

# KEYS TO SERENDIPITY?: THE RESEARCH SUPPORT LIBRARIES PROGRAMME AND IMPROVING ACCESS



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*The author sketches the background to the UK Higher Education Funding Councils' Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP), articulates the Programme's vision and objectives, describes the collaborative, cross sectoral, work that RSLP is promoting and introduces the concept of a distributed national collection (DNC) of library research resources. RSLP project activities are described, with particular emphasis on three which have a significant serials element, and the purpose of the Programme's Access strand is explained. The feasibility of a serials union catalogue for the UK is discussed, in the context of a major study into the feasibility of a UK National Union Catalogue and the current strategic agenda being pursued jointly by the British Library and UK Higher Education.*

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Some of you may have come across *The key to serendipity*<sup>1</sup>, a rather eccentric, privately-printed work, which seeks to describe and act as a guide to the secondhand bookshop owned by one Peter B. Howard. Mr Howard's bookshop, which is located in Berkeley, California, has a large stock of over 250,000 volumes and, at least to the uninitiated, is in a state of chaos. Indeed, 'great and ceaseless care has been taken, almost unconsciously, to ensure that books will be found when and where one least expects them'.<sup>2</sup> What is less obvious is that the serendipitous aspects of the store are not merely temporal (if you look long enough) or spatial (if you look far enough) or even theological (if you look in the right spirit). The prices themselves may be 'happy discoveries'. For there are books with prices in them and books which are unpriced. The sum you end up paying will depend on your attitude to Mr Howard and how he perceives you. If you wish to keep on the right side of him, the question not to ask is 'Are these books in any order?' The acceptable question is 'How are these books arranged?' And the answer is invariably 'logically'.

Howard claims that the stock is arranged logically but "logic" appears at best to mean no more than that two adjacent books are likely to be linked by some common element beyond their paper and type, but that this element may be indeterminate and ever-varying'.<sup>3</sup> As the corporate expression of Mr Howard's mind, his bookshop is an immense conglomeration of single-celled organisms rather than an organised whole.

Mr Howard's bookshop is, I believe, a good, if rather extreme, analogy for the world of information more generally. Indeed, I believe that we have some considerable way to go in providing access to our collections, be they monograph, serial, physical or virtual.

What is being done to improve the mapping of this chaotic information world? Well, one of the principal purposes of the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP), is to enhance

access to research resources in libraries and archives. We are adopting a strategic approach and taking a holistic view of the physical UK information resource. Indeed, the Anderson Report (1996)<sup>4</sup>, from which RSLP partly derives, recommended a programme of collaborative collection management activities, based on networks of library holdings, with the object of moving towards the concept of distributed national collections in particular groups of disciplines or types of materials. While building one integrated, distributed, national collection is almost certainly over-ambitious, the vision of a Distributed National Collection (DNC) of research resources in particular groups of disciplines or types of materials is achievable, and is of central importance to the Programme.

RSLP brings together both traditional and new forms of access to library information, with specific reference to support for research. While the principal beneficiaries of the Programme will be researchers and their postgraduate research students in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), there will also be significant benefits for other groups. The initiative is a national one and is funded by the four UK Higher Education Funding bodies. It started in the academic year 1999-2000 and will finish in 2001-2002, with up to £30m having been awarded over the four years.

## Vision

The Programme's overarching vision is to facilitate the best possible arrangements for research support in UK libraries and archives, by taking proactive steps:

- to sustain and enhance personal access to research resources;
- to extend collaborative arrangements for collection management;
- to increase the availability of information about the location of the UK's rich information resources;
- to improve ability to navigate around important collections;
- to provide new technological and organisational arrangements to support the strategy.

In very general terms, the activities which the Programme is funding are broken down into

three strands: (a) collaborative collection management projects (in any subject area); or (b) projects that provide support for humanities and social science research collections. In practice, many of the projects contain a number of elements of different types of work. Strand (c), the Access strand, seeks to compensate major holdings libraries for costs incurred in providing facilities for researchers who are not from the 'home' institution.

