Letters

If we didn't have it - we would have to invent it: the value of LIRG

The discussion paper circulated to members in October 1995 has provoked some thought and the following ideas concerning future developments. When notice of renewal of annual subscriptions is received my usual response is to write a cheque without thinking - but when the question is posed - is there still a role for LIRG - then the old brain cells start ticking over. There is nothing like putting an organization under some possible threat - however mild - to start members of that organization reacting. And hopefully others will be joining in the debate.

Twenty years ago library and information research was really getting off the ground. I suspect that this period recorded the greatest amount of activity funded by the BLRDD. The research centres were in place, other major projects were in progress, some cross-fertilization of methods was occurring. The general state of the economy was such that funding for publicly funded library and information services was healthier than that of today. The British Library was dreaming about its splendid new building in London. IT was having an impact upon access to information, and what emerged as the WWW was but a gleam in the eyes of a group of research students at UCL. At that time research funding was reasonably secure, the Public Library Research Group was active and both LIRG and the PLRG were working to bridge the gap between research and practice, and practice and research. The numbers of students taking research degrees, particularly at the doctoral level was still small and the explosion in the numbers of masters dissertation had yet to take place. LIRG filled a gap in bringing researchers together, and<u>LIRN</u> replaced the useful but modest earlier publication produced by Edward Reid-Smith.

But conditions have changed - the numbers of students and practitioners engaged in research and developed have expanded. It is easier to count the numbers of theses and dissertations produced each year in the UK, than it is to count the numbers of in-house research and developments projects carried out within services. The latter has grown partly due to an acknowledgement of the value of R & D, but also, I suspect, because of the need to prove accountability. Much more information is gathered, analyzed, synthesized and reported, albeit in internal documents. Developments in technology have made it easier and cheaper to communicate with other researchers wherever they are based, and access to information has in many ways, improved. So many achievements have been made that LIRG might consider whether it has a role still.

I suspect that if we did not have LIRG we would need to invent it. One reason would be to provide a mechanism for those engaged in research to have a network of people who understand about research - the possibilities, the opportunities, the frustration. A second would be as a lobbying organization, particularly as cuts take place in important sources of funding - and this is being

written as cuts have been indicated yet again in the BLRDD budget. A third reason is that there is still much to be done in the area of developing and using a range of methods to study theoretical issues and questions of practice within the ILS field. The list could continue - there is a number of good reasons.

But questions need to be asked to understand whether the current membership is appropriate, and whether the activities are those that members might need. The size of the membership is much smaller than the numbers of people engaged in research in the LIS field in the UK. For this reason the income will not be large and the work of LIRG will be carried out on a voluntary basis, probably subsidized by some organizations in one way or another. The potential membership includes researchers based overseas, particularly higher degree students. They may only join initially for their period of study, but hopefully would find LIRG an organization with which they would wish to be affiliated. This pool is large, and although students today have a very limited income, an attractive package might draw in larger numbers. A membership charge which separates the unwaged, the research assistants on lower incomes, practitioners, and institutions might help expand the income. There is also the question as to whether the word 'library' ought to be dropped in order to encourage membership from a wider group of information researchers. This might bring benefits in achieving better cross-fertilization of methodology. But for some this might be unacceptable.

LIRN is a readable and informative serial and fills a niche, but information exchange using electronic means would encourage new members both in the UK and overseas.
The seminars and workshops organized by LIRG have been useful in training researchers, and passing on the experience of longer standing researchers. Today, however, even a workshop with a small fee can be too high when transport costs are added. LIRG could experiment with some video conferences, or perhaps videotape the seminars for those who cannot attend. It is not quite the same to view a tape, but if you live in an isolated location, it is better than having no access to the programme.

Should it remain independent? I think so - unless it can get itself affiliated to the IIS, the LA and other relevant bodies and hence act as a link between them. Politically this is unlikely. Staying as an organization in its own right means that it would not be hampered by bureaucracy. If running LIRG becomes a problem it might be that some academic departments could provide assistance with secretariat responsibility for a given period of time.

In the time in which it has been operating there have been a number of achievements which include the gaining of sponsorship for prizes. I am not sure that asking the members about their views will provide anything but support. We really need to get publicity out to potential members and determine whether there is a market for the organization. There is still a need to raise the quality of research, to encourage the use of new methods, to bridge the gap between research and practice and act as a watchdog. If LIRG does not do this - who will? And just a final word of thanks to those who have spent time editing LIRN, carrying out the various administrative tasks, attending committees etc.

