
News & Views

EXTRACTS FROM THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION COMMISSION RESEARCH COMMITTEE'S RESPONSE TO THE "REVIEW OF RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND PRACTICES FOR THE MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES COUNCIL (MLAC)", PROFESSOR JOHN SHEPHERD

The LIC supports the proposition that research priorities and programmes should be reviewed in the light of the impending merger of the sectoral interests of libraries and information, museums and galleries, and archives under the aegis of MLAC. We welcome the recognition that there are major gains to be made by the convergence of service, professional, technical and economic issues across these sectors and that there must be an integrated research strategy to address these issues effectively and efficiently.

We strongly agree that it is important not to lose the benefit of single sector research.

The LIC supports a review of research in the transition to MLAC. Such a review should be a major undertaking with serious consultation and investigation. However it should be remembered that a wide ranging mapping exercise of LIS research was carried out for *Prospects* which should not be duplicated.

Background

When the LIC was established, it was a major requirement that it should develop a strategy for research in library and information services (LIS) at UK level that would support cross-sectoral development and the avoidance of duplication. Within LIS "cross-sectoral" means across public, academic, special and commercial sectors. The LIC Research Committee was responsible for developing the strategy and had at its disposal a modest amount of funding to support policy development. Following significant mapping and background

study, and extensive consultation the LIC research strategy was published in 1998 as "*Prospects: a strategy for action*". At that stage the responsibility of the LIC was limited to policy, and as such was in an analogous position to that apparently envisaged for MLAC.

However, in April 1999 the British Library Research and Innovation Centre's responsibilities and programmes passed to the LIC. At that point the LIC inherited a rich history, well-developed programmes and an international reputation for research with strong academic and practitioner involvement that has contributed in large part to the LIS sector in UK being one of the most energetic and innovative in the world.

Currently, therefore the LIC agenda has three distinct strands:

- * research related to policy objectives
- * academic research
- * practitioner based research aimed at professional and service improvement

Research related to policy objectives and practitioner based research may overlap and should be mutually supportive, but they are clearly not one and the same thing.

General points relating to the recommendations

We welcome the focus on the need for strategic policy research associated **with big societal issues** such as social exclusion, educational impact and economic development. This is wholly in line with LIC policy and *Prospects*. We support the recommendation for larger scale longitudinal studies and the significant resource that they would require.

There is confusion between **practice oriented research** and policy oriented research. Little appreciation is demonstrated in the report of the importance of practitioner based research that has been carried out in the past and the serious gap that would be created if clear provision for support of this work is not made. A major plank of LIC policy which emerged from consultation is 'research into practice' which is not adequately addressed in the report.

There is however a wider point of principle here. Whilst the LIC unequivocally supports the importance of the policy agenda, we do not accept that MLAC research strategy should be shaped only by **DCMS policy and priorities**. That would ignore the strategic research interests of other sectors not directly the responsibility of DCMS and would stultify innovation arising out in the field.

There is a serious danger that if a narrow interpretation of MLAC's mission is applied to the research programme the outcome will be activity of considerably reduced impact, serving only Government policy and cross-sectoral initiatives. There is a place for both, but neither could account for more than a fraction of the current range of research. Both the BLRIC and the LIC interpreted their mission very broadly in terms of research and aimed at significantly advancing the sector in terms of innovation, awareness and change. The Council will want to advise Government and will be seen to be seriously weakened if its research programme is constrained, effectively Government-driven.

We do not disagree with the proposition that **academic research** (i.e. that carried out by universities and other eligible research institutes) should be funded by AHRB (Arts & Humanities Research Board), subject to a much greater clarity of understanding of definition and funding issues than is demonstrated in the report. Such issues include the following:

- The use of the terms "blue sky" or "basic" is confusing in what is predominantly a professional related discipline and recognised as such by the Higher Education Funding Council.
- From discussions between the LIC and AHRB it is clear that AHRB does not expect to fund academic research in LIS to the previous level funded by LIC/BLRIC without additional funding.
- AHRB cannot fund research done outside universities, or even by university libraries. The BLRIC budget was always available to academics and practitioners from all sectors of LIS. The transfer of funding responsibilities to AHRB and the research councils, without making provision for the gaps mentioned above

would have a serious effect on non-HE institutions and individuals working in this field. This effect should not be underestimated.

We do not accept the proposition that the **research training function** carried out by LIC can be exercised by AHRB except in a minor part. AHRB can only accept responsibility for the development of 'academic' researchers.

We agree that there should be a **regional dimension** to MLAC's research agenda. We do not agree that research funds should be distributed on a regional basis as that will fragment and reduce the impact of the already modest sum available.

Some detail points

We agree that MLAC should continue to develop **efficiency measures** such as performance indicators, liaison with other funding bodies, avoidance of duplication and the encouragement of LIS researchers to compete more widely. The LIC/BLRIC have been active in all these areas and wish this emphasis to continue. We also agree with reviewing the LIC research centres.

