

Getting the best return on university investments in information and optimising services to researchers, students and the public

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About a year ago I was asked to chair a committee looking at the future of UK research libraries. The reason was the general perception that the existing system, based as it is on local university libraries was not well placed for the electronic age. Not only does the electronic world effectively invert the existing model, i.e. resources can be delivered from a “central” resource direct to the researcher’s desktop computer, but the current model places libraries in a weak market position. We have spent a year in this committee thinking and trying to understand the problems of research libraries with the aim of developing proposals for an additional way forward. All being well the report will be published (by HEFCE) in November 2002.

We were fortunate that the committee not only contained the University Research Libraries and the UK funding councils (the public bodies responsible for disbursing public revenues to the universities) but also the British Library. Our key conclusion is we need stronger and more formal collaboration between the various parties involved.

Let me step backwards for a moment and list the drivers which operate on the universities and upon the research endeavour:

- Good research infrastructure is an essential prerequisite for national competitiveness and this infrastructure includes the provision of research information. .
- UK university electronic networks are strong and maintained through a structure which funds them centrally.
- UK universities compete strongly for faculty, students and research resources.
- The opportunities of the Web are profound
 - Current UK library provision is very good but will it stay that way given:
 - High periodical inflation continues unabated
 - Electronic age not easing financial situation
 - Current structure is fragmented – it has grown that way because each university is autonomous.

The issues in Britain are similar to those in the rest of the world. Britain is fortunate in one respect, however. Over the last five years we have been able to persuade the UK Government that research in the universities is absolutely critical for the economy. This has meant that the Government has increased investment significantly, and is now interested in further increasing investment particularly in ensuring an excellent research infrastructure. So although Britain is still relatively small by global standards, we will have seen the money going into the research side of universities increasing from about 3 to 8 billion Euros over fifteen years. So the background political situation is encouraging if one wishes to propose means of strengthening national research provision.

As part of the broad debate on research, there has been much discussion about research infrastructure. It is important that this discussion does not merely focus upon the large machines beloved of particle physicists, and becoming beloved by molecular biologists, but includes “research information resources”. There is an irony, however. A primary reason for being able to persuade government has come from the effects of competition between universities for research and research staff. This has improved the actual research but at the same time it makes it more, not less difficult, to persuade universities to work together! Yet, we need collaboration in providing research information and so we will need to argue that co-operation and collaboration in libraries is more important than competition.

Of course, all this is taking place against a major technological change. We are all aware of the World Wide Web’s huge opportunities, in that it is transforming information technology. However, the advantages to libraries are also matched by the potential advantages to publishers who may be quite efficient at extracting more money out of the system for relatively little extra “value added”.

There is a national peculiarity about Britain. We really have only three really huge libraries, the British Library (on a par with Harvard and the National Library of Congress and one of the *great world libraries*, acquiring a quarter of a million monographs each year and a hundred and twelve thousand serials) and the libraries at Oxford and Cambridge, which acquire about sixty thousand monographs a year and about sixty thousand periodicals. Then there is a significant step downwards in the scale of individual library provision at what are nevertheless very strong international research universities such as Edinburgh, University College London, Manchester, Birmingham, Warwick, etc. On average these university libraries acquire about twenty five thousand books a year and subscribe to twelve thousand periodicals/serials. These figures are much smaller than in the US research universities and yet the system works well and UK research compares favourably with others around the world. The answer, we believe, lies in the British Library’s Document Supply Centre which provides copies of serials at the rate of 1.5 million per annum to UK universities and provides an essential *national* resource. In the context of our overall conclusions let me emphasise that the Document Supply Centre began life more than fifty years ago as a “national initiative” and grew from being remarkably modest in size and reach into one of the most effective systems yet developed anywhere.

