

# RSLG – whither research libraries?

Based on a paper given at the 26th UKSG Conference, Edinburgh, April 2003

*The Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG) Report* was published in March 2003. It provides a strong analysis of the research information environment, and proposes the establishment of a Research Libraries Network (RLN) to plan and manage the development of that environment nationally, across higher education and other providers. The paper welcomes the broad thrust of the report, but also identifies difficult issues arising from the plans, such as the relationship between the RLN and the JISC, which will have to be addressed, and areas of activity, such as priorities in the development of discovery tools and in e-science, where the plans may need to be modified and developed more strongly.



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There is an almost overwhelming urge to speak of Follett 1 and Follett 2, and to think of them as being linked in some way. It should be resisted, because they are very different. Firstly, the two groups were set up to address completely different issues. The first group's task was to consider how to handle the library needs which flowed from the great expansion in student numbers which took place in the late 1980s and early 90s. The second was asked to consider the problem of research information provision. Secondly, the first group came up with a fairly detailed and partly costed set of proposals, and worked at least in some areas on the basis of 'let a thousand flowers bloom', i.e. encouraging a wide range of projects and activities. The second has produced one 'big idea', namely the development of a nationally-planned and managed strategy, from which a detailed programme of action (only some of which – I hope – is identified) would flow, but with much flesh (and muscle?) still to be developed. *The Follett Report 1992* was published with something of a fanfare; *Follett 2003* emerged quietly on the web in March.

## Background to the Group's work

Why has the Group's work been necessary? The report identifies the reasons for the Group's establishment, and these should provide a way of measuring success. They were essentially two-fold.

Firstly, a problem of long-term viability in the research information infrastructure was identified, particularly on two grounds:

The rising cost and volume of materials, and in particular of periodicals. This issue was identified in *The Follett Report* of 1992, where it was recommended that the (then) CVCP should work with the American Universities Association to find practical ways of changing this situation. As a member of that group, I look back rather wryly at that recommendation.

The changes being introduced in research information provision by the development of electronic means of dissemination. These are emerging as much from researchers as from library or ICT professionals.

Secondly, the significance of the British Library was seen as lying both in its role as a library of last resort in terms of its holdings, and also in its document supply and interlibrary loan services, which the Group has identified as a key reason why we are able to support high-quality research in the United Kingdom without having massive libraries in many universities. My first draft of this paper stated that this was the first time that higher education and national libraries have been considered together, but I subsequently recalled that SCONUL ran a seminar on such collaboration in support of research in 1986 and the concept of national collaboration was a strong thread

through the late 1980s, clearly an idea ahead of its time. However, this is the first time that such official attention has been paid to it, and we should note that the main focus here has been on the British Library, rather than the national libraries as a whole.

### **The needs of researchers**

Before I look at the conclusions of the Group, let's look at the work on which these were based. This demonstrated some new features which are important for reviewing the recommendations in the Report.

There was considerable consultation of researchers to try to ascertain their needs. This was more detailed than has been done before, and resulted in the recognition of the hybridity of demand; of the variety of relevant electronic resources; of the continued importance of catalogues and discovery tools; and the desire for integrated access to resources across services and institutions.

An important conclusion was that researchers' information needs had to include resources other than those found in libraries or on the internet. Examples included data such as those to be found in the large e-science datasets, as well as images and other non-textual media of all kinds. Alongside this was the strong desire to see links between different elements and content in the information chain.

The consultation resulted in a recognition that researchers are not all to be found in higher education. An important feature of the Report as a result is the view that services should be designed to cross boundaries between different groups of researchers. What is not mentioned is that, in these circumstances, it will be reasonable to expect the funders of these researchers to put money into the overall kitty.

Though the Group accepted that some tools and resources developed for research could also be used to support learning and teaching, it suggested that there was a real qualitative difference in the needs of those activities which merited a focus on the specific needs of researchers.

Critically, the Group thought that the current provision was patchy and, while moving in many of the right directions, not only needed to go further, but also lacked co-ordination and strategic direction. This last was crucial to the recommendations.