In view of the success of the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) we support the extension of this activity into the cross-sectoral arena. But, whilst supporting the case for improved statistics, we do not support the proposition (if this is what is implied) that more data collection should be at the expense of other areas of research.

The transition to MLAC

The LIC Research Committee does not accept that it was necessary to abandon a research strategy which was approved by four Secretaries of State and supported widely as a result of proper consultation, nor to disrupt an ongoing research programme highly relevant to one of MLAC's core sectors. There is ample flexibility in funding allocations and total willingness in LIC to co-operate to effect a smooth transition to MLAC's research strategy when it is known. A well-managed transition will receive the support of all the stakeholders. The LIC Research Committee is available to assist in this process.

Finally it is essential in this transitional period that the confusion which has been created between policy driven research and practitioner based research be resolved. It is quite clear that the advanced position of LIS in UK would not have been achieved purely by policy driven initiatives. If the outcome of the transition to MLAC results in research resources being appropriated solely to the policy agenda then LIS in UK has a great deal to lose whilst it is not clear what it will gain.

**EXTRACT FROM THE LIC STAFF
RESPONSE TO THE "REVIEW OF
RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND PRACTICES
FOR THE MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES AND
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JOHN SHEPHERD**

The staff of the Library and Information Commission (LIC) welcomes the review and finds much in it of value and interest. We acknowledge that it was a big task for an individual to undertake in such a short time. We recognise that further work will be needed. However, we believe that the review is a good starting point for developing a research direction for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC).

MLAC mission

Greater clarity is required on what MLAC will be and what it is going to do for whom before deciding on the research priorities. If MLAC's mission is narrowly defined as serving Government policy, and possibly only DCMS policy, it follows that the research programme would also have this narrow focus. The outcome of such a research programme would have a limited impact as it would be seen as remote and irrelevant to those in the museums, libraries and archives sectors.

The British Library Research and Innovation Centre (BLRIC) interpreted its mission very broadly as advancing the library and information sector in terms of innovation, awareness and change and LIC has a similar mission. The Council may want to

advise Government on innovations for the museums, libraries and archives sector. However, it will have weakened its position to do so if its research programme is constrained by being solely Government-driven.

Scope of research

We are concerned that MLAC research priorities are to be set by reference to the current four overarching themes of DCMS policy. LIC was specifically set up to have a UK-wide remit and to bridge across to other Government Departments. We would encourage MLAC to do the same.

The review makes scant reference to research with an **international focus**. LIC is committed to developing an understanding of global developments in relation to its remit and is committed to supporting research where international comparisons would inform understanding within the UK. This international focus should be maintained. The review suggests that the substantive core of MLAC's strategic research programme will be the work that spans the needs of the three sectors: the cross-sectoral or "convergence research". A balance should be maintained between research of this sort and "domain-specific" (that which is relevant to one sector alone) research. The current library and information research programme demonstrates the need for continuing work in this sector.

Research excellence

We note that a responsive mode of funding research is not considered suitable for MLAC. However, we feel that methods for "mining" the research community for ideas should be put in place that would include broadly defined calls for ideas for research. These would build on the sense of ownership of, and involvement in, the research by the community and ensure that its concerns were fed into a process that would influence policy development. There are dangers in Government policy-driven research in that it may only give the answers that are required. An acceptable balance might be achieved by funding some "public good" research that is not driven by immediate MLAC agendas and considering "excellent ideas" proposed by the research community.

TOPICAL ISSUES*Ros Cotton***Whither library and information research?**

One of the most pressing matters on the LIS research agenda must be the imminent absorption of the Library and Information Commission into the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC). A fortnight before D-Day on 1 April, LIC colleagues were unsure of their roles and job descriptions, not to mention where LIS research would go following the speedily produced Shepherd Report and MLAC Chief-in-Waiting Neville Mackay's statement that "We must recognise that our external environment is changing and that the way in which BLRIC and LIC ran their research programmes is longer appropriate for MLAC's needs."

The LIC staff and LIC Research Committee responses to this document make interesting reading. At first sight it would seem that the latter agrees with and supports a lot more than the staff, though both quite rightly express misgivings about the likely narrow focus of the MLAC research programme, which is set to be driven by the needs of Government policy and possibly only DCMS policy at that. Other points stressed by the responses and possibly misunderstood by the Shepherd report include problems associated with LIS research being funded by AHRB [Arts & Humanities Research Board], the interdependence of different kinds of research, the lack of an international focus, and the disruption to LIC's ongoing research programme. It is to be hoped that, by the time you read this, these important issues will have been satisfactorily resolved!

