

# How Can University and National Libraries Achieve Deeper Collaboration? The UK's Efforts and a Plan

by BRIAN K. FOLLETT

## INTRODUCTION

Governments are placing great store in “the knowledge economy” as a key engine for economic and social development in a post-manufacturing world. One result is an acceptance for much increased expenditure on research and advanced teaching and there is much debate, at least in the UK, about how these matters should be organised. Since much of the research (excluding defence) and virtually all the graduate teaching will be undertaken in the universities it follows that one key question in the UK is just what proportion and number of the 100 UK universities should be truly “research-intensive”? The trend, although it can be exaggerated, is towards greater concentration and last year I estimated (Follett, 2002) that the faculty in about 12 of the universities will spend *on average* 50% of their working year on research and graduate teaching, and 50% on undergraduate teaching. In another 30 universities faculty will spend about 25% of their annual working year on research and 75% on undergraduate teaching. In the remaining 60 universities the time available for research will be much smaller. A second key question relates to the “research infrastructure” needed to support the researchers. It is my contention that access to world-class “research information resources” - at a reasonable cost - is a pre-requisite for any nation's research base.

In parallel, of course, the actual means of providing those “research information resources” is changing rapidly and the existing provision through “local” research libraries in individual universities or research institutes, often set alongside other services from the “national” library, is under both financial and technological strain:

- Electronic provision of delivering research information “direct to the desk-top” has inverted the means of delivery. This has been developed most strongly in the natural sciences but is likely to develop in all areas of research.
- The generation of primary research data on a huge scale - from telescopes, particle physics machines and genomics - is leading to electronic grids and the associated metadata being established so as to process and deliver this material direct to the researcher. Similar opportunities exist for using these technologies in the humanities and the social sciences.
- Overall growth in the volume of the world's research continues unabated and is likely to do so for the foreseeable future.

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- Costs of purchasing research information outstrip inflation (even at constant volume), partly because a true market does not exist.

#### WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

One solution would be to leave it to “market forces”. This has its attractions but it would fail to address a host of strategic issues amongst which I would mention:

- Virtually every country has opted for continuing with large numbers of (relatively) small universities and/or research institutes. The reasons may be sound (the undergraduate educational experience, optimal size of research teams etc.), but such a system is far from ideal for delivering “research information resources” coming over the world-wide web. At its most extreme one can imagine a single national electronic library serving a high proportion of researcher demand and the local library playing only a secondary role.
- Librarians and researchers are progressively at the mercy of the publisher (“for profit” and “not-for-profit”). Experience over the last two decades suggests that such providers have capitalised very strongly upon their market position. New trends, e.g. “big deals”, begin to shape the market and there is some evidence in the natural sciences that individual researcher’s views of what constitutes a high quality publishing outlet is influenced by what they can access electronically.
- Whilst researchers place great store upon where their own research is published, they show remarkably little interest in the structure of the publishing machinery. This is despite the fact that virtually all of them also offer the critical peer review services at negligible cost to the publisher. The issue here may well be that the costs of publishing one’s research (or accessing data sets) fall not on the researcher but elsewhere in the system – the institutional library or the research council providing the data set. This is out of kilter because these days virtually all the other costs of research are met directly by obtaining funds (space, dedicated research personnel, ongoing costs, travel). It is interesting to contemplate what would happen to scholarly communication if and when publication becomes a direct part of the costs of a research project.
- As research is concentrated in fewer institutions, “access” for those not favoured by location becomes more of an issue.
- There are serious issues relating to preservation in the electronic age. Renting material does not guarantee access to it in a decade or more! Digital content creation is a further area where it has been said – at least in the UK – that some kind of “national strategy” would be helpful.
- The virtual absence of a serious answer to cooperation and collaboration in collection development and management.

## THE RESEARCH SUPPORT LIBRARIES GROUP

Each country is slightly different and so the approach reflects a country's history and position, notwithstanding the fact that most of the problems to be resolved are similar. The UK, like virtually all other countries, has been trying to grapple with these library issues over the past decade or more but it would be the height of arrogance (and utterly wrong) to claim that our "solutions" are superior to any others. In our case the particular features, which have shaped our current position, are:

- (a) Strong university autonomy that has been strengthened across the last twenty years by putting in place a competitive culture which tends to pits one university against another (constitutionally our universities are independent. They are state supported to a considerable but far from overwhelming extent. For instance, Oxford's basic grant from the State for teaching and research amounts to 32% of its turnover).
- (b) National Libraries run by government departments usually different from those responsible for the universities.
- (c) Quite strong moves to strengthen central government planning and control.