At the time of writing, funding totalling £11.25m has been made available for sixty projects, as well as a number of studies. Three projects are being co-funded with the British Library's Co-operation and Partnership Programme, and one with the Scottish Cultural Resources Area Network (SCRAN). A further £15m is being made available over three years to a total of forty-eight higher education libraries under the Access strand.

RSLP projects are mainly dealing with traditional library materials but, in almost every case, creating an electronic resource. These take the form of bibliographic and archival records, collection descriptions, digitised images and texts, and web directories and portals. We are also funding, or co-funding, a number of studies, and other pieces of work, which, we believe, will assist in facilitating access and have resonance within the academic research community.

## A collaborative agenda

Almost all of the projects currently funded by the Programme are consortial, and many are cross-sectoral. There are as many as twenty-one partners in a consortium, many of the projects are multi-faceted, and are working in a number of Programme areas: for example, collaborative collection management activities (in any academic discipline), or activities that provide support for humanities and social science collections by improving information about, and access to, materials through retrospective conversion, improved indexing, cataloguing and conservation. Indeed, the complexity of many of the projects has prompted us to arrange a series of project management courses led by the Office for Public Management.

Among the non-HE partners participating in RSLP projects are the British Library, the National

Library of Wales, the National Library of Scotland, the National Archives of Scotland, the Public Record Office, Glasgow City Council Libraries and Archives, the Brighton and Hove Museum and Art Gallery, English Heritage, the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, the Tate Gallery, Westminster City Archives and the Wellcome Institute.

The time is certainly ripe to promote cross-sectoral work. There is a great deal of other challenge funding available in the UK at present, e.g. from the British Library's Co-operation and Partnership Fund or from the Heritage Lottery or New Opportunities funds. A recent Library and Information Commission Education and Libraries Task Group report, *Empowering the learning community*<sup>5</sup> has taken the view that closer cross-sectoral co-operation within the library domain would ensure better support for life-long learners and result in managed access to academic libraries, in a way life-long learners have not had before. Notably, the report recommends that cross-sectoral funding arrangements should be established.

While the current political climate is such that cross-sectoral, and even cross-domain collaboration, is strongly encouraged, libraries in the United Kingdom are funded by a number of different government agencies, and cross-funding between sectors, e.g. from higher education to national or public libraries, is generally forbidden.

However, it has been possible for RSLP to fund the higher education element of proposals submitted to the British Library's Co-operation and Partnership Fund. This has meant that bids have had to meet the criteria of two separate funding agencies. In the British Library's recent call for proposals (October, 2000), work with the HE sector was highlighted and the BL indicated its wish to encourage and enable institutions outside the HE sector to build on and work with existing initiatives in RSLP and other higher education programmes. The BL has welcomed proposals from non-HE institutions to take part in and extend existing RSLP projects. Joint proposals from HE and non-HE institutions for new projects were also welcomed.

### Some RSLP projects

As ever, the library and archive professions have been ingenious in inventing acronyms. Amongst

those proposals that have found favour with RSLP are: SCONE (Scottish Collections Network Extension project), EGIL (Electronic Gateway for Icelandic Literature), RASCAL (Research and Special Collections Available Locally), NAHSTE (Navigational Aids for the History of Science, Technology and the Environment), HOGARTH (Helpful Online Gateway to Art History), and PADDI (Planning Architecture Design Database Ireland).

Projects which have a major serials element include:

#### *Archway*

This is a project, which brings together eighteen university libraries with archaeology collections as partners in a project that is investigating the feasibility of a national collection management policy for archaeology journals and related materials.

The project, led by the University of York, aims to evaluate whether it is possible to enhance access to archaeology research materials by attempting to develop:

- a national distributed collection of archaeology journals and related materials and a union list;
- a national collection management policy for archaeology journals and related materials;
- co-operative library access arrangements;
- consortium access to full text electronic journals;
- tables of content, SDI and document delivery services with effective coverage of archaeology.

