

# Periodicals and the Academic Library Budget

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I would like to begin this paper by explaining briefly what I do at the Library and Information Statistics Unit because I think it is important to make it clear where I stand before I get involved in the meat of my paper. LISU is funded by the British Library Research and Development Department and it is my job to collect, collate and analyse library statistics so as to help practising librarians. In my work I try to be neutral and objective. This means that I sometimes come up with figures that people would rather not know about. Practically all librarians these days plead poverty and many of them seem to like to be told how badly off they are. If I come up with figures that show that their financial position is improving they don't seem to be made happy by that news and I get black looks. Well, so be it. Trying to get at what you believe to be the truth does not always increase your popularity and even in universities, which are supposedly devoted to the search for truth, the emissary carrying the wrong news is, as in days of old, rather in danger of his life.

In these days of questioning the effectiveness, economy and efficiency of libraries (and indeed of universities themselves) we are being required more and more to justify our actions and our expenditure of massive amounts of public money. Like it or not we are in a numbers game and performance indicators are being used, albeit at times rather crudely as yet, and performance is being measured, which means the use of statistics. As an American academic once said, "Statistics may be boring, but they are preferable to thumping the table". I think table-thumping carries very little weight with our paymasters today.

In my work I see statistics being useful for two main things. Firstly we can use them for trends

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over a period of time - for anything from an individual library to the country as a whole. I have been surprised in my work at LISU how little objective attention has been given to trends over periods of years. Secondly, statistics can be used for comparisons - between libraries, between groups of libraries, between a library and a peer group of similar libraries and so on. These comparisons can raise very interesting questions as to **why** there are differences and, of course, they can be used to produce league tables which are universally condemned by those people in the lower quartile.

I think that the current interest in performance indicators really boils down to funding bodies asking if the input of money is really justified by the output of product - be it graduates, research findings or whatever. Among the current buzz words "accountability" is a popular one in Whitehall and higher education cannot claim an exemption. University libraries stand in a unique position in the academic organisation because they serve almost everyone on the campus - they are servants to everyone and master of practically nobody. They are expected to buy, process and make available learned information on every subject taught or researched in the university and they are expected to do this equally well for every department and with a level of professional foresight and expertise only exceeded by those academics who are lay members of the library committee. I think it would be fair to say that most members of the academic staff view the library in a fairly benevolent way and want it to provide a good service to users - so long as that doesn't mean that it gets financial priority over any other academic service on campus you could possibly think of. In my younger days as a lecturer, I lived through the hectic internal politics that accompanied the rapid expansion of the universities in the '60s and early '70s. I thank my lucky stars I am on the sidelines of the internal politics of the problems of the late '80s.

Today I am going to look at the library budget and the special position of periodicals in that

budget, but I am going to set the scene by first looking at the position of the library within the university. I shall be using figures from the UGC/USR Volume 3 Finance annual reports which give a 100% coverage of libraries each year. (Because of the reorganisation of universities in Northern Ireland recently the UGC/USR composite figures have been given for Great Britain rather than the UK - no disrespect to the Irish.) I shall not be using SCONUL figures, which are much more detailed for each university, because they do not have 100% coverage and the response rate does vary from year to year. The SCONUL figures are the best for detailed inter-library comparison (which is what they are compiled for) but they are not as good for trends.

So, let us begin by looking at the overall financial provision for universities by way of their recurrent grants and we can see how the libraries have fared in the share-out. I have taken the five most recent years of UGC figures which end with 1986-87, since the figures take almost a year to publish after the academic year has ended. In 1982-83 university total recurrent expenditure was £1.8 billion; by 1986-87 it has risen to £2.5 billion, an increase of almost 35%. Spending on academic departments from general recurrent funds rose from £790 million to just over one billion pounds - an increase of 31.4% and under the overall expansion rate. I think it should also be noted that academic departments' specific recurrent expenditure over the period went up from just under £300m to £560m, an increase of 88% in spending from specific grants, contracts and the like, which universities have been encouraged to seek, though about 60% came from the Exchequer anyway. This 88% growth certainly earns the universities some brownie points, but it does carry with it certain implications for libraries which I feel have not always gained the recognition they deserve. When we turn to what are called academic services they rose from £132m to £171m over the period, a growth of 29.2%, so the admin empire didn't actually grow as fast as the academic one. When we look at general recurrent expenditure on libraries the increase was from £69m to just under £90m, giving a rise of 29.8% - below the increase of 31.4% for the academic departments.