### **The Research Library Network**

The key conclusion of the Report of the Group is that a single body – the Research Library Network – needs to be created to address all these issues across sectors and to provide the necessary functions for a research information infrastructure. Its roles are identified as three-fold.

The first is to determine the overall strategy for the system and the development of a comprehensive programme for it, and to ensure collaboration between the various players involved. This is based on the view already described that the existing system and the responsibility for various elements in it are too fragmented.

Secondly, the Network would have to ensure that the programme is funded and implemented (though it is recognised that some implementation may be done by others).

Finally, the Network would have an advocacy role. It is suggested that this is needed both at the level of national bodies and government and on the international level as well, relating to issues both of research information and also of the technology needed to deliver it.

These are strategic goals which I believe should be welcomed, since they do address the issues which led to the setting-up of the Group. In turn, they also raise a number of issues to which I shall return at the end.

At the operational level, and in line with its aim of addressing how to tackle the issues in a structured programme, the Group has identified four strands for practical action under the Research Library Network framework. These are defined as discovery, access, retention and preservation, and scholarly communication. Its proposed programme is shaped round these, and the report suggests that the activities can be broadly divided into two stages. Both of these stages comprise particular pieces of work within each of the four strands.

For the rest of this paper, I wish to comment firstly on some aspects of the programme insofar as it is outlined in the report, and then secondly, to return to questions raised by the strategy as a whole. I will not comment on the retention issue, since I think it raises fewer questions at this stage (though that does not mean it is easier, or even easy, to address than the others).

## Discovery

Both the strategy and the programme outlined in the Report make a welcome recognition of the need to enhance the discovery of both analogue (printed and manuscript) and digital resources of various kinds. The programme for this strand has a two-fold purpose: firstly it is planned for improved discovery of resources and secondly, it is designed to provide the basis for collaborative collection management, twin themes which recur at several points.

The Report makes some proposals (specific though not very detailed) relating to the discovery of printed and other analogue resources. In my view, the proposed Network will have to address where the priorities for discovery should lie. The rationale for the development of SUNCAT as a priority is strong, and this is in any case already under way. Beyond this, however, the priorities are perhaps less clear. Emphasis in the Report is laid on the idea of a national union catalogue of printed monographs. I think that the RLN should first consider whether it would be more important and sensible initially to target other areas. These could, for example, include significant planned work on the discovery of archives and manuscript materials, which is still – notwithstanding the sterling work of the Archive Hub – an area where much basic work remains to be done. The case for a new national union catalogue also remains to be more strongly made in terms of costs and benefits. Would a planned national development of the CURL and national libraries' catalogues be a more cost-effective development? Should more emphasis be put on targeting of specialist collections for addition to existing catalogues? Collection mapping is also identified as a significant pre-requisite for this work, but those of us who have been involved in such exercises are under no illusions as to the complexity of this activity.

Moving to electronic resources, the Report recognises the need for quality control and standards in a way which is very welcome. It also identifies a complex set of needs in respect of electronic resource discovery: common metadata standards, the creation of metadata by authors, the development of more sophisticated integrated resource discovery tools, and the variety of resources – both printed and digital – which such tools should embrace. I suspect that the Group

was not able to address fully within the time the way in which generic tools and subject-specific products should mesh together, and this will need more detailed consideration. Taken together, this makes up a complex and very demanding programme indeed, involving many players: not just libraries (and indeed they may be relatively smaller players), but authors, research and development projects, funded by various bodies and some commercial players. All these will have to work not simply at the national, but also at the international, level.

## Access

The access strand in the Group's Report perhaps raises most questions for some at least of the stakeholders.

