

## LIBRARY PROVISION IN THE LATE 1990s: FIGIT IN A WIDER STRATEGIC CONTEXT

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*The Electronic Libraries Programme promises major advances for HEIs in the medium-term. Given financial and other constraints, how rapidly will it have an impact on libraries? What kind of strategy for library collaboration can best meet the remaining long-term needs for printed materials?*

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### Context

The Report of the Follett Committee<sup>1</sup> stimulated a range of important developments in the UK academic library scene. Funds have been provided by the higher education funding councils to add or convert more than 200,000m<sup>2</sup> of accommodation to provide more student reader spaces. More than £16 million has been distributed in grants to improve the conservation, cataloguing and access arrangements for major archival and other significant humanities research collections. A wide-ranging report has also been issued on performance indicators<sup>2</sup>, and several imaginative initiatives have begun on copyright-related issues, notably through coordinated journal site-licensing schemes. On the IT front, under the auspices of the FIGIT Group, the Electronic Libraries Programme, with more than thirty first-phase projects already announced, is certainly the most innovative and technically challenging post-Follett development. There is, however, widespread agreement that even the most imaginative and rapidly developed IT programme is unlikely to solve, for some years, today's pressing problems in British research libraries. It will probably be beyond the end of the century before a majority even of current scientific, technical and medical journals appear in digital form, longer still before this applies to a majority of humanities journals, and it is impossible to assess when (or even whether) a majority even of STM journal-type material will appear only in digital form. As a result, librarians will need for many years to meet demand for newly published non-digital periodical materials, and the need to supply humanities monograph and existing non-digital stock must surely mean that paper will be the dominant medium in libraries well into the next century.

Librarians will thus find themselves facing a double pressure. There will be increasing demand for new forms of information, while demand for traditional forms seems unlikely to decline. Certainly, there is no sign so far of any significant fall in the rate of growth in either the number of new journals or the number of

published monographs, while desk-top publishing is producing a rapid escalation in reports, working papers and other forms of 'grey literature'. In parallel, CD-Rom versions of both traditional publications and new forms of multimedia are growing rapidly and there is a growing supply of, and demand for, on-line information sources and services, and also a steady expansion of publicly available datasets and data-bases for use as primary research tools.

In parallel, student numbers in the higher education sector are only slowly (and perhaps temporarily) stabilising, staff in the new universities are increasingly being expected to undertake research as a major part of their contracts, and teaching methods at all levels in education are laying greater stress on self-directed study and thus on access to information sources of all kinds. At the same time, the national libraries are experiencing growing pressure on services, even including, in the case of the National Library of Scotland (and, surely almost immediately after opening in St Pancras, to the British Library), shortages of seating capacity. The Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa has seen continued rapid growth in demand for many years (six percent last year alone). And there is little sign of any slackening of reader interest in public libraries, and certainly not in the major city libraries whose reference and archival holdings often challenge or exceed in importance the research holdings of all but a tiny minority of higher education institutions (HEIs).

Yet this increase in supply and demand for information is not matched by any growth in funds - indeed, quite the opposite. In recent years, journal prices have risen far above the rate of general inflation. Where parallel digital services are introduced, this has usually been at a higher price than the printed version, the differential being justified by their 'value-added' content. At the same time, funding in almost all elements of the British library scene is falling sharply in real terms. HEIs are being subjected to a 3% per annum so-called 'efficiency gain', from which their libraries are not likely to be exempted and from which pressured departmental budgets will not save book and journal acquisition budgets. The national libraries are at best experiencing a freeze in their grants in money terms, with

inevitable pressure on their purchasing. Some of the consequences of cuts in local authority funding have already reached the letters pages of *The Times* and may shortly lead, in the case of one English local authority, to a legal challenge for breach of statutory duty.

#### **How and where will digital services fit in?**

The previous section suggested that, in the next few years, unless radical actions are taken, almost all libraries will lose the battle to meet demand even for traditional services. Within this context, what is the immediate future for the growth of digital services? Some of the new developments are, in part, substitutes for other parts of library budgets or the budgets of library users - and substitution might provide some of the funds. It would be rash, however, to assume that this will be so. Will the real total costs of supplying documents within consortia by remote on-line delivery really be less than acquiring them by post from the Document Supply Centre? Or will some of the costs simply be hidden in a spirit of mistaken support for competition? Outside the commercial world, indeed, how much demand is there for a price-premium instant document delivery service? Electronic journals will undoubtedly come, but if they are just digital versions of existing products, will users agree to cancelling the hard copy? If they are not, will they agree to cancelling other traditional journals - at least until the status and utility of the new products are well established? Given how little students are prepared to pay for textbooks, how much will they be prepared to contribute to the costs of on-demand study packs - and, if too little, who else, if anyone, will pay?

