

# A SERIALS UNION CATALOGUE FOR THE UK?



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*This article gives a summary of the process and recommendations of the recent Feasibility Study on the establishment of a UK National Union Catalogue, with reference to the serials aspects of the study. An outline of the methods used to progress the study is given – sample surveys, visits to ‘key players’, investigation of the technological possibilities. The importance of the provision of high quality bibliographic and holdings records is stressed, as is the need to link value-added services – e.g. document delivery, electronic access – to the establishment of any union catalogue structure.*

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The more mature among the readers of *Serials* – among whom I suppose I must include myself – may remember the days of BUCOP, the British Union Catalogue of Periodicals, the publication produced by the British Library, with supplements into the early 1980s, listing UK library journal holdings. Cost-cutting exercises, and doubts of its commercial viability, led to its demise, but there were also the inherent limitations of a printed listing, input from fewer libraries updating their entries and therefore limiting its usefulness, together with a feeling that the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) at Boston Spa was able to supply or locate a very high proportion of journal articles required.

However, there has always been a feeling among some academics and some library staff that a national union catalogue of serial holdings would be a very useful tool, particularly for research, particularly perhaps for arts and humanities researchers, where it may not infrequently be necessary to review a run of volumes of some relatively obscure, older journal title, a service not so easily supplied by the very efficient provision of individual articles by BLDSC and other document delivery sources. The existence of the web, and the increasing provision of online access to the journal literature, has also reinvigorated an interest in such possibilities (although it could be argued that these developments might in fact negate the need for any form of union catalogue).

This feeling, in favour of a serials catalogue, crystallised in focus groups held under the auspices of the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP), set up by the UK Higher Education Funding Councils, and was considered in combination with the possible requirement for a wider national union catalogue for the UK, covering all formats. Accordingly, in early 2000, RSLP, the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Funding Councils

(JISC), and the British Library's Co-operation and Partnership Programme jointly commissioned a feasibility study of a UK National Union Catalogue (UKNUC). The contract was granted to a consortium led by the University of Sheffield, with Michael Hannon as Project Director and Peter Stubleby as Project Manager. Rob Bull of Crossnet Systems provided technical expertise in union catalogue issues, including much experience of Z39.50 systems, and Dr Clive Field, then Director of Information Services at Birmingham University, represented the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL), developers of the important existing COPAC union catalogue. Glasgow University was also part of the consortium in the person of myself, with a brief to concentrate on the serials union catalogue issues.

The feasibility study was intensive and exhaustive – and exhausting (and exhilarating) – and produced a final report, together with a number of subsidiary documents, for the study's funders in April 2001. This Final Report is available on the project's website at <http://www.uknuc.shef.ac.uk/>. This article will concentrate exclusively on the serials aspects of the study, but other articles are in preparation, which will cover the wider issues. If you would like to know more on the serials aspects, there is also a report on the website.

### Survey

One of the first tasks of our study group was to undertake a survey of a sample of users – given time limitations, and expectations concerning the major customers for union catalogue information, we concentrated on staff and research postgraduates at higher education institutions – and of a sample of library staff, from a broad range of sectors, although weighted towards higher education. There was no separate questionnaire on serials, which were covered along with other issues. Two especially relevant results were:

- the importance assigned to locating all journals in a particular subject area – the highest rated option in a multiple choice question, which asked how often researchers would use a UKNUC for various different purposes, including locating books on specific

subjects, locating particular items;

- checking citation details; and the pleadings, especially from science/technology/medicine (STM) researchers, for enhanced article linking between databases and fulltext, in some ways not directly relevant to the creation of a serials union catalogue, but expressive nevertheless of the requirement for electronic access.

The librarians' questionnaire elicited worries about the quality of serials representation in current union catalogues (coupled with an interest in bibliographic record retrieval), and a demand for a closer relationship between union catalogues and document delivery services.

### 'Key player' visits

This survey was supplemented by visits by the study team to a large number of 'key players', both in this country and in North America. On the serials side, these included potential sources of serials records, such as CONSER and the ISSN International Centre; international union catalogue utilities, including OCLC and the Research Libraries Group; national and other large-scale libraries within the UK; existing 'physical' union catalogues within the UK and Europe e.g. COPAC, SALSER (Scottish Academic Libraries' Serials), and NOSP (the Scandinavian serials union catalogue); UK 'clumps' providing Z39.50-based 'virtual' union catalogues e.g. CAIRNS for Scotland, and the M25Link group of London libraries (where much work has been done on standards for serials union catalogues); and participants in the JISC-funded Join-Up Programme, a set of inter-related projects investigating seamless linking between searching for relevant journal articles, locating them (physically or electronically) and delivering them to the researcher's desktop (again physically or, preferably, electronically). In February 2001, a Concertation Day was held in London, bringing together most of these 'key players' and others, outlining the study team's proposals at that stage, and receiving very useful feedback on these proposals.