The collaborative collection management theme is a key element within this strand, and is likely to prove contentious. In terms of its history, the effectiveness of such collection management has been patchy. The RSLP collaborative collection management programme has had limited success, despite determined efforts. The Research Support Libraries Group itself commissioned a study into the barriers to deeper resource sharing, which concluded that a very persuasive case would need to be made to higher education institutions before they would be willing to change their existing internal focus. A more detailed study, building on one of these RSLP projects, has just started, under the title, CoFOR (Collaboration for Research), which is trying to test the concept in the area of Russian studies. The key to success will have to be through achieving a recognition as much in institutions as in libraries that such a planned approach will achieve a significantly better result than any present informal arrangements which tend, in all honesty, to avoid the awkward questions. The argument in the report that there is a bigger problem with over-retention than with under-retention, and the consequent proposal for relegation and disposal, based on the discovery programme noted earlier, will certainly provide considerable work, both practical and political, for libraries as well as for the Network. There is certainly a severe marketing test here, and research libraries must expect to be in the midst of this.

A welcome element in the Report is its strong support of the roles played by the national libraries

in research support. A number of factors will be crucial to the successful implementation of the Research Library Network. The encouragement for recognition of this in the funding for these libraries will need to be reflected on the ground, as will the request to ensure that the British Library's document supply role is maintained, and it will be interesting to see where the necessary funding is sourced. It will also require stronger collaboration between the government departments concerned, and between the national and higher education institutions on collection management. I shall return to the relationship between higher education and the national libraries later.

Focusing on electronic resources, the Report identifies several of the problems which may seem all too familiar in respect of the licensing of these materials. It will be interesting to see how the admirable proposal to seek deals which can benefit the whole UK research community is put into practice, given the experience of those closest to recent work in this area. There are similarly substantial issues raised by the plan to evaluate business models for licensing (and an honest recognition of the difficulty of identifying the cost of this). There are many subsidiary questions raised by that plan which are not easy to answer, and which indeed cut across each other and which each year of the JISC's existing work illuminate further. The precise impact on individual libraries and their users will depend on how these particular questions are answered.

The Report's encouragement for common standards to provide seamless access to electronic material is less fully developed and its impact on libraries is therefore less clear. The link with e-science and with grid computing is not developed in full, yet this will be critical for libraries. The partnership with those working in these areas will need to be developed in the coming years. Similarly, libraries are frequently serving both research and learning and teaching, and how the proposed developments in access for research relate to provision for these functions remains to be seen. There are still unanswered questions about integrated provision to be addressed.

The proposal to continue the access funding, begun under the RSLP, albeit in a modified form, is a further welcome recommendation, and should provide a major boost to extending access. A major incentive held out in this Report relates to the

provision of borrowing facilities. It is, however, unclear how the funding will operate if, as seems to be the case, nearly all HEIs join in the SCONUL Research Extra scheme which has such provision as a central feature. Time will tell.

### **Scholarly communication**

The Report provides an excellent analysis of scholarly communication trends, and the conclusion that there is a growing divergence between the wide dissemination of research results and the formal publication of these same results is equally welcome.

The conclusions and proposals for action are, nevertheless, fairly modest, though there are interesting pointers in them, such as the idea of the reporting of publicly funded research being freely available, the support for new approaches to publishing, and the separation of communication of results from their quality assurance. More flesh needs to be put on the proposal for 'active support' for new methods of dissemination and on how 'consensus on future options for formal publication' is to be found: there is very limited evidence at present that this latter aim will prove a straightforward task.

This is a field in which national planning and collaboration, most obviously seen in the practical context of VAT, in line with the thrust of the Group's Report, is essential. Some element of international planning will also be necessary if new methods of dissemination are to be successfully implemented. Research libraries will have to put their weight (such as it is) behind these efforts, and play their part at institutional level and in consortial groupings of various kinds in driving forward what will be a difficult series of developments.

### **How does it all come together?**

The change proposed is one in which the system of information support for research is both planned and managed at a national level. This is a massive cultural change for the system and requires a lot from all the players. These include Funding Councils, who don't always sing from the same hymn sheet, Research Councils and the Arts and Humanities Research Board, other national funders such as the Wellcome Trust, the Department of

Culture, Media and Sport, some of which sometimes operate across several jurisdictions within the United Kingdom, not to mention the individual higher education institutions all still working to their own agendas, even if national drivers condition their work, plus of course the libraries themselves, more used to responding primarily to these local needs and demands. The need to buy into the RLN concept is not therefore limited to the bodies at the top, demanding as that is in itself. A crucial test will particularly be whether institutions will be willing to accept the reality of such a managed strategy and what it means to each of them. This is a tall political order, in which official agreement at the top may be the easy bit, and much will depend on how the RLN is set up and operates. Unless it does genuinely get all these players to accept national planning, the concept will not be able to work.

