
Overview of the Brian Perry commemorative workshop: looking back to the future; research agendas for library and information science

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Professor Judith Elkin is Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Worcester. Her early career was as Head of Library Services to Children and Young People in Birmingham. Judith previously held the position of Dean of the Faculty of Computing, Information and English at the University of Central England, where she headed a team of academics and researchers.

Judith was a member of the Library and Information Commission throughout its existence and served on the Research Committee, producing a number of key policy statements; *2020 Vision*, *Libraries: the life force of learning*, *Libraries: the essence of inclusion* and *Keystone for the information age: a national information policy for the UK*. She is currently the Chair of the Board of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) West Midlands, and serves on a number of Boards i.e. West Midlands Higher Education Association Management Group and the Wolfson/CURL selection panel. Professor Judith Elkin was a member of the Higher Education Funding Council's Research Assessment Panel for Information and Library Management in 1992 and 1996 and chaired the 2001 Panel. She was Chair of IFLA's Standing Committee on Education and Training from 1998-2004. Professor Judith Elkin has a national and international reputation for her research in the world of libraries and information science, especially in the fields of children's literature and literacy, reader development and multicultural literature and libraries. Her most recent publication is a contribution to Charles Butler's *Teaching Children's Fiction* (2006),

The workshop proved to be a fascinating day, with many deserved tributes to Brian Perry. It has been useful to reflect on where we were and where we think we are today, with respect to LIS research, and a valuable opportunity to rethink the research agenda. The published papers and record of the breakout sessions show the high level of debate at the seminar and the enthusiasm for taking forward the research agenda. Here I highlight my personal reflections on the day, try to pick out the key agenda items and suggest a way forward.

My musings on what to say to close the seminar reflect my own experience, as a member of the Library and Information Commission throughout its existence; as a member of its Research Committee; as a former Head of a "Library School" (University of Central England) and Director of its Centre for Information Research; as Chair of 2001 Research Assessment Exercise Panel for Library and Information Management; as Chair of MLA West Midlands and currently as Deputy Vice Chancellor for a new University, leading on its RAE return and involved with developing an innovative joint public and university library – the first in UK!

For me, the key recurring themes from today are the ongoing need for evidence based research, research based in practice, practitioner based research and space and time for blue skies thinking and for looking to the horizon. There has also been considerable focus on the need for better dissemination.

Derek Law looked back on the halcyon days of BLRDD, acting as a mini Research Council, and the research strategy subsequently picked up by the Library and Information Commission: *Prospects: a strategy for action* (1998). This outlined a three year rolling programme of strategic research projects, with the UK at the hub of the global information economy. Sadly this was never implemented. From Derek, the lessons for the future were the desirability of cross-domain research, with librarians, computer scientists, industry and government and cross-sectoral research, across Public, University, Special, Government and Health libraries and the growing importance of International research, Policy research and future studies.

Peter Brophy looked at LIS research since 2000 and demonstrated that research has been going on, though in a rather fragmented way and largely dominated by information and communications technologies (ICT), particularly digitisation, information environments and preservation/curation, as well as performance measurement and evaluation and some studies of users. He looked at some of the LIS academic departments' research funding, showing a dominance of the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council, EU-IST, NHS, JISC and some MLA funding. Peter was critical of MLA's poor evidence of a sustained programme of research, exacerbated by MLA's recent concentration on regionalisation.

I would defend MLA's regional approach through the recently formed MLA Partnership, which will take us into a new era of collaboration and partnership but has certainly not, to date, focussed on research. There is a growing interest in cross domain (libraries, museums and archives) research, recognising the need for an evidence base. Recent work on a new MLA Partnership Research and Evidence Strategy recognises that a research and evidence strategy is required to underpin and enable subsequent research activity.

It is not only MLA that can be criticised for failing to respond to the vacuum in research strategy that was left after the demise of BLRDD and LIC. No clear stance has been taken by the professional bodies, the National Library or the LIS academic departments. CILIP has recently agreed a new Research Policy and Strategy but has been relatively slow in acknowledging the demise of funding. The British Library is currently developing a new Research Strategy but again has been unable to replace the research vacuum.

What have the LIS departments been doing? There has been some LIC-funded and bits of MLA-funded research in some of the departments, including research around the People's Network. A look at the websites of the LIS departments and BAILER (British Association for Library Education and Research) showed surprisingly little evidence of buoyant research. The BAILER website had no

pages, apart from an outdated list of department heads. We see no hope for leadership there, then, either narrowly within the departments or more broadly participating on the national stage!

When reviewing the websites of LIS departments, I had enormous difficulty extricating any real sense of what research was being undertaken; understanding what the relevance or impact of it might be and where the real strengths and new researchers were. Not helpful in terms of looking for guidance on a future research strategy. The LIS departments need a much more joined-up and coherent approach to research, if they are really to have significance within national or international LIS research strategy.

So, my overall reflections from the workshop are that there is research going on, much of it ICT focussed, but, it is piecemeal, of varying quality, with no coordination or coherence and poorly disseminated. There are no real think pieces being produced or encouraged. We have lost the locus/ the space for research, within a coordinating framework. We have lost the continuity and the context, as well as the culture and the capacity.

We need to re-vision the future and find a new LIS research landscape. We need to continue to refine the debate and reshape the thinking. We need a Research Strategy that will be cross sectoral, cross domain and horizon scanning, within a multi stakeholder partnership.

The greatest tribute to Brian Perry would be a research strategy for the twenty-first century which will nurture new plants, new roots and new directions. It is time to move from 'Monty Python: the life of Brian' to 'Monty Python: the Holy Grail'. We have to re-find the Research Agenda in partnership. There is probably no single organisation that can take this forward in the twenty-first century.

I would like to call on the British Library to convene a Think Tank, a forum to get the key stakeholders round the table, including MLA, CILIP, LIRG, LIS departments, key funders and new researchers, to re-establish a national LIS Research Agenda.