

Sharing the pain, striving for gain

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Ireland is experiencing a particularly severe and sudden economic downturn. Spending on higher education is under the microscope, with implications for university libraries. The impact of this new environment at National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, in particular, is discussed and a range of challenges, opportunities and coping strategies explored in the context of staffing, information resources and operations. The national dimension is also covered, notably implications for the Irish Research eLibrary (IReL) service. Overall, a combination of pain and gain is identified, with resource losses balanced against opportunities for new thinking and models.



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Since 2008 Ireland has been experiencing a steep recession, having since the mid-1990s enjoyed a prolonged and unprecedented period of prosperity. The good times were characterized by high public spending and job creation and this enabled a very welcome sustained expansion in academic library staffing, resources and services. The onset of the recession has been quite sudden and has left no individual or organization untouched. Where there had been an assumption and realization of growth and job creation there is now major uncertainty, contraction and loss of employment.

The government response has been a complete reversal of that maintained previously, with massive spending cuts and taxation increases now the order of the day. The public sector has been a particular target and has experienced a moratorium on recruitment, reductions in budget, a pension levy and actual pay cuts of at least 5% for everyone. Inevitably these measures have had a very negative effect on worker morale. There is a general climate of uncertainty, accompanied by a very strong focus on efficiencies, value for money and shared services potential. All of this brings major managerial challenges and opportunities. Academic libraries have been in no way exempt and this article describes the scale of reductions at National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, their impact and library coping strategies in terms of staffing, collections and operations. While taking account of the pain involved, the opportunities for gain are also highlighted.

Staffing

The ban on recruitment, already mentioned, has been in force throughout 2009. Its provisions mean not only that no new post can be created but also that any existing post falling vacant, whether through retirement, contract expiry or any other circumstance, must remain unfilled other than by redeployment within existing numbers. Promotions or acting allowances are not permitted and a series of incentivized schemes to promote early retirement, career breaks and reduced annual hours has also been introduced. The entire focus is on headcount reduction and the Library at NUI, Galway has endured a reduction of almost ten per cent in its FTE complement during 2009. This has been an enormous burden and all grades have been affected to some extent, with the loss of the post of Deputy Librarian a particular blow.

Coping with these losses, which have occurred at regular intervals throughout the year, has been a major preoccupation for the senior management team. Some level of absorption proved possible initially, especially where a vacancy occurred in a larger team, but the cumulative effect of losses makes this progressively much harder. Redeployment has been the most common strategy. Reduced budgets have meant less purchasing activity and this facilitated some transfer of staffing from the acquisitions department. Two retirements in quick succession in the subject librarian team resulted in a redistribution of subject responsibilities. This has

spread cover more thinly but also has the potential for stronger teamwork within the subject librarian group and also between it and the research support team.

The recession has engendered a stronger sense of focus and with it opportunities to structure business differently. The senior management team has taken the lead by identifying a number of clear strategic priorities centred on customer experience, full service impact, maximum staff capability, and close alignment with the University's strategic plan. This exercise, coupled with the appointment of a new University Librarian and concomitant loss of the Deputy Librarian post, has been the catalyst for a major restructuring of the senior management team. Effecting major change at the top, with significant new responsibilities and areas of emphasis being taken on by senior managers, has signalled a positive example to all staff which has helped to sell change throughout the Library.

The previous management team structure had been in place for almost ten years and provided a valuable level of stability, but, inevitably, some stagnation and limited fluidity. A strong thrust of the new structure is to maximize teamwork and collaboration by bringing previously separate teams together and to support greater local autonomy along with increased flexibility of deployment. The four Head of Division posts for Bibliographic, Information and Reader Services and for Library Systems have now been redefined as follows:

- Head of Organizational Development and Performance: driving forward annual planning, process analysis, performance measurement and technology strategy.
- Head of Staff Development and Service Environment: maximizing staffing capability for customer benefit, ensuring a fully-functioning service environment and planning new or existing space optimally.
- Head of Research Services and Customer Focus: uniting research support services previously spread across three divisions, enacting a sustained marketing strategy and embedding the customer focus agenda.
- Head of Learning Services and Information Access: bringing together the subject librarian, collections purchasing and cataloguing teams with online resource and interface specialists to maximize information access.

This structure is radically different to its predecessor and has only been in place since September 2009. Early gains are wider knowledge distribution within the management team and beyond, the emergence of some new synergies and a focus on realistic strategic priorities and values which has driven planning for 2010. The new structure will take some time to establish in full, however, and requires a major change management effort, along with an increase in individual workloads against a backdrop of continuing staff losses.

Collections

Reductions in public spending have inevitably impacted on academic library non-pay budgets. The information resources budget at NUI, Galway has reduced by 15% since September 2008, with negative implications for local collection development. There is a very strong national dimension to collection access in Ireland as well, due to the establishment of the IReL (Irish Research eLibrary) consortium in 2004; government funding levels for this initiative are uncertain at the time of writing.

Locally, the 15% reduction has been spread over two financial years and has resulted in lower expectations following a period of annual budget increases. Worryingly, there is a level of uncertainty and concern which in some instances has actually manifested itself in a reluctance to spend even the reduced allocations provided. None of this is healthy in the long term for collection development and will result in gaps that may not be rectified, particularly in monograph collections. The journals situation has been more favourable up to now thanks to IReL provision but, as noted, this may change.

