
Breakout Session Two: The LIS research infrastructure

Research into practice: prospects for a future framework

Bob McKee

Author

Bob McKee has been Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals since April 2002 and was Chief Executive of The Library Association from September 1999. From 1988-99 he worked for Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council first as Director of Libraries and Arts and then as Assistant Chief Executive responsible for economic development and policy coordination. Earlier in his career he worked in community libraries, in school and college libraries, and as a lecturer at what used to be the School of Library and Information Studies at Birmingham Polytechnic. Until September 2006 Bob was a member of the Board of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), and Chair of MLA's Finance and Audit Committee. He currently serves on the Public Lending Right Advisory Committee. Internationally, Bob is a member of the Governing Board and Executive Committee of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. He also serves on the Committee and Advisory Board for IFLA-FAIFE, one of the Core Activities of IFLA covering work on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression. In January 2006 Bob was appointed Visiting Professor in the Department of Information and Learning Services at the University of Worcester.

My task today is to stimulate discussion about the future infrastructure for library and information research in the UK.

We're paying tribute today to Brian Perry and the very successful research infrastructure that BLRDD provided in its time. But time moves on. We need to rethink the structures and systems which underpin our research activity. Any new research infrastructure will have to address a number of aspirations if it is to be deemed successful. At present we do not have: a clear locus for research within our domain; a strategic direction and coordinating framework for our research activity; or a culture of research or a means of building our research capacity. We used to have clarity and stability in the machinery of research which helped to foster all those things. We now need to find a new clarity and stability in the new library and information landscape of the twenty-first century. That is the challenge we're addressing this afternoon.

Back to the Future

The title of our workshop today is *Looking back to the future*, and I want to draw on a number of personal perspectives – past and present – in my paper:

- My current experience with CILIP – and also with IFLA, the International Federation for Library Associations and Institutions, recognising that our future research infrastructure has to have an international dimension.
- My recent experience as a member of the Board of MLA and my past experience as a member of the Library and Information Commission (LIC), remembering that there is an audit train of responsibility for research leading from BLRDD through the LIC to Resource and MLA.
- My very recent experience of putting together my Inaugural Professorial Lecture in my role as a Visiting Professor at the University of Worcester – because that task gave me the opportunity to look at the evidence base

which we have available to support out advocacy of the value of our library and information domain.

- My past experience as a practitioner-researcher, given that the interplay of research and practice is particularly important in an applied academic discipline which is part of the landscape of Professional and Vocational Education.

Of course, some research is valuable purely on academic grounds, and all research worthy of the name has to have academic rigour in the way it is carried out. But, from my perspective, the justification for investment in research in an applied vocational discipline such as ours can only be the applicability – the transferability – of that research into outcomes of practical benefit; either by deepening the knowledge base which informs our professional practice; or by strengthening the process of argument and advocacy which informs policymaking in our domain.

Research into practice and policy

Research is about knowledge generation. But we're also in the knowledge transfer business – whether that is about transferring knowledge into research-based practice or into evidence-based policy. So for me the key question for our discussions this afternoon is: how can these largely separate worlds of research, practice and policy be brought more closely together?

This issue is usually expressed in terms of two communities – of academic research and professional practice – but there is also a need for researchers and practitioners to understand more about the (essentially political) process of policymaking. Our future research infrastructure has to enable interaction and collaboration across these three separate worlds. We need to find a way to foster the continuity needed for longitudinal academic research (for example – into the value and impact of library and information provision) and, at the same time, to respond to the relative short-termism of the politically driven policy agenda.

We also have to find a way to address the barriers which get in the way of practitioners who wish to engage in research activity: lack of time; lack of support from employers; lack of research skills; lack of familiarity with the research landscape; no experience of bidding for research funds; and (despite the best endeavours of LIRG), the lack of a critical mass of other practitioner-researchers.

The other critical issue to address is the difficulty of communication across these three difference spheres of research, practice and policy. Researchers, practitioners and policymakers speak different languages. Writing up research for a scholarly journal is very different from drafting a policy paper for government and both are very different from making the results of research easily accessible to practitioners through the professional press. That is why there is a need for intermediaries, who might best be described as “translators” – who can translate the outcomes of academic research into the discourse of public policy or the jargon of professional practice or the plain language of public interest.

Conclusions from a case study

Reflecting on my past as a practitioner-researcher prompts not only these general observations but also a specific story from which we can draw some conclusions of relevance to our discussions today. It is the story of BLRDD research report no. 6253.

The date is 1983. I'm in my second professional post, as a college librarian, and I've just been seconded to a major action research project sponsored by government and the electronics industry. The aim is to explore the potential of ICT (in particular the technology of viewdata) in a range of different contexts – retail, banking, publishing, and education. My job is to use viewdata to develop information sources and interactive services of educational value at school and in the home. Remember – it is 1983. The technology is cumbersome, the applications are rudimentary – but the potential (as we can now see) is immense. The project and the potential stick in my mind ...