One possible consequence of these funding problems is that the take-off of new electronic library products will be slow. The key to success in this area must be getting the clients on the right side - and in this case in HEIs this means the academic staff, most of whom at present are woefully ignorant of, if not actively hostile to, IT possibilities which could fundamentally transform their lives. Yet, in the politics of universities, it will be senior academics, faced with conflicting claims from other academics in a world of severely reduced funds, who will need

to be persuaded to support increased library and departmental budgets for equipment to mount, access and support new services, and, quite possibly, in the short run at least, to fund additional library staff time to plan them and people to be trained to service them. If digital materials cost more than traditional alternatives, then there is not even a funding argument to support a shift to digital purchase. Indeed, perhaps the best, and maybe the only, way of accelerating the take-up of digital services would be to follow the lead of a few enlightened North American publishers and to market digital products at, say, 90% of the print price. In commercial organisations with a more managerial culture, what the users think may matter a little less, but the remaining problems of justifying a shift in financial terms will be no less acute. For some local authorities, the problems of finding funds for any digital services may be almost insurmountable.

One possible route, of course, is to bite the political bullet and accelerate the run-down of traditional acquisitions. Given the reluctance of librarians to cancel serials, this would seem likely to have a devastating effect on humanities monographs, an area already heavily squeezed by the cuts in real funding noted above. Many less used journals will also, inevitably, be cancelled - but at the expense of yet more demand for inter-library loans, thus accelerating a trend which is already booming as readers discover more obscure and hitherto untraceable articles and books on on-line information services. At one level, this shift from holdings to access is probably to be welcomed, but its consequences are likely to be a further fall in journal subscriptions and a significant consequential increase in journal prices. As fewer monographs are bought 'just-in-case', the already lengthy queues for some monograph inter-library loans can only get worse.

One further consequence for libraries of the shift towards digital information provision has attracted less attention than it should - for its potential could be far-reaching. In a world where the emphasis in library provision is shifting from holdings to (increasingly on-line) access, what is the role for the institutional library? Why should the virtual librarian be based in a home

institution rather than in a disciplinary centre, located anywhere where the discipline has particular strength? For example, for me as a historian, if the new IHR-Info service for historians (one of the projects funded by the Electronic Libraries Programme) is as good as it may well be, what electronic help will my own institution library be able to provide that IHR-Info and its mediated desk-top on-line access to information sources will not? If access really rules over holdings, then why should it not become the user who picks and chooses what is acquired on a just-in-time basis, being funded to do so directly by his/her employing organisations, rather than funds being routed via libraries? If this is the future, what possibility is there of coordinated collection building and collection management, much of which has to be built on just-in-case acquisition?

The paradox of this last point is that we have lived for many years in a world where no organisation, however well-funded, can be self-sufficient in information terms and where collaboration and co-operation will increasingly be the only route to survival. Even the best endowed HEI has always depended to some extent on supplementing its own library holdings with access to external resources. Today even the best funded centres must depend on external forces not just for archival materials and rare books and obscure journals on inter-library loan and for on-line databases and services of many different kinds, but, frequently, so that its staff and research students can obtain vital monograph and report materials needed for their day-to-day research, materials that once would have been bought without question but are now unaffordable. Sometimes these may be borrowed for use in the home institution, but often they are read by visits not just to the copyright libraries but to public libraries and to other HEIs. Increasingly, however, even for non-UK-published English language books, the copyright libraries will not have a copy. Even the British Library is now facing the fact that it cannot afford many works that its readers might legitimately expect the United Kingdom's principal national library to hold. Certainly it can less and less afford both a copyright reference and a remote supply copy.

