

BITING INTO THE CORE? THE QUESTION OF BALANCE IN COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

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Striking the right balance in collection management has always been a challenging and complex objective for librarians, but common to all types of library is the difficult struggle to accommodate diversity and focus in a climate of seemingly infinite demand and dwindling finance. The current situation poses additional problems arising from the proliferation of information sources, the consequent realisation that the notion of the "well-founded library" is no longer valid and the threat to even the modest aim of a core collection to meet primary needs. Future solutions require fundamental rethinking of collection management to provide a strategic approach which recognises information services as the core component with document acquisition matched much more closely to actual demand.

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Setting the scene

Before addressing the question of balance in collection management, it is pertinent to consider briefly the environmental factors currently having an impact on all library and information services. They include: constrained or reduced budgets; escalating costs of library materials, with monograph and serial prices rising significantly faster than general inflation; continuing growth in published output, of both print and electronic products; a multiplicity of costing/pricing structures, and high levels of demand for information, with changes in patterns of usage - for example, more student use of serials in universities. Alongside this, in all sectors we see renewed focus on accountability, quality and value-for-money.

All this adds up to "doing more with less", but our situation is further influenced by changing roles and responsibilities for librarians and information specialists, with boundaries moving or becoming blurred as a result of convergence of functions within organisations and devolution of financial management to cost centres, business units, etc. Thus, in higher education institutions we have examples of mergers and take-overs between libraries and computer centres and also devolved budgetary control, within libraries or transferred to their client departments/customers. In addition, the shift from 'ownership' to 'access' strategies has heralded a corresponding shift in role from information provider to facilitator and developments in computer-assisted learning and electronic publishing suggest more convergence in future with teaching/learning support resulting in more emphasis on the information specialist's responsibilities as both instructor and resource manager. No slowing down of these pressures can be anticipated; if anything, the pace of change is quickening.

Looking more closely at the effects on library activities, the service imperative today is very different from the traditional model of a research library in the pre-networking era: collections tailored to client needs, with resources targeted at particular groups; skills development for both staff and end-users, and more effective supplier-customer liaison, combined with the willingness and ability to respond quickly and flexibly. Underpinning this we need a robust IT infrastructure, with dedicated specialist technical

support, to provide direct (networked) access for customers. Collaboration with other providers within and outside the organisation (for example, via consortia) is prevalent, but in a climate of competition as well as co-operation. The current focus on quality requires clarity of purpose, generally expressed in a mission statement, and often backed by some form of service contract or promise, as reflected by the charter movement in the public sector. This in turn implies having measurable objectives or standards, and a set of performance indicators to assess customer satisfaction, timeliness and utilisation of services offered. The approach now - at Aston as at many other institutions - must be quality-driven and market-led.

Two recently published seminal reports confirm the trends and developments outlined above. A study on behalf of the Royal Society, the British Library and the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers concludes:

"The traditional concept of a well-founded library is no longer valid. It is no longer possible for a university or equivalent library to cater from its own stock for many of the needs of its users. This reduction in coverage and quality of book and journal collections in academic libraries is irreversible without large injections of money. New methods of information retrieval, alongside the fostering of better library management and usage, are being actively pursued to redress the balance."¹

In the report, attention is drawn to the need for user education, including training in information access, and also notes "considerable user demand" for current awareness services, as well as shortcomings in existing cataloguing/indexing arrangements for networked information resources, and a lack of hard data on the real costs of electronic publication. In addition, it highlights the conservatism of many scientific researchers, as reflected in their apparent preference for investment in on-line searching and journal subscriptions rather than current awareness services and document supply. More significantly, it predicts a shift in responsibility for spending decisions, "The trend away from free, off-the-shelf information retrieval and toward individual article supply will

progressively move the control of information provision costs away from librarians, even though the librarian will remain as intermediary."

Similarly, the need for change is emphasised in the report of the Higher Education Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group, chaired by Professor Sir Brian Follett, which concludes:

"The traditional view of the library as the single repository of information needed for teaching, learning and research is no longer adequate. Information is now available through many different media, and in all manner of locations. Depending on history, geography and the resources available, more or less of this material may be available in the "library", but it is no longer possible for any single "library" alone to contain it all. The emphasis is shifting towards information and information access. This has profound and far reaching implications, and all institutions must act to ensure that they are in a position to deal with these to best advantage."²

The Follett report points to a "disproportionate increase in the price of books and periodicals" over the past decade, indicating that this trend has intensified in the last two years and suggesting that the prospect for 1994 is even worse. It acknowledges that funding has not kept pace with demands, and puts forward recommendations to alleviate current pressures, covering strategic planning, performance indicators, co-ordination between library and teaching staff, co-operation between institutions, and space management. It recommends substantial investment by the Councils in the latter, and also, of particular relevance in the present context, in a programme of innovative projects designed to encourage progress towards the creation of "a future electronic library service".