### Quality of serials records

One issue that was emphasised during most of these discussions was the question of the quality

of serials records. Traditionally, many UK libraries have not catalogued serials to the same standards as their monograph intake. In many cases, a separate serials catalogue existed, acting as a 'finding list' for local holdings, without many pretensions beyond that. Although these separate catalogues have largely been integrated into the standard library OPAC, the records themselves have probably not been upgraded. There are at least two reasons why this situation is no longer satisfactory. First, the focus groups that preceded the establishment of the feasibility study, and the findings from our survey of users, indicate that there is a demand for more sophisticated information on serials, including subject information (subject headings), corporate body entries, etc, so that researchers can discover relevant serials that they might not otherwise know of. Work on developing standards for collection descriptions and collection strengths is also relevant here, though not a major focus of our study. Second, linking together serials records, whether in a 'physical' catalogue such as COPAC or SALSER, or a 'virtual' catalogue such as those available via CAIRNS and M25, depends on the application of consistent cataloguing rules and record elements, and in particular the existence and use of the ISSN as a record identifier (recognising that not all serials have ISSNs assigned to them): our investigations indicated that the use of ISSNs, even when available, within UK library catalogues, is patchy to say the least – 29% of serials records on the CURL database (the record source behind COPAC), or 37% of SALSER records, have ISSNs.

These considerations led us to investigate more closely the international sources of high quality serials records, with particular emphasis on CONSER and the ISSN International Register. CONSER, Co-operative Online Serials, is based at the Library of Congress in Washington, and coordinates the creation of high standard serials records by around thirty, mainly North American, libraries. The National Library of Wales has recently become a CONSER associate member, and other large UK libraries, national and university, are also monitoring the situation, and may join in the future. CONSER records reside on the OCLC database, but are also available direct from the Library of Congress, or via for example the Research Libraries Group's RLIN service. The

ISSN International Centre is based in Paris, and its International Register includes records supplied by the various national ISSN centres. The feasibility study has recommended that the CONSER database be used as a first choice source of records for any UK catalogue, given that their records are in general more complete (many ISSN Register records do not include subject headings for example), and that they are in MARC21 format, the format that is being adopted in the UK over the next few years. The British Library is also of course an obvious source of records, and one for which there is relatively little overlap with CONSER. Our very small sample testing revealed a hitrate of about 60-65% for Glasgow University serials records against CONSER (and against the ISSN Register), but only about 20-25% of British Library titles were also present as CONSER records.

### Services

In addition to the question of record quality, our study team felt that it was important to consider the services that could be spun off from or linked to any serials union catalogue, including links to electronic content, and to document delivery more generally. Although a catalogue without accompanying services would be of limited value, we felt that our central brief related to the establishment of the catalogue itself, and that, if this was successful, the value-added services would follow. We suggest that the establishment and diffusion of the OpenURL structure, using SFX or similar products, offers one of the best ways forward here. A library with an OpenURL resolver would be able to designate the serials union catalogue as a target, to be offered automatically, when users search the local OPAC or article databases. In addition, the serials union catalogue could itself be provided with an OpenURL resolver, so that links out from the union catalogue would also be available. The better the quality of the data within the union catalogue, the more precisely and effectively will the resolver offer appropriate further information.

A serials union catalogue would also become an essential component within the Join-Up product structure (Shaw, 2001; EDINA, 2001) – following the employment of Xgrain software to retrieve relevant results from several databases,

the ZBLSA locating service would point to the serials union catalogue, as a Z39.50 target, among other possible locations. An article request might be automatically transferred to a library's document delivery service, from where a source could be selected by DocuSend, using, among other information, the serials union catalogue to suggest a possible location.