... And now it is ten years later. The date is 1993 and I'm a public library service director with a question (prompted by the experience of that viewdata project) on my mind: what would happen if we made ICT resources available for public use in local libraries? This was something we knew very little about at a time when fewer than one percent of public library service points in the UK provided Internet access for public use.

So I took a trip to an address in London – 2 Sheraton Street – and had a conversation with Terry Cannon at BLRDD. Out of the discussions came a BL-funded demonstrator project (Nankivell and Mackenzie, 1996) called *IT Point*: BLRDD research report no 6253. The proposal was developed during 1993 and the project ran from February 1994 to March 1996. It generated some useful evidence about what happens if you provide public access to ICT resources in a local community library and it was quoted in the government's *Competitiveness White Paper* (Her Majesty's Government, 1996) as a case study of good practice; giving people access to lifelong learning opportunities through ICT in their local library.

Seven years later, by 2003, every public library service point in the UK had public Internet access – through the *People's Network*. It is arguable that *IT Point* (and other demonstrator projects of the period like *Project EARL* and the *CLIP Project* in Croydon) provided helpful evidence when the time came to make the case to government – successfully, in 1997 – for investment in the *People's Network* initiative.

What is important in the context of today's discussions is how *IT Point* came about and the “matters arising” from the *IT Point* story that we have to address through our future research infrastructure.

I had an idea, and I knew where to go to discuss it. Where would I go today to discuss such an idea for a research project?

I got advice and assistance in turning that idea into a properly developed research proposal. Where would I get that support today?

IT Point was part of a twenty-year journey for me, from the viewdata project in 1983 to Internet access for all by 2003. Sometimes it takes a long time for research to evolve and transfer into practical outcomes. Our future research infrastructure has to provide the continuity to sustain similar twenty-year journeys.

The funding for that journey came from a variety of sources: DTI and the electronics industry to support the viewdata project: OCLC Europe (as was) to support further work on ICT applications when I was teaching at Birmingham Library School (as was); BLRDD to develop *IT Point* which was then carried forward with support from EU structural funds, EU Telematics Framework funding, and the UK's Single Regeneration Budget. Our future research infrastructure has to embrace a wide diversity of potential funding sources.

IT Point is also, of course, a story about knowledge generation and knowledge transfer – an example of the way in which local demonstrator projects can help in the development of national service initiatives like the *People's Network*.

These “matters arising” – a clear space or locus for research within our domain, support for the development of research proposals, continuity of activity, diversity of funding, and the process of knowledge generation and knowledge transfer – have to be addressed by our new research infrastructure.

A prospectus for action

While the *People's Network* proposition was being developed through the LIC in 1997 (building on the previous *Millennium Libraries* initiative (Information for all, 1997) co-sponsored by the LIC and the Library Association), the LIC Research Committee was carrying out the consultation which led to the publication, the following year, of *Prospects*, the proposed national strategy for library and information research, development and innovation in the UK.

The *Prospects* report (Library and Information Commission, 1997) addressed two main areas – the agenda for research content and the machinery of research infrastructure. My task today doesn't include commentary on possible research content except where the content agenda raises considerations about research infrastructure. That infrastructure needs to include the capacity for horizon scanning so that research content stays ahead of the policy agenda – so that research results are in place at the time when evidence is needed to support advocacy. That infrastructure also needs to include the widest possible range of different types of research – from long-term academic study to short-term action research or demonstrator projects or studies to support and inform policymaking. In addition, that infrastructure needs to include all the stakeholders around the research community – researchers, practitioners, funders, employers, policymakers, and so on – in the process of setting the research content agenda.

Prospects identified five issues around the research infrastructure which needed attention; and which continues to need attention today:

- the need for a strategic and coordinated approach to the forward planning of research activity – to avoid duplication, and address gaps in the evidence base
- the need for mapping and signposting to identify possible sources of funding – so that we can get at the money which we know is out there
- the need for a stronger skill base; and for better evaluation processes to improve the quality of research in our domain
- the need for more effective communication about research activity and research outcomes – with the specific suggestion of a web gateway to information about research in our domain
- The need to learn more about the process of transferring research into practice so that this might become more effective and widespread.

There is a lot in this five-point plan that echoes my earlier comments and the conclusions drawn from the *IT Point* story. *Prospects* set the agenda – but then the LIC (which had inherited the mantle of BLRDD) was subsumed into Resource (as was) and the moment was lost. Continuity was lost – and continuity is a prerequisite for the development of research capacity: why go into research, or remain in research, if there is no continuity of resources to support research? Confidence was lost – to be replaced by a concern that Resource (as was) had no real interest in the research agenda. Most damaging of all, the context was lost – the context of a dedicated locus for library and information research which had existed within the British Library and then within the LIC. The formal machinery of that locus had been dismantled; and the negative feelings about Resource engendered by that process continue to impact on MLA and the new MLA Partnership.