If you analyse the UGC breakdown of recurrent expenditure by purpose and type over these five years the only real change in proportions spent on the different areas derives from the specific academic expenditure which helped put up the overall general and specific expenditure on

academic departments from 58.9% of the total to 64.2%. The services and administration and maintenance and so on remained pretty steady, though pensions did vary a bit as some staff gratefully took early retirement.

Now we do perhaps think of the period since 1982-83 as a time of cuts and retrenchment, so it is important to look at the numbers of people left on the campuses who, for the most part, are customers or at least potential customers of the library. Between 1982-83 and 1986-87 the total full-time academic and academic-related staff rose from 51,000 to 55,000, an increase of 8%. Part-time academic-related staff rose from 2,700 to 3,600, an increase of 32%. If you take these two groups together, wherever their salaries came from, the increase was 9.5%. Full-time academic staff alone rose by 7.7%. Full-time students rose from 295,000 to 301,000 over the period, an increase of 2%, and part-time students increased from 33,000 to 39,000, an increase of 7.6%. Taken together full-time and part-time students increased by 3.6% to 340,720 bodies, all of whom could expect to call upon the services of the university library.

The UGC/USR reports only give figures for the numbers of professional (or "academic-related") library staff, which is a pity, but as these people are the chartered librarians they are the core of the library service. In 1982-83 there were 1,372 of them and by 1986-87 their number was 1,301 - a decrease of 5.2%. As I just told you, part-time academic and academic-related staff rose by 32%. In the libraries the part-time academic and academic-related staff shot up by 17.2% - from 58 to 68. So overall, combining full-time and part-time academic-related library staff the decrease was from 1,430 to 1,369, a decline of 4.3% in bodies to run the library.

If we then compare the numbers of full-time and part-time students with the number of full-time and part-time academic-related library staff who serve them, the staff-student ratio went up from 1:261.0 to 1:284.1. The library staff to academic staff ratio went up from 1:31.0 to 1:35.3. So the library staff didn't really do all that well out of the so-called "cuts" in the universities, did they?

However, if the library share of the overall budget decreased at the same time as the staff:customer ratio increased perhaps the libraries were able to cope with these problems by careful housekeeping and skilful financial management. The UGC/USR tables break down university library spending into salaries, books, periodicals, binding and the delightful catchall of "other".

Expenditure on salaries and wages covers all grades of library employees and cannot be related to numbers of bodies in the UGC tables. However, we do know that the number of professional bodies actually declined, so perhaps it comes as a slight surprise to find that the salaries and wages bill went up by 28.4% over the period 82-83 to 86-87. Of course, even university staff get annual inflation pay increases (sometimes) and there is a large amount of money goes to that repulsive member of staff, the incremental creep. Salaries and wages always account for more than what the UGC calls "non-pay" expenditure, which rose by 31.6% over the same period, so the salaries and wages did not gobble up the money spent on library resources.

So, at last - and you must have been wondering when the leading man and the leading lady were going to appear - we come to spending on books and on periodicals (Fig. 1). Spending on books in 1982-83 was 11.5m and in 1986-87 was nearly 13.5m - an overall increase of 16.6% - but do note, and note well, that spending on books actually declined from 13,824,000 in 1985-86 to 13,355,000 in 1986-87. This is the only example of genuine monetary decline I have come across in book spending in the UGC figures and I find it very worrying indeed.

Spending on periodicals rose from 12m in 1982-83 to 18.5m in 1986-8, an increase of 53.0%. The rate of increase in the most recent two years has gone down from the hectic over 14% of the 82-83 and 83-84 years, but, compared with spending on books, periodicals are still way ahead. The ratio of spending between books and periodicals has moved appreciably from the 48.6 to 51.4 ratio of 1982-83 to the 41.9 to 58.1 ratio of 1986-87. This is no mean shift and it raises a number of questions which I think ought to be carefully considered, though I shall not necessarily attempt to answer them as I am not a professionally qualified academic-related librarian as are so many experts here in the audience today.

However, I did think it might be interesting to see what sort of variation there was around the average for the book-to-periodical ratio and I was mildly surprised at some of the results. I have discussed these with one librarian and, of course, as in all statistics it depends "what you mean by ...". In this case by a "book" and by a "periodical". If you call anything with a series number a periodical (or serial) then you can seem to buy more periodicals than people who call your serials books. Nevertheless, I think it is pretty clear from the overall figures that periodicals

have taken a bigger slice of the cake in recent years.