Patricia Layzell Ward
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Comments on LIRG Strategy Paper

1. **Is there still a role for LIRG?**
    I am sure there is. I recently spoke to a University Medical Librarians' Group seminar on "Evidence based practice" and there was strong support for following the health professions in carrying out more research and using results of others' research more effectively. Dissemination was seen as a major problem - Internet services being developed under the eLib programme e.g. the Ariadne electronic magazine for librarians, are potential solutions. Is LIRG cooperating on this?

    As more students leave initial professional education having done research methods courses, many with Masters degrees including a dissertation, then we must surely be raising the general awareness of the importance of research in the LIS profession.

2. **Mission**
    I think it remains valid. There may need to be attention on **how** objectives are achieved.

3. **Meaning of research**
    I cannot see an alternative term to use in the name of the group, but we need to put more emphasis on "evidence based practice" which encompasses practitioner "projects".

    Maybe a new subtitle - LIRG : the national group for all concerned with improving LIS through research and investigation.

4. **Collaboration**
    As a committee member of another group linked to a professional body, we experienced difficulty in recruiting members outside the main body's membership, despite the publicity. Better to collaborate over joint activities, exchange of news and information via newsletters, exchange of committee membership. Most LIRG members will already be members of professional groups - use this for joint seminars/workshops e.g. with the Public Librarians Group.

5. **21st Century**
    We need a WWW presence, via existing services like LIS-LINK. This is now read world-wide.

6/7. **Membership**
    Agree on need for survey. This might form a student project? Membership is good value for money. Is it worth an insert mailing with <u>Inform</u> and <u>LAR</u>?

8. **Constitution**
    Reason for imbalance lies in context of librarians working in Higher Education where status is enhanced by personal and library wide research activity. FOLACL/BL are commissioning a small project into what research PLs need and want. We have just registered a research student, (Deborah Goodall - already a published researcher) who will investigate PL research needs and use.

9. **Benefits**
    You can never please all the people all of the time! We need a range of activities.

<u>LIRN</u> - I would be very sorry to see this become a research journal. There are plenty of those. The advantage of <u>LIRN</u> is brief, accessible articles, which authors can produce quickly to disseminate information to the library/information community. It provides a needed service, if we can expand readership. **NB** Readership is much wider than membership - mine circulates throughout my department. It is "news" in the sense of bringing research in progress and recently completed to the attention of practitioners.

LIRG Seminars - as with any meetings, problem is cost and time to travel. Keeping costs down is important, and in sympathy with mission of group if it is to promote research activities and link researchers. Unique role is to bring together active and potentially active "researchers". If membership increased, perhaps local contacts could attract more activity. Need to continue to balance London with alternative venues.

Prizes - accept problems outlined but they support the mission of the group and attract attention and publicity. Could you not involve members other than committee in adjudication, rather as BLRDD send proposals to referees with clear guidelines?

10. **Level of activity**

Using experience of UKOLUG, it would probably have become a victim of its own success - (being chair was almost a full-time job!) if we had not developed a business plan which included use of an administrator (Christine Baker) paid pro-rata for her services. She is an exceptional, highly committed individual, but in the current climate of cut backs and pressure on resources in libraries, you cannot go on expecting committee members to do a second job.

Professor Joan Day
University of Northumbria at Newcastle

News

Information in support of teaching and learning strategies - Research Award

The Elsevier/LIRG Research Award has been given to David Allen of Sheffield University's Department of Information Studies to illustrate the ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) are transforming the way they provide information for teaching and learning and investigate the links between the transformations and any strategies developed. The Award was made at the AGM of the Library and Information Research Group on 20th March.

The development of information strategies at the instigation of the Higher Education Funding Councils and the Joint Information Systems Committee has addressed the areas of management information and the redefinition of roles and boundaries within the institutions. A driving factor in strategy development is the competitive advantage that can be gained or sustained. There also is a growing awareness that innovative use of communications and IT can transform the ways in which HEIs function. It is the competitive and transformational aspects of information for teaching and learning that the research will address.

David Allen is a lecturer in the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, teaching in the area of information systems, management, modelling and strategic planning. He is a member of Claremont Systems, a University consultancy on information strategies and has researched and published extensively on information systems and information strategies.

The Elsevier Science Publishers/Library and Information Research Group Research Award was launched in 1990. It is designed to encourage research and innovation in library and information science, and is made on the basis of proposals submitted by practitioners and others in the field. It is intended that encouragement will be given to research directed at improving the accessibility, retrievability and usefulness of information. The Award is made annually with a closing date in October each year.

