

" THE FUTURE FOR LIRG "

Background

The Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) has existed as an independent professional association since its formation in 1977. The Group is small with a personal membership of approximately 100 and with 176 corporate subscriptions to its newsletter, *Library and Information Research News*.

The Group is an Organisation in Liaison (OiL) with The Library Association. The LIRG Committee has over the last two years been monitoring developments in relation to a possible merger of The Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists to create a new organisation for the library and information profession. Being an OiL affords some benefits including preferential rates for hiring rooms at LA headquarters and advertising in the LA Record, and the ability to apply for small grants. In addition, The Library Association hosts the Group's web site. The Group is fortunate in having Alan Cooper of The Library Association as a co-opted member of LIRG Committee. This has led to a closer relationship with The Library Association and enjoyed more support than might otherwise have been expected of an OiL. The Group has had a looser relationship with the Institute of Information Scientists which has ebbed and flowed depending upon whether key individuals have been actively involved in both the Group and the Institute.

Changing environment

The research environment has changed considerably over the lifetime of the Group. One of the key roles for LIRG has been to link research and practice. Quality initiatives across all library and information sectors have led to a greater emphasis upon evaluation, performance measurement, and benchmarking. This has in turn led to more research and research related activity being undertaken. There have also been significant changes in the way that research is conducted over this period. There is a greater emphasis upon qualitative research, more use of IT in undertaking research, and networking between researchers has been made easier by technological communications.

We have also seen a most significant change in the organisation and availability of mainstream research funding for LIS research in the UK over the lifetime of the Group and, particularly, in the last five years. The current environment is one where the profile and funding levels for LIS research are being seriously eroded to the detrimental effect of the LIS profession.

Options for LIRG

The creation of the new professional body offers an opportunity to review our current positioning within the LIS profession. There are two options open to us:

1. Status quo. Remain unchanged as an independent professional association and retain our existing status as an Organisation in Liaison (OiL).
2. Become a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the new professional body.

Option 1 - Remain unchanged as an independent professional association and retain our existing status as an Organisation in Liaison (OiL).

LIRG is fulfilling a useful function that is not being carried out by any other professional Group. The Group plays a key role in raising awareness of LIS research through its events and its newsletter, *Library and Information Research News*. It recognises high quality research through its student prizes and the Daphne Clark Prize for practitioners and encourages new researchers through the Elsevier/LIRG Research Award. The Group has developed and offered a high quality research methods course that provides opportunities for people including practitioners to learn how to do research. Through the dedication and commitment of a group of active members, it achieves a considerable amount even though it has a small membership. However, much more needs to be done to further the aims of the profession in the research area, and this cannot be achieved without a larger active membership.

The Group suffers from other disadvantages from being a small independent Group. There are significant financial risks in setting up new larger-scale activities and maintaining them.

Activities with a high start-up cost can create cash flow problems for the Group when there is a lead time in receiving income. Also, as a small independent professional association, we do not benefit from having charitable status, being registered for VAT, or members being able to pay subscriptions by credit card.

As a small independent professional association, LIRG is also failing to make a significant impact on UK LIS research policy or on the setting of the LIS research agenda. The size and income of the Group works against this ever being achieved. LIRG is failing to attract into membership people who are active in research and who are interested in research. The Group's membership remains constant despite marketing initiatives and the promotion of its activities. The membership remains stubbornly focussed towards the academic library sector with under-representation from the others sectors.

Option 2 - Become a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the new professional body.

Specialist Interest Groups (SIGs) are fully integrated into the new professional body. Members of the new professional body would be able to opt to become a member of the Group either as a one of their 'free' groups or by paying a small additional subscription. It is likely that the Group would attract considerably more people into membership than currently. This opens up the possibility of being able to get more people actively involved and to engage in more activities.

The Group would also be able to influence its parent body and is likely to be a source of advice for the new professional association about research matters. However, SIGs cannot voice opinions on LIS issues independently of the professional body.

Being part of a larger professional body would open up opportunities for both organisations to mutually benefit. LIRG would no longer have to manage its own separate membership renewals (although it would still be responsible for institutional subscriptions to *Library and Information Research News*) and it would be

easier for people to join. The Group would benefit from the ability to work more closely with the parent body in relation to larger scale initiatives such as the research methods courses. There is also scope for achieving a higher profile for the LIRG research courses and the Awards & Prizes within the new professional body with mutual benefit. The new professional body would gain from having a Special Interest Group that would be concerned with linking research and practice, evaluation, and performance measurement. These areas are not currently well represented by existing SIGs.

There are two major obstacles to this option. First, there is a legal requirement that members of a SIG must also be a member of the parent body so long as they are eligible to join. Most LIRG members are either in The Library Association or the Institute of Information Scientists or both. However, some LIRG members appear to be in neither. The Committee has been considering whether it might be possible to put in place a means by which these people could become personal subscribers to *Library and Information Research News*. Secondly, the business implications of becoming a SIG would need thorough investigation. The Group would no longer receive separate personal subscriptions but would obtain a capitation from the parent body based upon numbers in membership. There would be significant cost implications in giving every personal member of a SIG their own print copy of *Library and Information Research News*. The capitation would not cover the costs of production. However, *Library and Information Research News* could be made available electronically with print copies available for those who wished to purchase it separately.

Committee's recommendation

The Committee recommends that **in principle** LIRG should become a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the new professional body. It believes that being part of the new professional body will enable LIRG contribute to creating a research culture within the new professional body and to enhance the profile of research within the profession. However, this would be

subject to satisfactorily addressing the issues associated with non-members of the parent body and the financial aspects.

If LIRG is to become a SIG, the Committee believes that this should be as soon as reasonably feasible after the inauguration of the new professional body in 2002. This may require an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) later in the year, or alternatively, it would be considered at the AGM in March 2002. This period would be used to investigate further the issues of concern and to consult widely with the membership.

The Committee seeks endorsement of this approach from the AGM.

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