Defining the problem

Returning to the present and the question of balance in collection management, we face a particularly challenging and complex problem. Librarians have always had to take difficult decisions about dividing their acquisitions budgets in order to reconcile competing, and conflicting, demands in relation to different types

of materials, subject categories and user groups: made between on-line and CD-ROM versions, and then between stand-alone or networked access.

However, one benefit of this broadening of the whole concept of collection management to embrace electronic information resources has been to remind us that acquisitions budget allocations really need to be assessed alongside the related allocations for interlibrary loans/remote document supply, in order to obtain a complete picture of the level of provision in each subject area. At Aston we have acknowledged these relationships in an information resources cost centre/budget matrix, which shows both function-based and subject/customer-based financial management responsibilities. Thus, the information specialists (subject librarians) are the resource managers responsible for authorising and monitoring the total expenditure to support each department - on books, standing orders, serials, electronic sources and interlibrary loans - and the acquisitions and document supply managers are the cost centre managers for their functional specialisms, with responsibility for purchasing and controlling costs across all subject areas. Shifting the focus in this way from materials/media to users/customers encourages us to think first about the balance across subject departments, before dividing the budget between books, serials, etc., and enables proper consideration of virement between different expense heads if required.

Academic librarians have been quite inventive in devising methods of carving up the cake between the departments/faculties/schools of their institutions and there is an impressive body of literature on the subject.³ Typical formulae take account of factors such as student and staff numbers, average book/periodical prices, growth rate of the literature and circulation statistics. However, although they are intended to provide a defensible basis for resource allocation, doubt is cast on their validity by the subjectivity inherent in determining the weighting of the different elements and putting them together. An alternative approach is the simpler "demand-led" policy, exemplified by work done at the University of Sussex in the mid-1980s.⁴ Current trends in UK higher education funding

mechanisms are likely to favour more direct correlation between the level of library expenditure and the size/performance of academic units, as their "earnings" for teaching and research activities can be identified explicitly under the more transparent funding models now used by the Funding Councils, and institutions are accordingly requiring each unit to balance its income against outgoings, including notional or actual spend on library services.

Difficulties presented by an over-rigid departmental focus include problems in apportioning the costs of materials relevant to more than one department, and also negotiating/mediating among several interested parties to secure contributions towards acquiring the items in the first place. In addition, problems may arise with fluctuations in departmental research (and teaching) assessment ratings, threatening the continuity and integrity of resource provision. If an institution wishes to improve its teaching or research performance in particular areas, then special investment in library support may be needed above the level justified by the current year's income. Libraries also need to find a mechanism to ensure continuing maintenance and development of general reference resources, both printed and electronic, without having to negotiate with every department for each purchase.

Strategies for survival

While the mix of provision will necessarily vary between subjects/departments, an appropriate balance must be sought between corporate/institutional and departmental needs, and economies of scale and scope determinedly pursued, irrespective of whether a centralised or devolved financial regime prevails. In the latter case, the library's contribution to the development of a coherent information strategy (along the lines advocated by Follett) becomes even more important. Strategic planning offers the chance to clarify roles and relationships, for example, between libraries and computer centres, as well as providing the opportunity for substantial professional input at institutional level and will be particularly useful in institutions where devolution has made it difficult for library staff to ensure co-ordination across different

areas. As recently as 1991, research suggested that, although several UK university libraries had cut back substantially on their holdings of printed materials and moved towards more reliance on access to remote document supply and/or electronic services, in most cases the shift had taken place more at the tactical than at the strategic level.⁵ Aston University Library & Information Services (LIS) is one of the exceptions, having determined to pursue an 'access' strategy as a result of a strategic review conducted during 1985-86.⁶ The sense of direction was reinforced by a highly participative planning exercise during 1988-89, involving both LIS and academic staff, to produce a new Strategic Plan taking us up to the mid-1990s. The existence of an articulated strategy has provided a framework for decision-making, which has proved invaluable in coping with severe budget pressures over the past two years and guiding us towards the electronic library of the future.

As well as a strategic framework, libraries need to make better use of standard management tools and techniques to ensure that human, financial and physical resources are effectively deployed. Priority base budgeting can help to distinguish between essential, desirable and marginal increments of service in order to meet strategic and financial objectives. Service level agreements, specifying the purpose, scope and standard of provision, together with costs, performance indicators and responsibilities of both parties, assist with translation of the strategic plan into operational objectives and targets. Regular customer satisfaction surveys, delivery time analyses and stock utilisation statistics enable information resource provision to be monitored and evaluated.