The Role of MLA

If MLA (through Resource) is heir to the BLRDD legacy then, what has MLA done with its research inheritance? One answer could be: not a lot. Discontinuing research programmes like the BNB Research Fund; subjecting research centres to a potentially discontinuous regime of annual funding review; raising expectations of research into wider library and information issues (through the WILIP initiative - Howley and Stevens, 2003), and then failing to follow through by quietly abandoning the subsequent *Routes to Knowledge* (R2K) programme in favour of cross-sectoral advocacy.

I make these negative points because MLA needs to understand that this negativity exists and needs to be addressed. And yet ... to some degree this negativity is unfair on MLA. When I was preparing my professorial lecture for the University of Worcester (McKee, 2006) I found myself, at several points as I developed my argument, revisiting research which had been commissioned in recent years either by MLA or by one of the regional agencies within the MLA partnership. The aspiration of R2K when it was set up (Howley, 2004) was:

“To establish how the contribution made by library and information services to the economic, social, educational and cultural life of the UK can be maximised.”

... And it could be argued that research commissioned by MLA in recent years has contributed to that aspiration by helping to build our evidence base. MLA and the new MLA partnership has to counteract the bad feeling created during the era of Resource – and MLA is, I believe, taking steps to address that challenge.

I understand that MLA is currently bringing together its various research reports in order to give a higher profile to the body of research which it has commissioned and to highlight the impact and outcomes achieved by that research – thus mirroring the exercise currently being carried out by the Research Councils to demonstrate the social, cultural and economic impact of recently funded research. MLA will clearly have a role to play in the partnership of relevant agencies which will form the framework of our future research infrastructure – probably, in the main, by continuing to commission research which builds the evidence base and feeds in to advocacy and policy making.

Lessons from the past

I'm going to turn now to two other past events in order to reinforce the agenda of issues which our new research infrastructure will have to address. One – the conference on *Research policy in librarianship and information science* held in Salford in 1990, funded by BLRDD and organised by LIRG – takes us back to the days of Brian Perry and BLRDD. The other – the study of the *LIS research landscape* commissioned by CILIP in 2003 – takes us back to that period of post-LIC uncertainty engendered by Resource.

The task of drawing conclusions from the 1990 Salford conference (Harris, 1991) fell to Lynne Brindley, and I paraphrase here the points made by Lynne:

- *funding*: multiplicity of sources; need for better guidance

- *policy*: needed, but who is to develop it?
- *practitioners and researchers*: need to bridge the gap
- *capacity*: need to develop sufficient research capability
- *evaluation and dissemination*: more needs to be done
- *strategic approach*: link LIS research to the Bigger Picture

This agenda of issues has recurred throughout this paper – although the last point adds something: the need to align library and information research with the Bigger Picture. Professional practitioners are told when they move into management that they need to align their library and information services with the corporate objectives of their parent institutions. Policy makers seek to align library and information services with the strategic priorities of government. Similarly, the suggestion here is that library and information research should align itself with broader research programmes. “Look outward to the strategic context as well as inward to the operational issues”, is the message – always remembering that we need research that underpins the intrinsic value of library and information services as well as research which demonstrates our instrumental value in delivering other people's agendas.

The 1990 Salford conclusions are largely replicated in the 2003 CILIP Survey (McNicol and Nankivell, 2003):

- *funding*: diverse and competitive
- *policy*: no coordination at a strategic level
- *practitioners and researchers*: difficulties of collaboration
- *capacity*: lack of skills and culture
- *dissemination and implementation*: not enough is done
- *the bigger picture*: a growing interest in interdisciplinary research.

The last point about interdisciplinary research chimes with the point about alignment with the Bigger Picture and is a key development to take on board in our new research infrastructure. Our intellectual domain cuts across disciplinary boundaries in the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities – and, with this in

mind, it is significant that Sir Brian Follett, Chair of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, sees the next step (now that the arts and humanities have achieved Research Council status) as, “using the Research Council system not only to support particular disciplines but also to cut across the disciplines” (Follett, 2006).

Of course, this interdisciplinary approach makes the landscape of research funding and potential research activity even more complex and demanding – giving further emphasis to the need for signposting and support in order to enable new researchers and practitioner-researchers to identify the opportunities for interdisciplinary involvement, and to deliver the quality demanded in an interdisciplinary environment.

