REPORT ON THE LIRG ANNUAL LECTURE 1996

The new approach to funding LIS research in Britain

Nigel Macartney
Director, British Library Research and Development Department.

Introduction

The healthy and continuing relationship between the work of the Library and Information Research Group and that of the Research and Development Department, now known as the Research and Innovation Centre, was illustrated by the Director's presentation at the Group's AGM.

Nigel Macartney spoke about the new approach to funding LIS research in Britain at a time when there are many opportunities for library and information services to grasp.

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The British Library
"The world's leading resource for scholarship, research and innovation."

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- 18 million volumes
- 900,000 sound recordings
- 33 million patents
- 600,000 volumes of newspapers
- 400,000 reader visits
- 5 million documents supplied

- intends to become a major centre for the storage of and access to digital texts and images by the year 2000

- an important objective is to assist readers to trace and access the material they want, quickly and efficiently whether they are in a BL reading room or using information and document delivery services over the Information Superhighway

The Centre is part of the British Library, a large and growing organisation which is just beginning to grapple with the effects of the digital age regarding access to texts, services to readers and so on. The changes within the British Library mirror those within the general profession and as such provide an apt backdrop for the work of the Department. The Director stressed the tremendous amount of content in the Library's collections and noted that as we enter an information age there is tremendous potential to contribute these collections to a wider public via the information Superhighway: *"we do not envisage an exclusively digital library: a major role for the BL will be a prime supplier of content on the Information Superhighway."*

Background to BL funding of LIS research

The current mission statement, *"to advance UK information and library services by promoting and supporting research, development and innovation"*, has evolved from the BL being an agency of change to one of advancement since there is no point in doing research if one cannot advance from it. There is also an emphasis on innovation, for example, the arrival of new technologies has

to be exploited. The new approach then is described as:

* entrepreneurial
* outward-looking
* pro-active
* aiming to stimulate debate
* aiming to ensure knowledge reaches those to whom it would be useful
* one which operates across the UK and internationally

Some of the strategies that will be used to achieve this include:

* developing alliances with other funding agencies
* working closer with the different user constituencies
* collecting, analysing and evaluating intelligence about what research is going on
* exploiting expertise to assist other funders
* giving help, advice and co-ordination to research teams
* devising a programme in co-operation with other agencies

Future aims/operations

Although the Centre had lost funding for 1996/7, as part of the general cuts within the BL, the priority within the Centre has been to protect research funds and preserve the awards budget. The Centre has not been entirely successful and is losing a small number of staff and is having to economise. Available funding for research is approximately £1.4 million.

The Research Plan for 1996/7 is an interim plan evolved to *"cover the gap between the current Plan and the next generation plan evolved to fit in with the Library and Information Commission Research Sub-Committee's national strategy. "* Admittedly there was not a great deal of consultation - *"several 'action lines' were agreed with representatives of the LIS community and an unsolicited proposals budget was marked covering a broad range of topics."*
The aim was simply to give a clearer indication of priorities. There are seven programme areas:

* digital libraries
* information retrieval
* management of libraries including staff/professional development
* value/impact of LIS
* library co-operation
* preservation of library materials
* providers and users of information

It was recognised that the Centre has a track record of research administration but still needs to develop its relationship with other funding bodies, namely the DNH/LIC and the Lottery Fund, HEFCs, ESRC and other Research Councils, EU, DTI etc. There is also a wish to maintain the good reputation of providing advice to individual researchers and to continue partnerships with practitioners, academic departments, major players such as CURL, FOLACL, the BL, researchers and LIRG, consultants, overseas collaborators, and the commercial sector etc. In essence the Centre aims to become an interchange of information and contacts, for example, the Director stressed that the Centre is keen to support colleagues through the early stages of proposals and that this help/advice/coordination role will continue. Also the ability to deal with unsolicited

proposals. It was however recognised that it was necessary to work in cooperation with other agencies to devise programmes.

Dissemination

Another key area of work is that of dissemination: here the objective is of getting the results of research out to where they are needed. Practitioners want to know the results of research but do not have the time/motivation to go through reports so there need to be new mechanisms for dissemination, for example, summaries which identify key factors of research. There was also a role for the Centre to draw attention to other research. Changes include:

- revamped <u>Research Bulletin</u> containing more summaries of research and which will remain free of charge.

- Web pages - Portico/UKOLN. Some full text reports are now available.

