

THE BRITISH LIBRARY STRATEGIC PLAN 1999 - 2002

Reviewed by Jack Meadows

The strategic plan of a major institution often tends to be a little bland, as its authors anxiously hedge their bets. The British Library Strategic Plan for the period 1999-2002 is, on the contrary, gratifyingly specific and concrete. It is, moreover, based on a user consultation exercise carried out in 1998. (The motley band of individuals and institutions consulted in this exercise are somewhat mysteriously labelled 'stakeholders', though it is not clear who is supposed to be betting against whom.) Over 8,000 consultation papers were sent out, leading to over a thousand responses. As a response rate, this is on the low side. One must hope that the British Library made due allowance, in assessing the replies, for possible bias.

As one of the alleged stakeholders, I was actually not expecting too much of the consultation exercise. I am glad to admit that I was wrong. The Strategic Plan takes considerable notice of the survey results in drawing its conclusions. The respondents attached major importance to the scholarly activities of the British Library - the development of its collections, along with better access, improved management and continued work on preservation. They assigned lower importance to such activities as exhibitions, publications and educational services. The Strategic Plan accepts these priorities. This is a brave decision. All public institutions are currently under pressure to sell themselves to the general public, yet activities relevant to this are being given lower priority in the British Library's plans.

'Priority' here means, of course, financial priority. The finances of the British Library have been increasingly squeezed in recent years. It is a

matter of congratulation, therefore, that discussions with the Government have led to an increased grant-in-aid over the next three years. This obviously does not relieve the British Library of its need to supplement its income. As the review points out, with pardonable pride, the British Library is unique amongst national libraries in earning over a quarter of its annual gross expenditure by its own efforts. New moves proposed in the Plan include negotiating further corporate sponsorship deals (currently running at £850,000), and setting up an investment fund designed to generate more income from existing and projected priced products and services. It is noted tersely that the Government's favoured PFI approach has not proved successful.

A major thrust in the Strategic Plan is towards increased working with partners. This willingness to co-operate in basic library operations with others represents one of the better consequences of recent financial stringencies. Ten or twenty years ago, the British Library typically believed that other libraries depended on it, but not vice versa. Now proposals for collaboration cover several of the Library's priority areas, including collection development, preservation and access. The British Library is backing this approach with a co-operation and partnership programme that has been allocated £250,000 for 1999-2000. Thus one of the specific co-operative projects envisaged is to work with other legal deposit libraries in sharing mass-market leisure journals. The British Library is currently extending its previous consultation exercise by asking for comments on its proposed partnership priorities.

Preservation provides another important thrust of the Plan. Expenditure on preservation actually

fell by 20% over the period 1994-1999. The improved Government grant-in-aid will allow the situation to be improved considerably over the next three years. A little more discussion of how this will be done would have been valuable. For example, the environmental advantages of the St. Pancras building are noted, but what of the separate newspaper library, which has significant preservation problems? Again, there is no indication of what selection policy will apply over the next three years, though it is noted that preservation is a prime area for contracting out.

Serials are not often mentioned explicitly in the Plan, but a number of the proposed actions apply to them. An obvious example is the priority to be given to collection development, including the acquisition of digital works. Though it is hoped that legislation to require legal deposit of non-print material will be presented to Parliament in due course, the Strategic Plan also proposed more immediate steps. A prime objective is to implement further agreements with publishers for

electronic storage and delivery. Such access is already available for more than 900 titles. For serials as a whole, the British Library intends to create a new high-quality serials register. The Library also intends to make the provision of ISSN's financially self-supporting.

Now that the problems associated with the transfer to St. Pancras are subsiding, and other public buildings are raising screams of indignation at their financial overruns, the British Library is in a much better position to consolidate its position and move forward. This Strategic Plan makes good sense as policy for the immediate future. One question as yet unanswered is whether Brian Lang's successor will be equally committed to all the proposed actions.

Anyone interested in the details of the Strategic Plan can consult the text at the British Library's Web site, www.bl.uk.

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