As you might imagine these various features of the UK scene (along with the recent devolution of political power in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) are not always congruent! However, experience over a number of years in the area of libraries and information provision strongly pushes the UK towards cooperation. It has proved a most valuable way forward to resolve major issues, e.g. the British Library's Document Supply Centre, the SUPERJanet electronic network, e-Lib: The Electronic Libraries Programme and its successors.

All the above must have been considered by a group of powerful players in the UK - notably Lynne Brindley at the British Library, Reg Carr at Oxford, Brian Fender and Howard Newby at HEFCE (the body that distributes about £4 billion of public funds to the universities and colleges in England), and their equivalents in Wales and Scotland - who concluded that a step change in cooperation and collaboration between the libraries should be contemplated, especially for the provision of research (this paper does not consider an issue of equal importance, the provision of teaching materials.). They decided to establish an inquiry (the Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG) and gave it the following main remit: *"to make recommendations on a national strategic framework and mechanisms for promoting collaboration in, and integration of the development and provision of library collections, their long-term management, and services to support research"*. At that point I was asked to chair the Group.

We spent much time - perhaps too much time - asking whether the UK needed another organisation in a field where there are already many players (e.g. CURL and SCONUL with their strengths of representing libraries, the JISC which runs SUPERJanet and leads many of our national electronic library developments, the Research Councils which had just established a large e-science initiative, Re:source, and in the last three years new

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bodies within Wales and Scotland beginning to develop regional structures). We looked at the underlying technological drivers, compared our library systems with those elsewhere, pondered possible futures and concluded that there were substantial advantages to be gained from the country developing a strategic framework for the future of its research information resources. The strategic issues go beyond the electronic world and involve the future of collection management and preservation along with matters such as access and the future of scholarly publication. We argued that this strategic framework should involve not only the research collections in the universities and colleges, but also the national libraries, and most notably The British Library which is one of the greatest libraries of the world. We hoped it would also draw in other libraries with important research collections and archives. We then considered what kind of organisation might develop and implement such a strategy. Our key recommendation is that a new body be established (initially by the Funding Councils, The British Library and others) which we called the Research Libraries Network (RLN) and which would be charged with implementing the new policy (Field, 2003).

The RSLG final report was published in March 2003. In this electronic age it seemed proper to publish the report on the web but this has not emerged as a perfect means of dissemination and we are grateful to Colin Harris for publishing the report in paper format in a recent issue of *The New Review of Academic Librarianship* (2002). This not only contains the full printed report, but also includes a number of articles from persons who served on the group (Lynne Brindley and myself) along with initial reactions from a range of library experts. Meanwhile (and as of writing this article) all seven of our sponsors have accepted the report "in principle" and work is proceeding rapidly to develop a possible governance structure, establish the proper relationships with other bodies (e.g. JISC) and flesh out the initial work pattern.

It is my personal view that on this occasion "*the devil is in the principle not the detail*"! The key issue is whether the UK establishes a body with public funds, which tries to shape the future of research information provision and encourages far deeper library cooperation and collaboration. We argue in the report that the dangers to the long-term health of research information provision are likely to come from inaction and not from action. There are a number of library functions where joint working is preferable to individual working and we envisage the RLN as focusing only upon those issues. Below I list some of the many areas where action by a RLN could be of value to our professional researchers. It is an incomplete list and the nine individuals who wrote articles following the report in the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* (2002) all have their own priorities. If there is a broad theme to their constructive criticisms, it is that the report was not ambitious enough or adequately looked into the future. I accept those points but would ask critics to remember that politics is the art of the possible. To me it is more important to establish the body with its broad remit than to debate the details: hence my misquotation above!

So, our overall recommendation is that: “...our sponsors create a Research Libraries Network (RLN) with a remit to develop, prioritise and lead a UK-wide strategy for research information provision.....” Let me analyse it at two levels.