Secondly, there are issues of ensuring that the strategy and the practical programme based on it are really forward-looking. There are inevitably gaps in the Report in this respect. These include the handling of born-digital electronic resources, the significance of some computing developments, and some international developments, such as BioMedCentral, which do not appear as prominently as they might do. The RLN will have to be ready to incorporate the opportunities afforded by these into its forward strategy and operational planning if it is really to enhance research information support in the future.

Thirdly, there is the issue of how the programme is taken forward. The Report identifies many elements of a national work programme already in progress, with the major current player being recognised as the Joint Information Systems Committee. It will certainly be critical that the RLN builds on this work and how it does this. We have been used to a model of JISC leadership which – whatever concerns about effectiveness we may have – has produced significant positive development, both in terms of content and resources and also in technological terms. Starting from scratch again would be – as they say in the north-east of Scotland – “nae wise”. How the RLN and the JISC inter-relate will be critical to the success of this new approach. The same will be true, if not to quite the same extent, of other bodies such as the Research Councils. This may be the most challenging part of the whole enterprise.

The United Kingdom has never been noted for its cross-departmental planning in government (and perhaps we are not alone in this). The Network will, for the first time, bring together in an official, as distinct from the professional, way, the national and higher education (and probably other) libraries. The bringing together of the common concerns for research support which these libraries share, at the same time as they each, quite properly, retain different priorities in respect of their missions, will certainly be a non-trivial task. It will be necessary to ensure that this is a genuine collaboration rather than a take-over by one or other partner, allowing each to continue to fulfil their own broader missions, while coming together for this purpose.

The business of research information support does not – and therefore the Network will not – exist within a box bounded by HEIs, the national libraries and funding bodies ‘within the system’. Most critically, it has to interact with the world of publishing. This is itself a major change programme for both the bodies already mentioned and for publishers, with of course a strong international element fed in to add to the richness of the stew.

One major change which the Report explicitly proposes is the way in which support for research is separated from that for teaching and learning. This certainly fits one reality in terms of some users, and some libraries have reflected this in making specific provision for research information support, as indeed they have done for teaching and learning through VLEs, etc. In terms of content and systems, however, libraries have sought both to make access as widely available as possible and also to adopt generic approaches and tools, so that users with different needs can use all available content, reflecting other realities. It remains to be seen how the proposed separation can (or even should) be articulated effectively in real life. It will certainly require different approaches by libraries to adapt to such a scenario.

Whereas *Follett* 1992 had a fairly highly-developed programme, *The RSLG Report* provides only a broad brush set of figures, without these being linked to specific parts of the programme. It is not yet clear whether the figures mentioned are total figures or are additional to the redistribution of existing funding from a variety of sources, and what will drive the growth from £7M to £22M over

four years. Indeed, I suspect that only once the full programme has been developed in more detail – and as is clear, I believe there needs to be some additions to the programme – will we be able to get a handle on the details of the real annual cost.

The Report has quite reasonably focused on overall strategy and the broad lines of the programme which it suggests should be followed. In this situation, ‘the devil is in the detail’, and this will need to be teased out. Usually when this phrase is used, it is an indication of a negative response. I do not mean it as such, rather as indicating the need for a realisation that success will come from a recognition that that these details do have to be addressed at the appropriate time in the planning.

Inevitably, a presentation of this kind flags up questions which I think the Research Libraries Network will have to address if it is to be successful. But successful is what I hope it will be. The Group has both provided a strong analysis of

the current environment for research information and also identified weaknesses and trends which need to be addressed. The Report of the Group offers a unique opportunity, as far as most interested parties are concerned, to make a real difference to the support of research. We should look to seize the opportunity to make our voices heard within the structures of the Network. This should be used both to support the broad strategy of the Report, but also to encourage further development for the future beyond what is proposed at this initial stage.

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