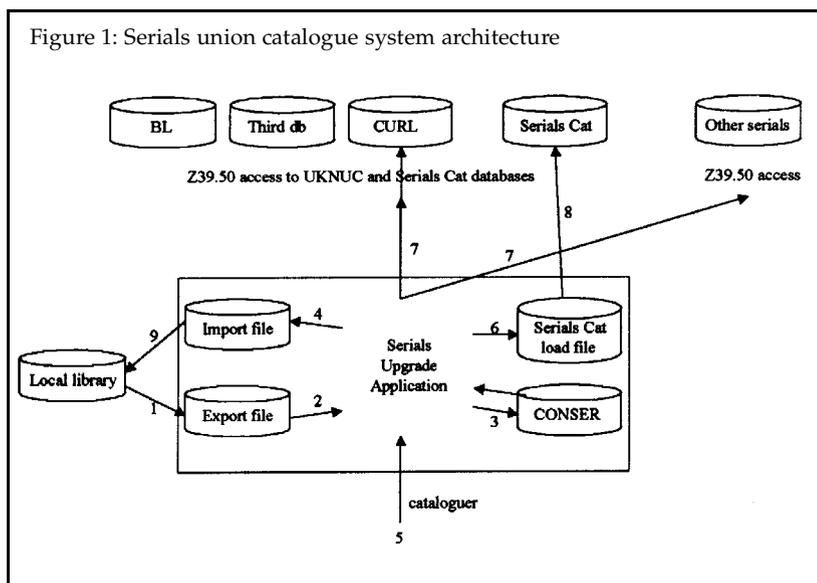
Use of a serials union catalogue for document delivery requires that standard summary (at least) holdings information is available. This is another area where the feasibility study has confirmed the existence of sub-standard data, which must also be improved if an accurate union catalogue is to emerge. The imposition of MARC21 will aid this process, encouraging the establishment of proper holdings records, not really available under UKMARC.

At first sight, electronic access to journals via a serials union catalogue would seem to be an obvious application, and much desired by researchers. However, the present fragmentation of access via licence restrictions renders this very difficult to achieve without much frustration. The possible establishment of a national authorisation and authentication database, if this could be linked to the union catalogue, would go a long way towards solving this particular tangled web.

### Final recommendations and costings

As a result of our investigations, including lengthy consideration of the various technical possibilities, the study team has recommended that a separate physical serials union catalogue be created for the UK, administered centrally, at least initially. Given the quality issues discussed above, we feel that a virtual Z39.50 solution will not work at present, although this may change in the future. The British Library would be a vital initial source of records, together with the CONSER database, hosted at the central administration

point. Records from the other national libraries, some of the large university research libraries, and some libraries with important specialist collections, would also be early contributors to a national catalogue. Contributors would have free access to CONSER records. Local records would be likely to require upgrading, both bibliographically and in terms of holdings information. It is proposed that that this would be done centrally, as much as possible, but that upgraded records would then be exported back to the local library, as well as acting as a component of the national catalogue. A simplified system architecture (excluding update procedures for example) for these activities is given in Figure 1, as developed by study team member Rob Bull of Crossnet Systems.



Although we are recommending the establishment of a separate serials union catalogue, it is also important that there are links to established services such as the University of London Union List of Serials and SALSER, and the development of a distributed service may well come closer to reality with the wider implementation of serials titles indexes as available from the library systems suppliers, and the application of the recently agreed extension of Z39.50 Bath Profile attributes to include serials titles.

A major implication of our recommendations is that the costs of setting up a serials union catalogue are far from trivial. Without going into details, our estimates amount to a total of

£881,000 over a three year period, and there would then be continuing costs if a centralised system were to be maintained – although we also recommend that at the end of the three years it would be necessary to review whether any concept change was required, in the light of forthcoming research and development. Although the costs are not trivial, neither are they unrealistic or inconceivable, and, given the predicted benefits, are, the study team believe, affordable and reasonable.

### What will happen next?

As stated earlier, the report was presented to the funders – RSLP, JISC and the British Library – in April of this year, with a recommendation that a full specification and operational requirement would have to be drawn up, if the serials union catalogue was to be taken further. It has been discussed by the funders, who, keen to move forward to the next stage towards implementation, have recently issued an invitation to tender entitled ‘Scoping study and implementation plan for a serials union catalogue (SUNCAT)’ – SUNCAT, incidentally, acting as the rather more graceful replacement for the somewhat inelegant SUKNUC, or Serials UKNUC, the term generally employed by the Feasibility Study team – with the intention that the implementation plan should be presented by the end of February 2002. It seems that it is still

likely that, in some form at least, a serials union catalogue for the UK will be set up in the relatively near future, and I for one will be very interested to monitor, and perhaps participate in, its progress.

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