## THE RLN: ITS OVERARCHING ROLES

The RLN should have three overarching roles:

1. To determine a national strategy and priorities. This strategy should be led by the priorities of the professional researchers (as is happening, for example, in the UK Research Councils e-Science Core Programme). This strategy is much more than the electronic world. Developing this strategy will involve a range of bodies that are shaping national research policy and developments.
2. To develop a comprehensive programme of work and organise its funding. This is critical because we do not envisage the RLN as being an advisory body and a “talking shop”. It needs to ensure that significant step changes occur in either services or practice (in retrospect this is a criticism I would level at the e-Lib programme and its successors). It is essential though that the RLN undertakes only projects where there is a broad consensus that joint working has clear advantages to individual working or other cooperative arrangements. RLN must surely focus upon a handful of the big issues.
3. To play an advocacy role nationally and internationally. In the former case to ensure that the case for research information resources is argued at the highest levels of government and becomes a far more overt plank of national research strategy. In the latter case to work within the EU and across the world since the issues are identical.

In effect, of course, the RLN is a device whose function is to promote far deeper collaboration and cooperation between research libraries. The *quid pro quo* for librarians and universities is whether it can deliver the step changes we all realise are needed but which are often so difficult to achieve in practice (see Barriers to Resource Sharing among Higher Education Libraries). For the taxpayer and government the outcome should be more efficiency and the better management of resources (Barriers, p. 34-35). When RLN demonstrates this is happening then we can all enter a world where an upward spiral will operate and more resources become available to tackle some of the expensive issues raised below. Put simply, the RLN must prove itself and be given stretch targets to meet in its early years. It should also focus and aim to prove itself quickly to professional researchers. In a letter I wrote some weeks ago to Howard Newby at HEFCE about the immediate future my words were: “some kind of formal review should be undertaken of the RLN – after three or four years – which allows the sponsoring bodies to decide how the body should (or should not) develop. As we both know there is always a tendency for bodies once created to sustain their own life even if the situation has changed”.

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I am optimistic about RLN: why? My analogy is the British Library Document Supply Centre, which had its origins in the bleak days following World War II. At that time some farsighted individuals persuaded the government to begin a national loan collection of scientific periodicals. It proved a fruitful idea and grew over fifty years into one of the largest interlibrary loan systems in the world. Indeed, it has been proved very cost effective for the UK and has allowed research-intensive universities to subscribe to many fewer periodicals (ca. 10,000) than their equivalents in the States (ca. 40,000), and yet still provide excellent “research information” provision to their researchers.

In practical terms we envisage the RLN as being “small but high-powered”. There are many models but we suggested that leadership should be set by a Steering Committee containing a small number of senior individuals (at Chief Executive/Rector level) from the funding councils, the universities, the national libraries, the research councils and university libraries. This committee would take responsibility for establishing the strategy and the priorities, and interact with RLN’s sponsors to obtain the necessary resources. Of course, the strategy and priorities would be greatly influenced by expert advice – academic, technical and practical - arising through the RLN’s chief executive. It would be one of the two important functions for the executive. The other would be to implement the policy, perhaps via an Operating Committee where membership would focus upon technical expertise. The final step would be delivery of the various projects and here we expect RLN to work through existing and new providers.

#### TASKS FOR AN RLN

The types of task where joint working would be preferable are not too difficult to discern. Indeed, most countries are attempting in one way or another to address each of them. Progress is patchy – not least because many of them are difficult – and rather few have been in any way “solved”. There is a tendency, particularly well evolved in the UK I’m afraid to say, to claim that others have solved problems and then to be too self-critical of one’s own efforts. In the case of the issues below no one has cracked the problems adequately. For instance, national site licensing is quite widespread but as yet no country has more than a small subset of journals freely available to its professional researchers. Equally, it became quite clear that the problems with “deep resource sharing” are not confined to the UK and exist widely, even in parts of the world where library cooperation is endemic (e.g. the State of Ohio). A third instance is “scholarly publishing”. SPARC (the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) – an initiative driven by the ARL but now encompassing Europe (SPARC Europe)– is making progress on a number of fronts, but it is relatively modest and requires the kind of cultural change, which professional researchers are not yet willing to embrace wholeheartedly. So here are our suggestions for areas where RLN should be active. They are not given in order of priority:

- *Discovery tools – catalogues, search engines.*

As Jean Sykes observed (Sykes, 2002): “Information overload is a grave problem for researchers”. I can vouch for this personally because re-entering research after a period as a university administrator has made me aware of the deficiencies, despite having access to the weekly update from PubMed in my own area of biological clocks and time-measurement in plants and animals. At the less professional research end (upper level undergraduates) it is simply not adequate to enter the literature via Google, excellent as that search engine is for many purposes. In the UK we are making slow progress towards a national catalogue of periodicals but we have no ready means of discovering what monographs exist nationally! One thing is certain: this is a field of singular importance but one fraught with challenges. A key issue for RLN early on will be to decide how much priority to place on developing UK-based search engines (rather little I surmise) or an all embracing union catalogue (only if it includes the difficult to find material and then the cost might become insupportable).