Just to complete the picture, the UGC figures for binding and "other" supply some interesting insights into the modern library (Fig. 2). Binding, as you can see, has gone down appreciably from 2.8m spent in 1982-83 to the below 2.4m of 1986-87. New technology may be taking over certain duties from binding, but in this conservation-conscious world we now have, the portents look a bit dodgy. "Other expenditure", however, has gone up from 4.4m to 6.2m over the period, an increase of nearly 42%, though precisely on what we are not told. The definition excludes expenditure on premises but can include minor purchases of equipment and furniture. Whatever this money *is* spent on it is increasing at a fair rate; but no increase in expenditure can equal that of the increase in expenditure on periodicals.

So to return to books and periodicals. I have heard it said recently, in discussions about the Net Book Agreement, that books are really not all that expensive and that increases in their price have kept below the general RPI in recent years for some books. I think this interesting suggestion warrants close scrutiny - and I have obviously been buying the wrong books for years. However, it does seem to be agreed by the trade that academic books in the humanities, social sciences and especially in science and in technology have gone up in price just a little in recent years. I would modestly suggest that the LISU half-yearly report *Average Prices of British Academic Books* is a useful source of information on the books that academic libraries do actually buy (and at 7.50 per copy, sent to you in a sealed plain brown envelope, rather a bargain). The LISU British index over the five academic years under review shows an overall increase of 40.1% on 1982-83, which you will recognise is greater than the increase in book expenditure of 16.6% by quite a considerable amount. The Blackwell's periodicals index over the same five years shows an increase of 69.5% (and over seven years it is up to 88.1%) (Fig. 3).

When we turn to the Blackwell's periodicals price index, published each May in the *Library Association Record*, there are two main breakdowns - by three main subject areas and by country of origin in three categories. Let us look first at the average prices by subject category (Fig. 4). There are actually six years of data on the graphs but you can equate the first five with the UGC/USR years and the sixth one I have

added because the data are published and, with your particular interest in periodicals I felt you would like to have the extra year. You can see quite clearly from the prices graph that periodicals in science and technology are considerably more expensive than those in medicine, which are in their turn much more expensive than those in humanities and social sciences. When we look at the inflation rate for periodicals, as given by the index starting at 100 in 1983, you can see that science and technology is ahead of all periodicals and that the inflation rate in medicine and in the humanities and social sciences has dropped a little in recent years (Fig. 5).

When we compare periodicals by country of origin the graph for prices of all periodicals shows a fairly steady rise but prices of USA and Canada journals have slackened off since 1986 whilst "other countries" produced a spectacular increase in 1987 followed by an infinitesimal decrease in 1988 (Fig. 6). The Great Britain periodicals just kept on rising at a steady rate, eschewing any flamboyant increases and carefully avoiding any suggestion of decreases. The graph for inflation shows rather a tangled plot but you can see that the steepest upward line from 1987 to 1988 is that of the British periodicals (Fig. 7).

Now I am simply presenting these figures to you as taken from the LAR and I have not attempted to consider questions of currency exchange rates which you understand far better than I do. I am sure the purchase of non-UK periodicals is a minefield for the library buyer, though the picture for British periodicals is at least reasonably clear since we do buy on our home ground.

The periodicals trends show British periodicals to be still the cheapest of the three categories, but the rate of inflation for British periodicals looks as if it is doing its best to catch up with the others.

I feel I must draw your attention to certain dangers inherent in the use of any average prices for books or periodicals. Clearly the average price you get for anything depends on the number of units you include in your "basket" and the actual price of each unit. If we look at the components of the total periodicals "basket" of 2,007 titles we see that they comprise 42% Humanities and Social Sciences, 10% Medicine and 48% Science and Technology. If we look at the actual total cost of all the 2,007 periodicals we see that this is made up to 17% Humanities and Social Sciences, 9% Medicine and 74% Science and Technology. This means the average price of what is called "all" journals is heavily weighted by the cost of

those in Science and Technology. The equivalent book categories I worked out to match the journals are more weighted to the Humanities and Social Sciences, in which areas a lot of books are published, but even so the 20% of Science and Technology unit books accounted for 30% of the total cost.

