

Merger and Centralisation : Can We Be Big AND Good

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INTRODUCTION

The merger of the Victoria University of Manchester and UMIST in 2004 to create Britain's largest university (though the achievement of world-class status rather than mere size was the real objective of the merger) raised a range of parallel issues for the libraries of the two universities and for the Manchester Business School (MBS) Library, which had previously operated independently, but was also merged into the new University Library. The first issue was the name of the new library and here the shift was so subtle that few people notice it until it is pointed out to them. If the "John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester" seems hardly to differ from the "John Rylands University Library of Manchester" (the name of the former Victoria University of Manchester's Library), this is because the Rylands name already has global brand recognition and it would have been foolish to risk a major name change that might have put that recognition at risk. It was a case of subtly shifting the emphasis of the name to reflect the fact that we are a new entity whilst not creating confusion in relation to our great historic collections.

THE NEW LIBRARY – THE JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The new library service that officially came into being on 1 October 2004 is large and complex in its structure. It operates on 35 sites, including the largest Main Library complex in the UK; a beautiful neo-Gothic grade 1 listed building, which houses our Special Collections, in the centre of Manchester; the award-winning Joule Library (formerly the Main Library of UMIST) and smaller libraries as far afield as Jodrell Bank Observatory (which is part of the University of Manchester) in mid-Cheshire. It contains 4.5 million books, more than a million manuscripts and probably the largest collection of e-resources in the UK. It has 370 staff and a budget of £15.4 million (€22.775 million) for the academic year 2005-06.

All of the [JRUL](#)'s activities are funded from this single budget and its structures are fully integrated, with a centralised 'back-office' support structure, whilst public services are, of course, delivered either physically or electronically at the point of need. The Director is supported by two Deputy Directors, one responsible for Infrastructure and Planning Support (back office) and the other for Information Resources and Academic Support (front office). There are also seven Heads of Operational Divisions who, with the Director and Deputies, constitute the Senior Management Team. Beyond this point we have tried to ensure that reporting lines are clear and that staff feel supported as well as challenged to perform effectively, whilst our Inter-Departmental Consultative Group brings together all heads of activity monthly to share information and ideas. It is impossible to unravel the complexity of our structure but we do try to make it transparent and comprehensible and to encourage staff to see beyond their own area to the broader picture of what the Library and the University are trying to achieve.

Despite the size and complexity of the new library service and the fact that all staff have gone through a dramatic period of change, the evidence of satisfaction surveys across the new University, where the JRUL was given a much higher rating than any other central service, suggests that we have succeeded in bringing about a successful merger and in creating a structure that is delivering what our users want. Perhaps we have succeeded in being both big and good, but how?

THE MERGING PROCESS

One of the key concerns among staff in the run-up to our merger was, inevitably, job security. In the private sector company mergers usually involve redundancy for large numbers of staff, so this was bound to cause anxiety. Long before the merger actually took place both merging universities gave assurances to their staff that there would be no enforced redundancies, though voluntary severance, on generous terms, was offered to staff over 50 who wished to retire or move on. In the interests of fairness, however, it was decided that wherever in the new University a single, merged role would replace the two (in the case of the Library three) separate roles that had previously existed, the holders of the posts concerned would have to compete for their role in the new institution if they wished to retain it. In the JRUL we took advantage of the fact that we

would have some 'surplus' staff to create new roles, which were needed and for which we would otherwise have had to seek additional funding, and encouraged colleagues who might wish to consider a change of role to apply for them. This resulted in some excellent appointments in which people who might otherwise have been competing for roles that they had occupied for long periods were able to direct their enthusiasm and expertise into new channels that were of benefit to their own careers and to the Library. By filling such posts early in the run-up to merger we reduced the level of competition for existing roles and, with it, some of the uncertainty that staff felt. By the end of the process all staff had a clear place in the new structure.

In dealing with the concerns of staff about what kind of organisation they would be working in rather than whether they would have a job, we found it important to begin planning for integration almost as soon as the merger was proposed, with regular meetings between the Directors and Deputies, meetings with trade union representatives, frequent staff meetings and working groups on new structures and services drawn from across the merging libraries. In almost all cases staff who were taking on new roles and/or relocating had done so before the merger had formally taken place so that, by 1 October 2004, we were already effectively a single library.