Inevitably the current structure is fragmented, in the sense that we have at least fifty research universities in the UK for a population of sixty million. There is a lot of interaction between libraries and librarians but if one asks the hard questions, e.g. do you organise your collection management schemes collaboratively? Then it soon becomes apparent that the degree of “deep resource collaboration” is relatively small. I do not think the UK situation is very different from elsewhere in the world. It is also true that libraries, whilst important for a university rector (president, vice-chancellor), do not normally cause sleepless nights! The money spent in a research university on acquiring periodicals is between 1 and 2% of annual university turnover. Even though we are exercised by the inflation in this figure it does not create a sufficiently large problem for a university

to mean that radical changes are contemplated. This does mean that university leaders talk about libraries but rarely take serious cooperative action to try and influence events.

So, what is “my” committee doing? Time and time again we keep coming back to the possibility of there being a “national” solution. Not, repeat not, national control, but a structure and system which would lead coordinated actions in those areas where a combined approach offers advantages over the individual approach. This is hardly a novel idea. The Document Supply Centre and the University SuperJANET electronic network are important examples in Britain and other countries have also developed most interesting models. In Finland, libraries cooperate strongly. Equally, in the United States there is the OCLC (Online Computer Library Centre) based out of Dublin, Ohio. OCLC is a cooperative created decades ago by the US Universities. Its primary role has been to create and maintain a national union catalogue – WorldCat – but from this it is possible to lever many other functions. Without OCLC the US university library system would be much poorer.

A decade ago the UK began a modest national initiative to establish a ‘UK electronic research library’ (e-Lib, DNER, now the Information Environment), which because of the importance of SuperJANET to its life, has been a part of the university electronic network for much of the time. Experiences are highly positive with the progress that has been made by our colleagues. They seem to have addressed a number of technical issues, have developed model platforms and have demonstrated that researchers and librarians see great value in the approach.

At this stage in the Committee’s deliberations we stopped and asked the customers what they wanted from a future research library. The analysis was undertaken professionally and sought in various ways to ask how academics in the humanities, social sciences and scientists worked and how they envisaged their approaches might change. The good news is that most of our preconceptions turned out to be supported by the analysis, which is on the www if you wish to investigate it: at hefce.ac.uk.

Naturally we asked librarians about their views of more formal and deeper collaborations. As had become evident elsewhere librarians face a number of genuine difficulties with “deep resource sharing”. The overall reactions to collaborative collection management, particularly of extant paper collections, ranged widely but erred on the cautious side. We were somewhat disappointed and still believe that efficiencies in purchases could and can be made but we accept that a sound economic and academic case has yet to be made. We were much encouraged, however, the fact that librarians see the electronic world as an area where deep collaboration would be especially valuable.

From this we have moved to a situation where we believe that a new national body – evolved out of the existing Information Environment – with a strong strategic focus would be beneficial to UK research and to the constituent research libraries. There are many areas where such a body could “add value” significantly”:

- Provision of discovery tools
- Access to electronic resources including serials
- Managing electronic content
- Digitisation & preservation
- Hard copy collection & management

- International linkages

Discovery tools are vitally necessary and range from provision of a national union catalogue through specific search engines for academic sub-disciplines. The body might also enter the field of electronic site licencing. The next issue is managing electronic content. We do not envisage that the system will hold much electronic content itself. What we are aiming at is presumably a server structure that will allow people around the globe to enter the portal, find out what they want and then access it. In the management of such systems, inevitably we enter the areas of digitisation and preservation. Both are areas where, it is generally held in the UK, our policy is too fragmented: we lack a strategic overview. We do believe that our new body should look at hard copy collection and management.

The final issue is international linkage. It is clear that many countries, if not all, will create something like our body and these will need to interact.

Whether the UK will adopt this idea I cannot tell you. Our report will be submitted to our sponsoring bodies – the Funding Councils and the boards of the British Library and those in Wales and Scotland – in November and I suspect it will be exposed to wider consultation for a period. At the end of that then a decision will be taken: we hope the arguments are persuasive and that the UK does establish a body, modest in the beginning but who knows what the future will hold.

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