I am not going to attempt to discuss why science and technology books and journals should be so expensive, but I thought you might like to see which, in the 1989 table, come out as the priciest and those that have inflated the most since the price index was established in 1970. The Blackwell's periodicals index groups some subjects together and at the top of the average prices in 1989 is Biophysics, Biochemistry and Microbiology averaging £552.65 per periodical, followed closely by Chemistry at £529.79. The highest inflation indexes were, based on 100 in 1970, Physics at £1,775.70 and Botany at £1,623.99. Now averages are averages and no actual chemistry journal costs £529.79, but I see from the 1989 computer print-out that John Merriman has kindly sent to me that the Journal of the Chemistry Society is priced at £2,082 in 1989, which is nearly four times the Chemistry average price. Chemical Abstracts is priced in 1989 at £8,081, which is fifteen times the overall average. Those of you who spend your lives and a lot of money buying periodicals don't need me to tell you that some journals are extremely expensive but nevertheless essential for the customers you serve. You might cancel Oxford Agrarian Studies at £8.50 without creating a riot, but cancel Chemical Abstracts and the roof will fall in on you I am sure.

So - what can you do about it all?

I think the most important thing for librarians to consider first of all is the slice they are getting of the whole university cake. From the national figures I have analysed it looks strongly as if university libraries are being expected to serve more customers with poorer funds. This is just not good enough and the case for better funding should be made forcibly, backed up by both local and national statistics and therefore without the need to thump the table. In particular I consider that the libraries should always receive special funding from research grants if the growing numbers of contract research workers are to be served at all. The weighting for libraries of part-time staff and students should also be carefully considered because they can make heavy demands on library services. Now this is strategy and tactics on the macro scale. Within the library

I think you have got to consider where the money goes very carefully indeed if **actual** spending on books is going down. Staff are very difficult to cope with since pay scales are not decided locally. I know there are, in some libraries, moves to replace assistant librarians by library assistants - and maybe this is not necessarily a bad thing. If automation can save money and provide a better service then it is to be welcomed, but if it simply produces a need for **more** staff and the capital investment and maintenance costs merely produce marginal improvements then why should you go I.T. mad?

The figures I have given you today show some worrying increases in the prices of both books and journals and, of the two, journals are the more worrying. I know that you have been pruning your subscriptions regularly now for years so as to clear out those journals you took on for a lecturer and his course, both of which departed several years ago. One eminent journal publisher I heard give a talk a while ago said that the pressure to publish new journals came very

largely from the academics themselves who wanted more outlets for their research findings (and possibly better chances of getting more articles on their c.v.s for promotion?). I think it is the professional librarian's job to do the detailed scrutiny of subscriptions and to be prepared to resist strongly requests to take on new journals without very detailed arguments for them. Perhaps you should emulate the present government's ideas for funding general practitioners and give every department its own books and periodicals fund and let them suggest what to spend it on; but make sure you keep the final ratification of orders in your own hands. I am reminded of the title of that marvellous play "Whose Life is it Anyway?". I think it is nearing the time when you may have to come out into the open and confront the academics with the challenging question "Whose Library is it Anyway?" If you do, I think I shall be taking my retirement from the university with that well known parliamentary correspondent's phrase - "The debate continues".

FIG 1

SPENDING ON BOOKS AND PERIODICALS (£K)

	BOOKS	PERIODICALS	RATIO
1982-83	11,454	12,099	48.6 : 51.4
1983-84	12,454	13,906	47.2 : 52.8
1984-85	13,089	15,607	45.6 : 54.4
1985-86	13,824	16,864	45.0 : 55.0
1986-87	13,355	18,513	41.9 : 58.1
% INCREASE	16.6	53.0	

FIG 2

SPENDING ON BINDING AND "OTHER" (£K)

	BINDING	"OTHER"
1982-83	2,813	4,359
1983-84	3,015	4,501
1984-85	2,405	5,429
1985-86	2,426	5,443
1986-87	2,389	6,185
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% INCREASE	(-15.1)	41.9

BLACKWELL'S PERIODICALS INDEX

	AVERAGE PRICE	INDEX	% INCREASE	RPI JULY 2ND YEAR
1982-83	72.82	100	13.8	100
1983-84	84.73	116.4	16.4	104.5
1984-85	100.81	138.4	19.0	111.6
1985-86	110.18	151.3	9.3	114.3
1986-87	123.45	169.5	12.0	119.3
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(1987-88)	127.42	175.0	3.2	125.1
(1988-89)	136.99	188.1	7.5	-