As well as this interdisciplinary dimension, there is also a need – as I mentioned earlier in the context of IFLA – for our research infrastructure to take on board an international dimension. European research networks have been developed through the European Framework Programmes but we need to go beyond the European perspective. Given the global nature of the information society and the way in which professional issues transcend national boundaries – not to mention the pressure generated by the Research Assessment Exercise for work of international standing – our new infrastructure has to be hospitable to a global perspective. Our professional concerns are global, our professional reach is global, and our research environment has to be global.

Key issues to address

Out of this range of reflections comes an agenda of key issues to be addressed by our new research infrastructure:

- the need to bring more closely together the worlds of academic research, professional practice, and policy development
- The need to grow sustainable research capacity and a thriving research culture underpinned by continuity of research

experience and confidence in the future for library and information research.

- the need to get better at knowledge transfer – at communicating and “translating” the outcomes of research, and at the partnership processes by which research can be transferred into practice
- the need to develop an interdisciplinary perspective which connects library and information research to a Bigger Picture
- the need to develop an international perspective given that we are part of an international professional community
- the need to map out the new landscape of research funding and research opportunity, taking into account these interdisciplinary and international perspectives
- the need to set a clear strategic direction for library and information research which establishes a coordinated approach but also allows space for good ideas to be brought forward and developed into research proposals
- the need to move beyond the mediocrity of much of the library and information research reviewed through the previous Research Assessment Exercise – to “raise our game” in terms of the quality of research delivered by our domain
- The need to identify a locus – a clear space (such as the one provided by BLRDD and then the LIC) for research within the library and information domain.

That locus for library and information research does not have to be a physical place. It could be a web address rather than (as in the days of BLRDD) a street address in London. A further key issue to consider is the ICT infrastructure needed to create knowledge-sharing across our community of practice through an e-enabled research environment.

Related to this is the issue of the information infrastructure needed to support library and information research. As the library and information profession we support the whole of

the research community across all disciplines and, with this in mind, we've supported the establishment of the Research Information Network (RIN) to develop collaborative provision of research information for the benefit of researchers across the UK. The information-related issues which we raise at a macro level in the context of the RIN, (coordination of the information infrastructure, open access to publicly funded research, issues around institutional repositories, issues around access to digital content, and so on) need also to be addressed at a micro level by developing an information strategy for research in our own domain.

The final – but probably most fundamental – infrastructural issue relates to the partnership of key institutions around which our new research machinery might be built: recognising that, in a multi-stakeholder environment, the institutional framework will be built on partnership rather than on one central institution as it was in the days of BLRDD. Which institutions will form that partnership? And what different and complementary roles will each particular institution play?

Clearly the Research Councils – and in particular the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) – will be part of that institutional infrastructure. In that context, it is encouraging to note the commonality between the agenda for library and information research identified in this paper and the agenda for action identified (Review of the Year 2005/06, 2006) by the AHRC: to build capacity and capability; to extend interdisciplinary and international working; to foster knowledge transfer; and to facilitate collaboration. The AHRC has developed a number of collaborative initiatives (such as collaborative research training and collaborative doctoral awards) on which we can build. In addition, the AHRC has recognised a number of national museums, galleries, archives and libraries as “academic analogues” –

practitioner institutions carrying out research in a way which is analogous to higher education institutions – and these “analogue” institutions are eligible to bid for Research Council funding. This is an initiative worth of further consideration and extension.

Progress through partnership

So, having identified a range of key issues to be addressed, what happens next after our deliberations today? When you're developing a new infrastructure it makes sense to consult widely across that infrastructure – it was, after all, the consultation preceding the publication of *Prospects*, which generated substantial ownership and support for the recommendations in *Prospects*. Maybe a good outcome from today would be a commitment to get potential partner institutions round a table to consider the future research infrastructure and plan for a new round of consultation about that infrastructure – recognising that the process of consultation and discussion has to provide an opportunity to listen to the voices of the next generation of researchers and practitioner-researchers. If we're going to build new research machinery for the future then the thinking has to involve those who in the future will be working within that new machinery.

Brian Perry and BLRDD developed a highly effective research machinery for our domain in the latter half of the twentieth century. A number of studies over the past fifteen or so years – like the Salford conference in 1990, the *Prospects* publication in 1998, and the CILIP survey in 2003 – have produced very similar conclusions about the actions needed in order to build on the achievements of BLRDD and develop a new research infrastructure for the twenty-first century.

We know *what* needs to be done. We now need to focus on *how* it is to be done, and by *whom*. This is the challenge that we have to address by bringing together the potential partner institutions to form a new framework – a new locus – for library and information research in the UK.

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- Note:** This paper has also drawn on a previous paper which I delivered to LIRG as part of the CILIP Umbrella 2003 Conference: Bob McKee, (2004) 'Why do we need research?' in *Library and Information Research* 28 (88), Summer.