Further information may be found on the project website at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/archway/>

#### *Company Annual Reports*

Historic company annual reports are important primary documents for business studies and economics but are increasingly being discarded by libraries, as more current material becomes available electronically. This London Business School-led project aims to create a web-based catalogue of pre-1995 UK company annual reports and an accompanying website to provide information about the collection policies for UK

and international annual report literature in UK academic libraries. Document delivery options for HE researchers are also being investigated. In addition, the project will consider a national collection policy for annual report literature in collaboration with the British Library and the Guildhall Library, both of which hold major annual report collections. The project also plans to approach key commercial suppliers of appropriate electronic products to negotiate an HE licence.

See: <http://www.london.edu/companyreports/>

### *Mapping Asia*

Mapping Asia is a wide-ranging demonstrator project led by the University of Oxford.

Its principal aim is to improve access to, and coverage of, UK library materials for researchers working on all aspects of Asian Studies by mapping existing UK library collections and collecting policies on Asia, treating newspapers in depth. It is also examining the availability of language expertise required to service these collections. It is disseminating the information via the Web and enabling national collaborative collection management policies for information sources in Asian Studies to be discussed and formulated. In particular, the project is drawing up a national collection management policy on newspapers published in Asia for higher education libraries. The project will also provide the means of improving national coverage of printed materials relating to Asia by identifying gaps in collections on the one hand and saving money on unnecessary overlaps in coverage on the other. In the case of newspapers published in Asia, it will provide data for cancelling duplicate subscriptions, where appropriate, and enable a greater number of titles to be taken to improve coverage for research.

The project website may be found at:  
<http://www.soas.ac.uk/asiemap/amhome.html>

A full list of projects and lead institutions is available on the RSLP website,  
<http://www.rslp.ac.uk>. Links are available from the RSLP website to project websites.

### **Access strand**

Co-ordinating collections and their acquisition, cataloguing, subject-indexing and preservation is

only worthwhile as part of a national strategy, if readers who need access can obtain it, and even if we uphold the concept that libraries should be free at the point of use, most of us would acknowledge that there are costs attached to service provision for users who are not members of the 'home' institution. Major holdings libraries within the UK higher education sector have until very recently received no compensation for the 'burden' imposed by visiting research-active staff and students from other UK higher education institutions. The RSLP Access strand has sought to compensate the libraries for extra costs incurred in providing access and services for these 'external researchers'. As there was no comprehensive and auditable data already available, RSLP commissioned the first large-scale survey of the use made of UK higher education libraries by external researchers. Almost 5,000 research-active staff and students were surveyed. The survey confirmed that there is very extensive use of libraries beyond those of the 'home' institution and provided the data on which the RSLP Access strand annual allocations for the academic years 1999-2000 to 2001-2002 were made.<sup>6</sup> A small number of research libraries outside the HE sector have made the point, that as they provide significant support to HE researchers, they too should have a share of the RSLP access funding. The current funding regime, however, does not allow this.

### **A serials union catalogue for the UK?**

When we were setting up RSLP, we sought the views of the Higher Education research community in an attempt to establish priorities for the Programme. In particular, views were sought in consultation with the British Academy and almost seventy discipline associations, as well as through a series of focus groups, organised regionally throughout the United Kingdom and on a discipline basis, with representation from a wide range of HEIs. One matter that came up repeatedly was how difficult it was for researchers to find locations of journal titles. I believe this is a very important issue, even in this digital age, and that it is an example of one area in which the library profession has signally failed the academic community.

To cut a long story short, RSLP, JISC and the

British Library are jointly funding a union catalogue feasibility study which is being undertaken by a consortium led by the University of Sheffield Library and which includes Crossnet Systems, CURL and the University of Glasgow Library as partners. The aim of the feasibility study is to undertake a review of key issues that impinge on the creation of a National Union Catalogue (or catalogues) for monographs, serials and other formats (such as archives and manuscripts) for the UK. The primary focus is UK higher education and national library catalogues and collections, though other key stakeholders are also being consulted. A major component of the study is an investigation into the possibilities of a union serials catalogue for the UK. The study is expected to report in spring 2001.<sup>7</sup>

The study is organised in a number of workpackages, one of which involved undertaking two surveys - one of academic staff, postgraduates and researchers; and one of library staff. Both of these found there was very considerable support for the creation of a serials union catalogue, and that it came high on the list of priorities presented to survey participants.