- *Electronic research collections.*

This is a major issue, which looks four squares into the future. Already the UK is involved through JISC in various projects and has put in place some of the machinery, standards and metadata required for the next stage. There have been some important successes, sometimes led by commercial interests (English Books Online), but developments are eclectic and a means of identifying clear national priorities is lacking. I note that the physical scientists, supported by a considerable investment of public money through their research councils, are making progress with the e-science grids required by them within a decade. The molecular biologists are equally in the field of collecting massive datasets and analysing them with high quality tools. Both cases show that targeted initiatives, led and driven by the researchers (i.e. bottom up, not top down) can be most effective.

- *Access.*

The shape of publicly funded research in the UK is likely to lead to some further consolidation around major centres (see introductory paragraph) and it is critical that the country maximises access for all professional researchers in the UK to as much material as is possible. Machinery to ensure openness of existing libraries to outside readers exists and is working well. It needs extending and this will be a first task for the new RLN since the present financial arrangements end at the end of academic year 2003-2004. Under this heading can be included the issue of national site licences and acquiring electronic content. Since these issues involve complicated and legal negotiations I will say no more publicly.....

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- *Collaboration in collection management.*

Difficult as this issue is to address, it must not be pushed under the carpet and put off simply because of arguments about “university autonomy”, “competition between universities in the research assessment exercise” or “academic resistance”. I would go further: our case for significant extra public resources being invested in new developments is dependent in no small measure upon our showing a willingness to tackle collaboration in collection management constructively, rapidly and on a significant scale. The key, easier to say than to define quantitatively, will be cost savings not just in purchasing budgets but also in space and staff time (the whole life costing issue). There have been some gratifying steps taken by librarians in dealing with the collection policies underpinning some non-English languages and we hope RLN can encourage many more on a larger scale. Other pieces necessary for these developments have also been developed recently – local and regional consortia, discipline consortia – and the role for RLN is to help these consortia act strongly. The issues also enter the field of “national reference collections” and “lender of last resort”. It is at this point where the importance of The British Library and the other legal deposit libraries in the British Isles (i.e. Oxford, Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin, National Library of Wales, National Library of Scotland) becomes an issue. At a personal level I could not more strongly welcome the potential for the RLN to bring (back) together the university and national libraries.

- *Retention and preservation in an electronic world.*

This is another area squarely of the future. Commercial aspects also figure in the equation and for that reason I would prefer not to talk too much in public about the ideas that our Group had as to ways forward.

- *Scholarly communication.*

Many persons view a change in the modes of scholarly communication as a necessity. Perhaps, but some realism needs to be injected into the debate. Firstly, it is essential that researchers do not abandon or excessively dilute the current peer review mechanisms for analysing new discoveries: they lie at the heart of society's trust in research as an objective process to uncover truth. Secondly, the costs of publishing research findings are small relative to the overall cost of undertaking the research itself. Thirdly, academics are likely to show excessive conservatism in this whole area as their esteem measures and promotion are linked to publication. On the other hand the present arrangements are themselves creating features which are unsatisfactory: large publishing companies able to influence events, lack of public access, an over-dependence upon citation data with distortions in the perceived importance of certain periodicals. We viewed RLN as being able to a useful role in this debate which clearly has to be international and needs the input of academics as much as publishers.

- “Leadership”.

Let me end with the issue of leadership. As many of you are aware, my own involvement in library matters is as the “enthusiastic admirer” and not as a professional expert in information matters. I am only too well aware, however, that libraries and information provision are not seen as a major problem by those who manage research or run universities. Personally I think this is a mistake because a country like the UK which spends about 5% of the world’s investment in R&D has a considerable interest not only in the research it is paying for directly but in the 95% of other research, much of which finds its way into the public literature. RLN should make this point within the UK at the highest level and in parallel should aim to play a role internationally. Perhaps one of these days we shall have a network of RLNs across the world.

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#### WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

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British Library. <http://www.bl.uk/>

British Library Document Supply Centre. <http://www.bl.uk/services/document/dsc.html>

CURL - Consortium of University Research Libraries. <http://www.curl.ac.uk/>

e-Lib: The Electronic Libraries Programme. <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/>

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