E-commerce to the fore

On the topic of pressing issues, you can't open a newspaper or journal these days without seeing something on e-commerce. The British Library held an excellent conference in March on e-commerce for SMEs, [Small and Medium sized Enterprises] which are widely predicted to be the drivers of e-economy developments rather than the large corporations. It was inspiring to see delegates representing such a wide variety of activities which

included: market research and PR companies; retailers of food, shoes and clothing; publishers; Business Links, trade and professional bodies; IT consultancies; and – reassuringly – firms of solicitors and accountants. We heard some excellent presentations and everyone must have departed convinced that e-commerce cannot be ignored by commerce and industry, by the information profession or even by the man on the Clapham omnibus. This spawned the useful maxim: *if you haven't got an internet strategy you haven't got a strategy.*

It was fortuitous that the conference also coincided with the public listing of 'lastminute.com', pointing up the volatility of technology stocks and the strange anomaly of companies which have yet to make any profit displacing some well-established ones from the FTSE index.

A further catalyst to the domestic e-commerce strategy came in the form of Don Cruickshank's damning report on the UK banking industry - which is said to be hindering progress by imposing substantial costs and barriers to the processing of online credit. The thrust of his report can be gleaned from: www.bankreview.org.uk

Techies still rule okay?

Good for Elspeth Hyams, writing in the recent *Information World Review*, for pointing up the need, based on her visit to an educational technology fair, for much more interaction between the information and education sectors, not to mention less reinvention of the wheel. She also identified the significant potential for new research on user behaviour. I found this interesting in view of the massive increase in use of electronic information sources coupled with the concentration of research funding on other issues such as the Library and Information Commission's 3 Cs – Connectivity, Content and Competences.

A well-known internet consultant recently commented on how "awful" the user interfaces of well-known CD-ROM products were: he confirmed that, during his time at a reputable CD-ROM publisher, the technical people had never really engaged with the user community. In order to get interfaces that really work, helping users to exploit these sources to the full, it seems that more research

on user behaviour is indeed called for, covering the psychological aspects of different learning styles. This seems particularly important with the use of icons on electronic sources – I for one hardly ever find the symbol chosen to be an obvious representation of the function: if it wasn't for tool tips, I would not have the faintest idea what any of them meant!

Related to this is Karen Blakeman's article in December 1999 *Business Information Review*, where she refers to the common mistakes made by web site designers. These were first identified several years ago and are being perpetuated years later. These include things allegedly irritating to users such as use of frames and dancing logos. (The one web site I would excuse is bluemountain.com, the purveyor of electronic greeting cards, which are great fun). So it would seem high time for electronic publishers to get their acts together and to engage in constructive dialogue with their users with a view to enhancing useability and cutting out the gimmicks.

Hard times ahead for well-established players?

Although prophets of doom have long forecast the 'pride comes before a fall' syndrome attaching to Dialog chief Dan Wagner, and although we have got used to big names merging and changing hands, it still comes as a bit of shock to learn of the probable sale of Dialog's information services division to the Canadian Thomson Corporation. If the sale goes ahead we will have to get used to the third new name within three years - Bright Station. At least it is a memorable one, unlike all the names with suffixes like "line", "net" and "market". If and when the change goes ahead it will no doubt mean far reaching changes for users, like the last time...

Another outfit which must be looking warily over its shoulder is the British Library's Document Supply Centre, which has gone from having a virtual monopoly to having a good deal of competition. A young upstart, Ingenta, the "global research gateway" originally part of UK academia, has not only taken over the Uncover document supply service, giving it much wider access to the US market, but has also won an important contract from JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and the Publishers Association to develop a pilot electronic ILL service for the UK's higher education community.

Knowledge management comes of age

Or so it would seem now that this discipline has its very own Centre at Robert Gordon University. The Centre aims to "assist organisations in unlocking their untapped potential to achieve competitive advantage through the effective management of knowledge." The Centre is starting from the recognition that effective use of intellectual capital is vital for building sustainable competitive advantage. The sort of expertise on offer, including training and consultancy, is not readily available elsewhere in Scotland.

Although it has been said that Knowledge Management is the management discipline for the next decade and beyond, I recently heard that experts had moved onto the next stage – network management. Perhaps we can soon expect to see a Centre devoted to this but in the meantime, more information about this one can be found at: <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/~sim/ckm.htm>

National Information Policy in the UK

A Library and Information Commission policy document concludes that although Britain has made some progress towards becoming an Information Society (I wonder whether Tony Blair will be reading it) a lot more needs to be done to ensure that the full potential of all the various initiatives can be realised. One area where this is particularly apparent is public internet access, where funding is coming from a variety of programmes under the jurisdiction of different Government departments, including DTI, DCMS and DfEE. This duplication of effort makes life very difficult for libraries and other bodies trying to obtain funding. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that Tony Blair himself, who seems to take the reins in crucial areas such as the NHS, will act to ensure that all the parties involved start to talk constructively to each other. <http://www.lic.gov.uk/publications/policyreports/keystone/html>