- BLRIC will cease to act as a publisher in Autumn 1997; however grant holders can continue to publish their own reports. Other reports will be deposited at BLDSC.

Staff structure review

It was recognised that the BLRIC team needed to be able to

- become more flexible
- switch between priorities
- interact more with the wider R&D community
- develop a subject approach
- minimise routine work

In the new structure there will be seven research analysts who will be subject focused to match the seven programme areas and will have the prime role of monitoring and evaluating the work in their areas. They will be more outgoing than hitherto and will spend less time on actually managing projects. This is part of the more flexible, leaner, fitter staff structure illustrated below:

Director

Promotion & Development   Research Analysts   Support Unit

Outlook

In summary the Director felt that the *"whole LIS sector is poised at the crossroads: this is the time to stop the drift and become more purposeful. The Research and Innovation Centre is a strategically vital organ for the whole LIS world, including the Commission and the British Library. Like most organisations we face continual change, but a research and development unit should be able to get it right!"*

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Questions to Nigel Macartney

Biddy Fisher
What can practitioners do to influence the BL? Is there any mechanism in the BL to receive information about burning issues?

"There are formal mechanisms, however the Advisory Committee only meets twice a year. It is important that we all work with the Commission and its research committee to inform the national strategy. There will also be more opportunities to talk to R&D staff via the Research Analysts structure - however there will be a gap whilst the team is developed before they can go out on visits. They will, however, all be accessible via email and the personification of the Centre via the new staff structure will make it more approachable."

Micheline Hancock-Beaulieu
Have you appointed analysts to subject areas?

"The Centre is still in the process of deciding. One proposal is to appoint two year fellows who would come from the wider LIS community. There are two frozen posts at present. The Centre would be interested in the community's thoughts on fellowships/secondments."

Dorothy Williams
The programme is very 'library and information services' rather than 'information' research. Is this a clue as to what you are hoping other agencies will take on board?

"The programme does reflect that there are other agencies who are funding LIS areas for research. It is necessary to cover the core areas of LIS funding but also it is equally necessary to be one of a group for funding some initiatives."

Philip Payne
Do you envisage a move to collaborative research jointly funded?

"Yes - and the Analysts will have to put together packages of funding for projects. Indeed this is essential as the Centre has lost out on funding."

Harry East
Is funding for BL's internal research going to increase?

"The Centre can see no reason why the research grant budget should be given to the BL for internal research, but nevertheless it could still be useful to work with the BL on research."
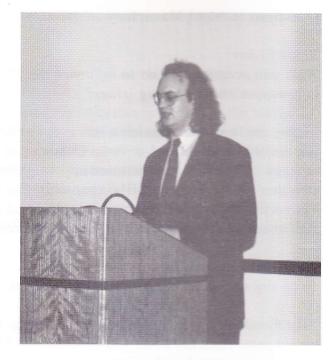
Micheline Hancock-Beaulieu
The public's perception of the Information Superhighway is not one which is linked to libraries so libraries have to create the impression of being information-active.

"Yes - hence it is essential that the Centre works with other, bigger funders in order to have credibility outside of the profession and influence the wider agenda."

Deborah Goodall
July 1996

Above: Nigel Macarthy (Director of BLRIC),
giving the Annual Lecture.

Above: David Allen (Sheffield University)
Winner of the Elsevier/LIRG Research Award

Above: Della Sar, Elsevier Director of Marketing,
presenting the Elsevier/LIRG Award to David Allen.

LIRG Strategic Plan

The Committee of the Library and Information Research Group spent a weekend in November reviewing the mission, membership, activities, and organisation of the Group. The starting point for this review was the discussion. paper which has been circulated to LIRG members and reproduced in the last issue of LIRN. This provided a catalyst and an initial framework for stimulating the discussions over the weekend. We also had in front of us a response to the discussion paper from Bob McKee of Solihull Libraries (also reproduced in the last issue of LIRN). The discussions were good natured but lively. And, by the end of the weekend, we had thoroughly considered our current position, developed a plan of what we feel the Group should become, and began to put in place the building blocks for future development and growth. However, the Group **is** its membership and the Committee feel that it is very important to seek and to consider the views of personal members and those who read the Group's newsletter, LIRN. Please do take this opportunity to comment on the strategic plan by writing to me.