### **A National/Regional Strategy for Library Provision for Researchers**

It was the recognition that a potential crisis in provision of library support for research in HEIs could only be met by some greater degree of collaboration, which led to the establishment of the fourth major post-Follett initiative, the commissioning of a Report on future national and regional strategies for library provision for researchers. A group was established under my chairmanship, bringing together representatives of the funding councils, the Vice-Chancellors and Principals of universities and colleges, the research councils, the British Library representing all the national libraries, and various other interested bodies including ALPSP, the British Academy, and the Department of National Heritage. The remit was to survey the library access and support problems facing UK researchers at above taught masters level, to identify areas where action was needed, and to recommend what further work was required to produce a fully developed national or regional research library strategy embracing both HEIs and other parts of the library system. Given the focus of other post-Follett initiatives, the main focus of the Group's deliberations was on non-digital developments and, to some extent, non-STM disciplines. Problems of maintaining and accessing archives were already largely covered by another post-Follett Group.

The National/Regional Strategy Group collected a significant amount of evidence and produced a draft report with 15 main recommendations in early 1995. This draft report was then circulated to all UK HEIs and a number of other interested parties for comment. 90 replies were received, in the light of which a final report will be sent to the funding councils by the end of 1995, with the prospect, if it is approved, of action from early in 1996. The replies to the consultation process were overwhelmingly supportive of the Group's recommendations, some showing great enthusiasm, and many commending the realism of the report's approach. Interestingly, a number of institutions noted that the report had helped them to clarify their own thinking and policy.

The report identifies a number of areas of immediate concern. In 'non-traditional' materials, particular anxiety is expressed over the long-term

preservation of non-print (especially electronic) materials, though this is a problem which most parties seem reluctant to grasp. Although the report's main recommendation - that the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Funding Councils might take a lead here, possibly in collaboration with the British Library - was not much liked by many commentators, no workable alternative was suggested. This remains a crucial and urgent issue and the final report is likely to recommend joint FIGIT and British Library action here. Another 'non-traditional' area over which the Group had concerns is the future preservation and dissemination of 'grey literature'. The British Library has an important new UK initiative here, but the problem of preservation and access goes beyond UK materials and beyond the more formal publications which tend to be deposited at Boston Spa.

Turning to more traditional materials, there was almost total agreement in the Group and among respondents over a number of problem areas which it was a high priority to seek to address: the need to ensure reasonably comprehensive acquisition of non-UK material (especially foreign language and areas studies monograph material) somewhere in the UK - this is a growing problem as both the copyright and the HEI libraries cut back in parallel; the problem of maintaining continued access to 'second resort' research materials for browsing, a key and very cost-effective activity, much of which inevitably involves access to libraries of institutions to which readers do not formally 'belong'; and the need to preserve, for future research, materials for more localised studies.

Having reviewed a number of alternative scenarios, the Group was convinced that the principal hope for the future was more collaboration between different libraries on a long-term UK-wide as well as more localised basis over acquisitions, backed up by guarantees of free (at least at point of use) access to research collections in other parts of the national network. The national emphasis is important, since the Group unanimously concluded that a regional approach, perhaps organised around a set of what some people have called 'hyperlibraries', was not likely to be effective. This was both because current centres of collection excellence are widely

dispersed with their prime locations varying markedly between disciplines, and because, outside Scotland at least, regional boundaries are difficult to draw and are of only limited relevance since readers tend for good reason to travel to locations which are best for their subject but not necessarily geographically proximate to them.

For a national network to work, a number of pre-requisites must be firmly established. First, there needs to be much better information for users than is at present in place, to enable them to identify the location and availability of materials in other libraries. For this there is no alternative but improved access to on-line catalogues, and in this context a need is seen both for more retrospective OPAC conversion (especially for older research materials) and also for improved navigation tools to enable users to identify possible sources quickly without having systematically to search every available OPAC for every individual item that they need. FIGIT has already agreed to take action here. A second pre-requisite, particularly in the University community, is to build trust that some institutions will not seek to trade off the investments of others. In this connection there is, in the consultation responses to the Report, a clear recognition of a tension between the necessity for collaboration and the competitive ethos that has been so strongly imposed on the UK HEI system in recent years. In the Report's view, some reassurance must be found for those large research libraries (and even the national libraries) who fear that they may be swamped by demands from HEIs which have growing research aspirations but are unwilling or unable to invest in the core infrastructure to support them. The Report's solution is a requirement that individual HEIs with research aspirations generate and make public their formal arrangements for basic library support for research. These may involve building collections of their own, or may depend largely on digital and other access to inter-library loans and additional sources of data. For some, the solution may involve the formation of local consortia or even direct payment to another HEI or other library for some services.