Other concerns expressed by staff included those of the risk involved in developing new roles and, for those in the smaller libraries, both how would they fare in competition with colleagues from the JRULM and would the new Library be vast, impersonal and unfriendly. Here the role of senior management was vital in ensuring that there was full and open discussion and preparation for the process of appointment, with assurances given that all staff would be treated equally, irrespective of their library of origin. At the same time we emphasised that unsuccessful candidates, who had unusually been performing very well in the role in their original library, would not be regarded as failures but would be helped to identify alternative roles and career paths. We also worked hard, both before and after the merger, to develop a friendly and mutually supportive staff ethos, using social as well as professional activities where we could.

SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

We recognised that each of our merging library systems had its own distinctive 'local' brand and identity and that these were often valued by both users and staff. As far as was consistent with the need for both efficiency and recognition that a new library service had come into being, we retained successful local practices rather than always insisting that "one size fits all". We also made it clear from the beginning of the merger process that, when practices differed, the "old JRULM" practice would not automatically be the default position of the new Library, even though JRULM was the largest constituent, but that all options would be considered purely on their merits. When considering the closure of some smaller, specialised libraries to achieve efficiency gains or space savings we included their staff in the planning of moves towards the integration of services as well as guaranteeing their continued employment.

No merger would be successful if it failed to meet the academic objectives of the University and here the new JRUL had to engage with a radically different academic structure from those of either UMIST or the VUM. The new University has only four "super-faculties", one of which, Humanities, if independent, would be a medium sized university in its own right. The previously separate and fairly manageable departments have been brought together into large interdisciplinary "schools", in which traditional boundaries have been blurred, whilst in a few case departments which previously had close links have been separated into different schools or even faculties. These changes, combined with the differing expectations of the Library from academics of the former institutions, required us to transform our Subject Librarians into Academic Liaison Librarians, with a much more proactive role in developing the relationship between the schools and the Library, in undertaking a major programme of publicising the Library and what it can offer and in harmonising procedures in relation to activities such as book selection, where practices differed between the former universities. The success of this change has depended in part on the personalities of the staff concerned and in part on the willingness of the schools to respond to an outward-facing approach but, overall, the approach has been successful in breaking down barriers and ensuring that the Library is properly integrated into the new University.

BIGGER, BETTER & BEAUTIFUL

Although the merger has not been painless it has brought major gains for both Library staff and users. We have been obliged to think about old issues in new ways. This has been a challenge to all staff and one to which most have responded magnificently. New skills have been acquired and old ones have been re-

engineered. For staff of the smaller libraries, in particular, there have been enhanced career opportunities in a bigger and more diverse organisation. For users there has been a greater critical mass of total resources, while our avoidance of an impersonal, one-size-fits-all approach has preserved the best of the old in a newer and richer context.

So, how can one be big AND good (or even beautiful)? The first essential for us was to be open to the new possibilities offered by the merger of our universities. This was relatively straightforward in the sense that once the decision had been made we had to accept it and make it work successfully, but it still required great character and commitment from our staff, many of whom will inevitably have regretted or felt threatened by the passing of the old. I hope that good leadership and the inculcation of a vision and sense of purpose by Library management helped colleagues through the process, but will always be grateful for the support of an outstanding team of people. Early and careful planning that was both seen to be relevant and made as inclusive as possible, so that everyone's skills and expertise were valued and used, was also vital, as were trusting colleagues to get on with the process and delegating key tasks to them. People need to feel trusted and valued and seldom fail to produce their best work when they are. Minimising bureaucracy and focusing on what users need rather than internal processes are essential to delivering high quality public services. Our users care about what we deliver, not how we do it! Finally, to create something new and deliver it to a tight timescale and in good working order requires leadership "from the front", but also leadership that remains in touch with day to day reality and does not become detached from those who are expected to follow.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

JRUL - John Rylands University Library. <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/>