The Committee started by undertaking a SWOT analysis and considering the strengths weaknesses of the Group. There was a feeling that we had a small but loyal membership whose involvement and contribution to the Group had over the years enabled the Group achieve a high profile. Our activities (especially LIRN, the LIRG Awards, and the quality of our courses and conferences) are widely acknowledged and supported within the profession. We are financially secure and we have achieved a role as an independent professional group furthering the interests of those concerned about LIS research. However, our independence means that we do not benefit from the larger organisational infrastructure which helps to publicise and sustain many professional groups.

There was considerable discussion around 'what constitutes information research?'. It is very much more difficult to define our area of interest although most other professional groups face the same challenge. However, there was a concern that we had focused rather too much upon libraries rather than information. This raised questions as to whether the Group should change its name.

Our membership, and the spread of interests on the LIRG Committee, is very orientated towards academic libraries. We have tended to have poor links to other LIS research groups/organisations and had difficulties drawing upon and disseminating ideas being developed in related fields. This has fostered parochialism and a sense of loss of direction.

It was felt that the research environment had changed dramatically over the last twenty years. The BLRDD was no longer the only funder of LIS research and other Government agencies had a stake in information and telematics research.

The following are the main conclusions and strategy which emerged.

Aims of the group

LIRG aims to raise the profile and awareness of information research by:

- influencing its direction
- promoting the dissemination of sound research methodology and results
- assisting in the development of emerging researchers
- enabling networking between researchers

Membership

LIRG seeks to draw its membership from those with identified interests in research activities:

- Practitioners engaged on internal R&D projects
- Funded researchers
- Students - esp those studying for postgraduate awards/PhD workers
- Teachers
- Information consultants
- Users of LIS research (including policy makers and practitioners)

Where LIRG has a role

- Promote legitimate research methodologies
- Raise profile of research in LIS community
- Publicise LIS research opportunities
- Provide guidance on obtaining research funds
- Facilitate networking with other researchers
- Disseminate previous research
- Provide current awareness/'hot links' to research
- Influence direction of LIS research

Library and Information Research News (**LIRN**)

- One of the key personal membership benefits
- Major vehicle for facilitating networking between members
- **LIRN** important in keeping LIRG financially sound

Strategy

- Content to reflect aims of the Group
- Emphasis on **LIRN** as a newsletter rather than professional journal
- Increase immediacy and currency of **LIRN**
- Encourage and commission articles
- Maintain reviews of publications relevant to LIS researchers

- Increase news content
    - News about members and activities
    - Alerting to articles of interest
    - Link with electronic format to disseminate up-to-date news?
- Include possibilities for networking
    - Lists of research/research programmes
    - Funding sources
    - E-mail addresses for contacts
- Move towards increasing frequency from 3 to 4 times p.a.
- Establish editorial board
- Emphasis upon developing content before altering format
- No change in title for the time being

Courses and Events

- Build upon work of the Short Courses Group

Strategy

- Establish annual series of research methods courses
- Arrange workshops/clinics/seminars within a regional framework
- Organise one-off topical national meetings

Networking

- Communication is essential to the LIS research community
- Networking is the key to an active membership
- Networking would provide much added value to personal LIRG membership

Strategy

- Develop mentoring and support structures for new researchers
- Develop directory of members and their interests
- Use e-mail to commuicate to LIRG members (LIRG Mailbase List)
- Use LIRN as a vehicle for networking
- Regional networking

LIRG Prizes and Awards

- Maintain and build upon existing package of prizes and awards

Strategy

- LIRG Student Prizes: wider involvement in judging and seek sponsorship
- Maintain Elsevier/LIRG Research Award
- Review future of Daphne Clark Award

Publicity and Marketing

- Need for greater prominence in the LIS community
- LIRG needs a distinct image as a professional group
- Need to increase % of LIS research community who are LIRG members

Strategy

- Make more of publicity opportunities for LIRG
    Press releases on major events
    LIRG display board for conferences etc.
- Construct LIRG Web Pages

Administrative infrastructure

- Employ paid help (LIRG Administrative Officer)
- Establish LIRG Working Groups

    - Committee members and other LIRG members
    - Initially founded in the following areas:
        LIRN (Editorial Board)
        Electronic Communication
        Courses
        Mentoring of new researchers

Key principles

- Evolution rather than relaunch
- Build links with other professional organisations in the UK and elsewhere
- Build up personal membership
- Seek an active personal membership
- Encourage networking between members

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