As in the case of staffing, absorption of cuts has proved feasible to a limited extent, certainly in the case a small number of disciplines which have historically underspent their allocation. A general strategy has been to mitigate as far as possible the impact on allocations to academic units by concentrating reductions on top-sliced funds designed to support spending on general resources (e.g. reference material) or to meet special requirements on a discretionary basis. Regrettably, the allocation for special collections and archives has been reduced at a time when some particularly attractive material has become available. The impact of cuts on academic units has also been to

some extent felt less by consolidating funds into larger units to represent a new University structure which has created a smaller number of colleges and schools instead of multiple departments. In the case of journals, funding reductions have hastened the move to e-only subscriptions with savings of not only space and handling but also of VAT which applies to printed journals in Ireland. Purchase of online backfiles, often a target for any year-end surpluses, has, however, ground to a halt, with any outstanding balances now kept to help retain existing content.

At national level, the news is no better. IReL represents a shining example of positive investment in the knowledge economy, providing an essential and much valued infrastructure for research and indeed teaching too. Its consortial approach is also a fine example of the shared services agenda which is being promoted in the downturn as a way of maximizing scarce resources. That notwithstanding, a reduction, possibly substantial, in its financial support has been signalled due to budgetary cuts affecting its two national funding agencies, one of which anticipates a complete withdrawal from IReL. This represents a major blow as IReL has been a huge success story, encompassing all disciplines and delivering access to over 25,000 e-journals along with a range of databases, e-books and reference material.

For libraries, the ongoing approach since the inception of IReL of monitoring and reporting its usage, along with surveying its user population in a highly focused way to assess its benefits to researchers, is now proving invaluable. There is now a strong body of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to show the performance of individual resources and the key role played by IReL in the productivity and competitiveness of researchers in Ireland. It is hoped that the latter will help to mitigate the extent of the cuts, while the former will guide retention of the most valued resources whatever level of funding emerges. In the interim there is important work to be done in lobbying influencers and establishing a sustainable long-term funding model for this vital service. This will require a realistic approach from publishers who will need to understand that reduced information resource budgets cannot be met by routinely increased annual costs if subscriptions are to continue.

There is more pain than gain in the area of collections. Valuable information resources are

under threat locally and nationally, long-term gaps may afflict collections, and funding for strategically important rare or archival material is limited. On the positive side, publishers are being pushed, often slowly, towards more realistic pricing, while the focus on value for money is welcome, not least in raising questions about the cost of locally storing little used and non-unique material which universities have been for too long reluctant to let go. This has given renewed impetus to an existing national collaborative storage initiative.

Operations

An overview of the impact of the recession on library operations shows a similar focus on impact and value for money in the face of diminishing resources. A general theme has been an increased scrutiny of all operations with a view to eliminating duplication wherever possible and maximizing collaboration to create shared services. The shared services agenda is being promoted both locally and nationally. The Irish university libraries already have a healthy tradition of national collaboration which will continue, but now very much in a context of local efficiency drives.

At NUI, Galway a new Executive Director of Operations is reviewing the cost-effectiveness, efficiency and potential for streamlining of a range of activities. One such area is accounting, and the maintenance of separate systems in many departments (including the Library) to track the central accounting system is being questioned. External consultants have also conducted an audit and benchmarking exercise across the University, including a study of the processes surrounding the lifecycle of a book from purchase to relegation to store. This particular study was done in some haste and ensuring an accurate understanding and summary consumed considerable managerial time.

In general, however, it is important to work closely with such exercises, and to show that the Library has nothing to hide and is open to new thinking. They can actually present an opportunity to show that business is well run and to influence the future positively. Review of processes for value and performance is very much on the Library's agenda anyway and the establishment of the post of Head of Organizational Development and

Performance reflects this. The importance of benchmarking is clear and the Library's 2010 plan includes participation in the annual SCONUL statistics report and in the LibQual service evaluation framework. These initiatives, coupled with data from an annual survey cycle established in 2003, will support the kind of evidence-based decision making which is heavily emphasized throughout the University and aims to ensure that scarcer resources, human and financial, are directed to where they are most needed. A proactive approach is also vital, hence a renewed emphasis on marketing and getting out the message about Library activities and initiatives so that their value is well understood. The creation through redeployment of a post of Service Promotion Librarian has supported this.

For operations, as elsewhere, there is a mixture of pain and gain. Increased scrutiny, uncertainty over how some services might be reorganized, and being expected to deliver more with fewer resources, is highly demanding. On the other hand, it is right that processes should be reviewed, collaborations sought and proof of value demanded. There may have been some complacency about all of this in the good times and a more focused use of resources is now appropriate.

Conclusion

The operating environment for Irish university libraries has altered radically since mid-2008. Previous assumptions of continued growth and

expansion have been replaced by a major contraction in resources which threatens a number of advances made in the previous decade. Managing in such times is a huge challenge and brings its share of headaches, not least due to the speed of onset and steepness of this particular recession and its occurrence at a time of more rapid change in the roles of libraries than previous downturns. The only certainty in the immediate term is further cuts and more challenges. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for gain and for new approaches to service delivery, aided by a climate in which there is widespread recognition at all levels that efficiencies must be maximized and flexibility is expected. If we are alive to those opportunities and determined to take them, as opposed simply to looking to survive on less, there is the potential to realize valuable gain. There are limits, however, to the extent of resource loss that can be sustained without lasting damage and the duration of this recession will ultimately decide the ratio of gain to pain.

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