This links closely with a third strong recommendation, widely accepted in the consultation: that HEIs, and also national libraries, research councils and local authorities

with major public libraries, should produce collection, collaboration and retention policies which are part of their overall information strategies, are in the public domain, are clearly linked to their organisation's core mission, and are authorised by its highest level of management. In considering this recommendation, it is important to stress how much it goes beyond librarians conducting conspectus exercises which bind them to nothing. If collaboration is to be effective, there must be at least medium-term (absolute minimum five year) commitments; this is why linkage to core mission is vital (it must relate only to activities that an organisation could hardly conceivably give up) and why the whole-hearted endorsement of top management is required. At the same time, for stable collaborations to be built, these policies must clearly be in the public domain. One particularly important element of these strategies must be public acknowledgement of what libraries (and particularly the national libraries) cannot cover. As noted above, national libraries have long realised that they cannot even aspire to be comprehensive - but they have been reluctant to acknowledge this fact; until they do so, however, it is difficult for any other funding body to step in to help to form what will be genuine partnerships to help ensure much more comprehensive coverage at least somewhere in the UK.

Among obvious areas for immediately encouraging the development of partnerships are minority languages and area studies of regions covered by only a small number of institutions. One proposal in the Report is the establishment of a small number of pilots for collaborative purchasing in minority foreign languages and area studies, rather along the lines of those developed by the Association of American Research Libraries. The Report recommends that the funding councils might assist HEIs in these pilots, perhaps on the basis of a minimum five year rolling commitment. If the pilots are successful, best practice should gradually be extended to further areas, with the long-term aim of establishing something approaching a national distributed collection policy for many subjects. In addition, the Report proposes a small number of pilots where, with some funding council support, the prime national collecting responsibility is

passed from the national libraries to one or more HEIs which has the support of that activity as a central part of its core mission; a formal agreement over some regional materials between SOAS and the British Library would be an obvious candidate to start this process, but a number of other areas may be envisaged, perhaps including a formal arrangement with respect to some scientific activities between one or more Scottish universities and the National Library of Scotland.

There is, however, in the Group's view, another condition that must be met if an open access network approach to research library provision is to be successful. Inevitably there will be a further extension of the present situation where some libraries are heavily used by those without a formal entitlement to readers' tickets. This external use is often claimed to place considerable additional costs on the supplying institutions, through the need to provide extra seating, because external users are heavy users of inquiry services, and through additional wear and tear on materials. Current funding formulae for HEIs provide no compensation for these additional costs, except for the block funding which goes to Oxford and Cambridge in recognition of their copyright library responsibilities. No basis currently exists for extending any assistance to other HEIs. The Group therefore suggests that information on external use should be collected through a consultancy. This would report on current access arrangements, would estimate what additional costs external users cause to HEI libraries and would recommend how such costs might be audited on an on-going basis as the basis for a modest system of top-sliced grants for those most seriously affected.

The Group clearly recognises that there are other major players than HEIs in the UK research library scene. Some of the key roles of the national libraries have already been mentioned, and the Report urges also that they be formally recognised by their funding departments as the bodies to take responsibility for coordinating the preservation, in at least one copy somewhere, of the whole of the UK printed archive. The Report recognises, however, that it is neither cost-

effective nor appropriate that most material of more local relevance should be acquired and preserved centrally - but more coordination is needed. It therefore urges that the DNH and the Scottish and Welsh Offices should ensure that every local authority has at least one library in its area with formal and publicly declared responsibility for collaborating with copyright and other research libraries in collecting and preserving local research-relevant materials. There are also some areas where significant holdings of important, often unique, research materials - particularly reports, overseas publications, and non-print material - are held by libraries maintained by research councils, research charities, and professional associations. The Report expresses concern about the long-run preservation of some of this material and also in some cases about the extent to which low staffing levels make access difficult. It suggests that these organisations, like other library providers, should also publish information policies, and suggests that, in some cases, it would be appropriate for such libraries to consider closer collaborative arrangements over staffing and OPAC provision with neighbouring HEIs - and that the funding councils might endorse such action.

This has inevitably been a brief overview of a complex topic. A small number of copies of the full Report is still available and can be obtained from John Durnin at the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Donaldson House, 97 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh, EH12 5DH.

#### References

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4. Association of American Universities Research Libraries Project, *Report of the AAU Task Force on Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials*, Association of Research Libraries, Washington DC, 1994.