The proliferating choice of information products and services requires subject librarians/information specialists to take on a significant role in assessing the cost-effectiveness of different options for information delivery. Decision-making is complex, as staff need to consider the costs/benefits of print versus electronic, stand-alone versus networked, locally mounted versus nationally (or regionally) networked, conditions of use and search facilities offered by different suppliers, often for the same databases/publications. The life cycle costing techniques

developed by the British Library during its review of acquisition and retention policies can be employed to assess the total costs of a printed journal subscription against the costs of electronic provision.⁷ The former will include all the costs incurred from ordering and receipt, through cataloguing and processing, to binding and storage; the latter must take into account not only the subscription and royalty charges but also capital and recurrent expenditure involved in installing, maintaining and upgrading/replacing hardware and software (covering PCs, servers, printers, jukeboxes, etc.) as well as the cost of additions and changes to catalogue records for journals held in electronic form. However, decisions ought not to be taken on an entirely mechanistic basis. Cost per use and fitness for purpose are different types of measure; acceptability is an important criterion for electronic resources and this will depend on the IT-orientation and culture of the institution, department or peer group.

Today the information specialist or information resource manager requires a much wider range of knowledge and skills than previously. In addition to in-depth subject knowledge and technical skills, the changed role of facilitator, instructor and adviser requires oral and written communication (e.g. for producing user guides) and strong interpersonal skills, as well as the ability to teach inexperienced users and other library staff. As this role extends further into operational management of resource provision for particular client groups, involving negotiation with suppliers, oversight of the installation and testing of new electronic information systems, project management of the implementation and launch of new products and services, and continuous monitoring and evaluation, other management/business skills will be needed at the operational level. At the same time, the technical demands of the job are expanding, with staff typically expected to be competent in the use of a wide range of software (communications and bibliographic management packages; word-processing, spreadsheets, graphics and desk-top publishing) and to keep abreast of developments in copyright and data protection legislation.

Biting into the core?

Aston's forward strategy from 1986 was based on the concept of a locally-held core collection to meet primary needs, complemented by rapid access to material from external sources, identified through a range of information services and backed by an effective document supply service. Innovation through IT and self-service/desktop access were key themes underpinning this approach. As a result of successive budget adjustments from 1991, annual books acquisitions have been cut by about 33%, standing order titles by almost 50% and serial subscriptions by around 25%; in addition, we have had to cap our total interlibrary loan spend (in effect reducing volume by 10%) and step up the substitution of electronic for print sources, notably in abstracting and indexing services, where the latter now accounts for only 15% of our expenditure.

Implementation of this strategy relies on ongoing systematic evaluation of information resources against current academic priorities, which is in turn dependent on effective liaison and consultation with academic staff by our team of information specialists; a continuous programme of weeding/deselection runs in parallel with the selection of new additions to stock. Key factors which will influence our success or failure are: the effectiveness of our IT infrastructure; the academic culture, particularly in relation to IT; and our ability to develop appropriate economic models to inform decisions. Despite constraints, we have chosen not to charge customers for interlibrary loans but to introduce new procedures requiring academic departments to take more active responsibility for assessing needs and authorising requests - on the basis that user fees would be at odds with our current access model, implying that remote document supply services were an optional extra rather than an integral part of our overall strategy.

We are now embarking on a further strategic review to develop a strategy to take us forward to the year 2000. We know that there will be continuing downward pressure on our budget, which, together with depletion of reserves and withdrawal of our previous special inflation allowance, must call into question the viability of our existing model. If we have to bite into the core

collection and at the same time limit access to remote document supply, our access model is clearly under threat. However, this interpretation reflects too restricted a view of collection management, and fails to address adequately the question of information resource provision in the widest sense. An alternative view is to see new options for networked document delivery, combined with a wider range of electronic current awareness services and customised courseware for students, as an opportunity for strategic realignment.

Under the new access model, our core resources/basic services can be redefined to bring provision into line with the Follett vision and these can be supplemented by fee-based on-demand services/resources to meet identified needs, as anticipated in the Royal Society report. This model puts the expertise and professionalism of our staff in its rightful place - centre stage. Ultimately resource management is about people, for they are our most important resource and our greatest asset. The new access model redresses the balance in information resources management.

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Fig. 1 Aston University: LIS Information Resources Cost Centre/Budget Matrix

	Acquisitions				Cataloguing, Classification and Indexing	Inter-Library Loans	TOTAL	Resource Manager
	Books	Standing Orders	Serials	Electronic Sources				
Chem Eng	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	Info Spec Engineering
Civil Eng	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Comp Sci	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Elec Eng	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Mech Eng	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Pharm Sci	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Vision Sci	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	Info Spec Life Sciences
Business School	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	Info Spec Bus and Man Bus and Law ML/Int Bus
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Modern Languages	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	Info Spec ML/Int Bus
Gen Ref	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	Bib Recs Mgr
TOTAL	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	
Cost Centre Manager	Acquisitions Manager				Bib Recs Manager	Doc Supply Manager		

Fig. 2 The New Access Model

Core resources

- * expertise of information professionals
- * information systems infrastructure with multimedia facilities
- * customised courseware/computer-assisted learning materials for students
- * capsule collection of general reference tools
- * study space for individuals and groups

Basic services (free)

- * current awareness/SDI
- * information and study skills
- * navigational/subject access tools
- * help desks and supporting documentation

On-demand services (charged) - examples

- * information retrieval/individual article supply
- * research assistance/information consultancy
- * monograph/serial purchasing and storage