As we know, serials literature has different characteristics from monograph material both bibliographically and in terms of user requirements and there are distinctive problems in considering a union catalogue for serials. First, individual libraries have not always thought it necessary to catalogue their serials titles to the same MARC and AACR2 standards areas are taken for granted for monograph collections. Indeed, even when the standards are applied for monographs, experience with clumps and Z39.50 has shown that records can still differ in ways that inhibit this approach. Second, skeleton records may have been sufficient in the past to provide a 'finding list' for a single library's collections, but lack of detail and inconsistencies can act as an impediment to the interoperability required for a functioning union catalogue, whether physical or virtual.

Is it viable to provide detailed holdings information in a UK serials union catalogue? Among the aspects to be considered are: (a) standards in this area have only recently been developed and different library management systems are only now providing consistent methods for recording holdings information; (b)

most libraries in the UK do not have a complete record, issue by issue, of their exact holdings, at least on their OPAC. Is it any wonder that users become frustrated?

Many users would, naturally, prefer immediate full text electronic delivery of the article in which they are interested - and here there are implications for a serials union catalogue, as electronic access to an article may only be licensed to the staff and students of a particular institution.

At present, it looks as though the solution will be to recommend the creation of a physical, rather than a distributed, serials union catalogue, with summary holdings information only. This may well satisfy 90% of enquiries (and we should not forget that 'the best is the enemy of the good'.) Any other solution, e.g. a distributed serials union catalogue with detailed information down to the level of each issue of a particular title, would require an inordinate amount of funding and effort, and indeed, may not yet be technically achievable.

The work on serials aspects of a union catalogue is being undertaken by Tony Kidd (University of Glasgow). The study is nearing conclusion and I imagine that Tony will almost certainly present his detailed findings and the recommendations of this important work in a future issue of *Serials*.

## Conclusion

It is really too early to say what the impact of the Research Support Libraries Programme will be on the academic community in the long term. Clearly, within the four-year framework of the Programme and the £30m budget we can hope, at most, to create a bedrock on which further work can be founded. Certainly, one expects that in particular academic disciplines (such as archaeology, foreign legal studies, history, theology and religious studies, music and veterinary studies) the impact will be considerable. Access funding and the way it has been allocated has generally been welcomed, and it is hoped that this will continue in some form after the Programme comes to an end. The concept of the Distributed National Collection, promoted by the Programme, and the Anderson Report before it, has achieved a strong acceptance in the library community, and collaborative cross-

sectoral work, which will contribute to its development, has begun to feature on the agenda of other funding agencies.

The British Library/Higher Education Task Force has advanced the agenda further, particularly in relation to the Distributed National Collection and the building blocks and infrastructure that would be necessary to achieve the vision. It is now to be hoped that the new Strategic Advisory Group on Research Libraries, to be chaired by Sir Brian Follett, will be able to progress further those items on the RSLP agenda which have had resonance with research libraries both within and outside the HE sector, and in particular, with the British Library and the national libraries of Scotland and Wales. The new group might, for example, review ways of taking forward, scaling up and deepening the impact of the RSLP access and collection management strands and promote further development of a co-ordinated, collaborative, strategy for the provision of materials in printed and electronic form.

If all that is proposed can be achieved, we shall indeed have created the keys to unlock those resources, which are currently so often revealed only in serendipitous circumstances.

## References

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6. For a full account of the survey, see: Milne, R. and Davenport, G., The Research Support Libraries Programme Access Survey. *New review of academic librarianship*, 1999, 5, 23-39.
7. I am very grateful to Tony Kidd (University of Glasgow), and to Peter Stublely (University of Sheffield), who have contributed in a variety of ways to this section of the article.