicester University in the City of Leicester. The five libraries in the academic year 1987/88, spent a total of £7 million, of which £2.5 million was spent on the acquisition of library material. (There were
approximately 19,000 subscribed or free titles costing approximately £1.5 million).

In 1987, with the active support of the Vice-Chancellors and Directors, the five libraries agreed to submit a joint proposal to undertake an examination of co-operation. This was subsequently accepted and funded by the British Library Research and Development Department. The work commenced in September 1987 and is due to be completed in November 1988.

The study concentrated on an analysis of five areas which it was thought would afford the best possibilities of co-operation between the five autonomous institutions, viz:

document supply
access-reciprocity
co-operative acquisition/storage
transport infrastructure
impact of new technology

The topics were selected on the basis of these criteria:-
a) will co-operation allow something to be done which is needed, but which was not done or not done so well?
b) will co-operation provide as high a standard of service to as many users as at present or will it improve the service?
c) will co-operation enable savings to be made while providing as good a service, or better, than before? If not, is it cost effective?
d) does co-operation have the financial, technological and staff resources to achieve its objectives in the most efficient manner?
e) does co-operation take adequate account of new technology?

Although the five headings are not mutually exclusive, for the purpose of this paper the subject of inter-library loan and serials is considered independently.

Inter-Library Loans

With respect to inter-library loans, the question was posed earlier in the paper about obtaining information locally, rather than from the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC). This poses the question, 'would the material be available?', even assuming that:

i. the holdings are known (cost implication),
ii. there is a guarantee that they will continue to be taken, and
iii. they will be delivered as quickly as required.

In the research study the specific study of inter-library loans was given a high priority. In essence, the concern was, 'could the demand for inter-library loan be met in full, or in part, in a cheaper and/or more efficient manner from within the major libraries in the East Midlands rather than from BLDSC?'

In the East Midlands, during the preceding year the five libraries made over 70,000 inter-library loan applications to BLDSC, costing almost £200,000 in application form purchase alone - this excludes significant staff costs. Of that 70,000 figure, some 70% of the demand was for serials and 30% for monographs.

As part of the research study, from January-March 1988, one tenth of the inter-library loan requests from all five libraries to the BLDSC were also sent to each other so as to establish whether the item could have been obtained from within the resources of the East Midlands. Not surprisingly, the breakdown of requests was 70% serials and 30% monographs.

The findings, which have yet to be analysed in detail (the survey was only completed in the last few days), indicate in general terms that 32% (34% serials and 23% monograph) of requests could apparently have been satisfied within the resources of the five libraries i.e. the receiving library, according to its records, had the items in stock.

However, it is interesting to note that a subsequent shelf check revealed that the success rate was reduced to 26% (27% serials and 23% monographs). This can be explained by factors such as incorrect checking of records, vandalism (e.g. pages removed or whole items stolen), at binding, on loan, etc.

Since the research has yet to be completed it would be inappropriate to quote details of individual library returns, but it is not surprising to see that to obtain serials from another local institution, the two Polytechnics are above average, one University is average and the other two Universities below average, and, to supply serials to other local institutions, two Universities are above average, one University is about average and the two Polytechnics below average.

Thus the Universities are net suppliers and the Polytechnics net receivers, which would, in the event of an East Midlands scheme being established, suggest an imbalance which would
necessitate financial adjustments between participants.

What is the relevance of these figures? Undoubtedly the figures disguise a more complex pattern which has yet to be established within the time scale of the project - could one library supply the majority of requirements of any particular libraries?

These figures of apparent satisfaction (26% overall, and in respect of serials, 27%) look superficially attractive, but it is impossible to assess their significance without the costing element and, in particular, the staffing implications. The question of expenditure, not only in terms of what it costs to order an inter-library loan but what it would cost to supply an inter-library loan, has to addressed. This will be established within the project. It will then be possible to obtain a more complete picture of cost effectiveness and cost benefit.

Even though 26% of inter-library loans could be satisfied, and even if it could be assumed that it would have potential attractions, there could nonetheless be considerable management and resource implications associated with any major change in the present system of document supply.

Possible implications and consequences
It is worth outlining some considerations which have to be analysed in depth before any decision can be reached. (These will be considered in the final research report).

1. Would an East Midlands academic library scheme replace an already efficient service provided by BLDSC?

2. If a new system were to be introduced, then additional staff would be required to process inter-library loan applications. There would be a transfer from 'one-off cost' of forms to recurrent costs for extra staff.

3. What guarantee could there be that a 27% serial hit rate would be maintained in the future, especially if resources cuts were to continue, and in any case does past demand indicate future demand, given the changes of direction of academic work? Is co-operative selection and deselection a realistic possibility?

4. What would be the time delays? Would requests be dealt with as quickly as BLDSC could deliver items? What confidence would there be that the item which appears in the catalogue (assuming there is a reliable user list facility) is actually available?

5. Without financial incentive would there be any urgency in satisfying inter-library loan requests?

6. What if it is considered too expensive to loan serials or if there is a refusal to loan - at what level would a transport structure be viable to carry users to the material rather than vice versa, and could libraries cope with an influx?

7. In the event that institution(s) become the recognised centre either for 'cheap' inter-library loans, or receipt of readers, will other institutions be tempted to rely on these centres, thereby reducing their own level of service, while at the same time adversely affecting the suppliers' ability to provide services to their own readers?

8. If a new inter-loan system looked viable, what would be the most effective communication links to identify each others holdings and current availability? In the serials area, an automated union list facility might be deemed desirable, but how much would this add to overall costs? What would be the cost and value added benefits of such a list?

9. Will new technology have an impact? How far will fax (Group IV) eventually change the pattern of document supply? Will CD ROM have an effect?

10. If other libraries were to arrange local co-operative schemes and take, say, 25% of serials business away from BLDSC, what would be the effect on charges for the other 75% of material which would still be required from them? Could this have a destabilising effect?

11. Moreover, what would be the demand on the BLDSC if it had to move to 'full' cost recovery (however that may be defined)? The research study will consider the cost price at which libraries would be forced to supply material within co-operative groups rather than BLDSC.

Conclusion
These are a few of the many points which arise out of an inter-library loan/serials facet of co-operation. The study will address itself to these questions during the next six months.

This paper has sought to demonstrate that a study of co-operation from the inter-library loan and serials dimension has implications for the potential resource sharing even though it
constitutes only one part of a much larger and complex study.

At the end of the East Midlands study there will exist a large quantity of data which should aid management decision-making. An attempt will be made to place a value on the extent of co-operation.

Some librarians may regard this study as dangerous, seeing the possible outcome as indicative of the need for centralisation of authority with the attendant loss of independence for the librarian. Others may believe this type of study is advantageous, since it will clearly set out markers which show that the economies of co-operation, although good in theory, will cost more money than at present to make it work effectively. In such circumstances it should be seen that the detailed consideration of co-operation need not be pursued and autonomy retained.

Time will establish whether either of these views is valid. However, it is clear that inter-library loans, serials and their management will have an important place in any future assessment of the viability of co-operation.

References
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