Update on the Library and Information Commission

During the last few months, the Commission has been working on its aims, objectives and priorities. It has also formally responded to a number of key policy documents, including the House of Lords enquiry on the Information Superhighway, the Department for Education and Employment's Lifetime Learning, Oftel's Universal Telecommunications Services, besides a number of documents issued by the DTI and the European Commission. A communications strategy is also being developed, to include a Web site, and responses to policy documents will feature amongst items

to be put up. In response to an urgent request from DNH in December, the Commission funded a survey of UK public library access to Internet, which was carried out by UKOLN. It was felt that DNH would find such data useful for the preparation of Virginia Bottomley's December Statement, which was an official response to the DNH/Aslib <u>Public Library Review.</u> We await with interest the policy paper to be produced by DNH soon.

Commission Sub-Committees

The memberships of its two sub-committees, on research and on international issues have now ratified by the Secretary of State. Because much Commission business will be conducted through these two sub-committees, the Commission will then be properly up and running. Committee chairs are Professor Mel Collier (De Montfort University) for Research, and Derek Law (King's College London) for International. The Research Sub-Committee comprises the following: John Lancaster (Librarian, University of Wales College of Medicine); Ian McGowan (Librarian, National Library of Scotland); Michael Breaks (Librarian, Heriot-Watt University); Norman Russell (Queen's University of Belfast); Bob McKee (Library and Information Commission and Assistant Chief Executive of Solihull MBC); Judith Elkin (Library and Information Commission and Head of School of Information Studies, University of Central England); Mark Wood (Library and Information Commission and Editor-in-Chief of Reuters); Julia Neuberger (Library and Information Commission); Nigel Macartney (Director of BLRDD); Joan Day (Head of Department of Library and Information Management, University of Northumbria); Martin Dudley (Research Manager, Hertfordshire Libraries); John Muskett (Principal of Wakefield College). In addition it is hoped to appoint a representative of the cable industry.

Commission activities

Chairman Matthew Evans has been travelling around the country attending and speaking at a variety of events, and in April will attend the SCONUL conference, to be held in Reading, and the LIPLINC conference (Durham). Executive Secretary Stuart Brewer has also been out and about, and had the job of summing up and looking into the future following the DNH/LINC seminar on regional issues in library cooperation, held in York (9-10 February). Friday 9 February must go down in history as a date when virtually none of the Great and Good were available, since all were either en route to York or to Heathrow, venue of the networking conference, funded by BLRDD and organized by UKOLN. (I know because I tried unsuccessfully to contact them!).

Duncan Wilson of DNH Libraries Division stayed for the duration of the York seminar, an indication of DNH's interest in regional issues, and perhaps a sign that this will form part of the promised policy paper. Stuart surmised the consensus at York to be in favour of strengthening regional library services rather than developing LIPs or setting up new bodies, and he identified quite a few new functions which such agencies could take on, including EU projects and marketing and promotion of LIS in the region. BLRDD is likely to be asked to fund an urgent feasibility study on the concept and practicalities of regional development agencies. No doubt many organizations would be interested in the outcome, including DNH, LINC and the Commission of course.

As <u>LIRN</u> went to press, we learned of Stuart's resignation. We await news of his successor.

BAILER makes plea for BLRDD and DfEE bursaries

Lislink has been dominated recently by a debate about the librarian's image, to the fascination of some and annoyance of others, some of whom have left the list in high dudgeon. Yet others, like me, have tried to exercise discipline by looking mainly at Worthy But Dull messages, with a finger poised above the delete button. But something quite striking came up recently - two press releases from BAILER about the funding cuts to BLRDD and to the number of DfEE postgraduate bursaries in LIS.

BAILER Chair Tom Wilson links this with the Department of Trade and Industry's much-trumpeted Information Society Initiative, launched on 13 February, pointing out the discrepancy within Government of appearing to support the Information Society on one hand, but on the other reducing support at a crucial time for the very activities which can contribute to the development of the IS in this country. The accusing finger is pointed at DNH, the ultimate funder of BLRDD, which "has no conception of the significance of the agency for the needs of the Information Society, and probably little interest". BAILER then suggests that BLRDD should be located within a Department of relevance to Government and linked with the IS Initiative.

For the same reason the 10% cut in postgraduate bursaries is criticized. "A policy that equates progress with technology without the strategies to provide the people to support and develop the information applications is not so much a policy as grasping at straws... We can have little confidence that anything of significance for the UK will emerge out of ill-considered and uncoordinated Ministerial actions".

It will be interesting to see what response BAILER gets to these strongly worded missives...

Personal Information Management tools

This was another interesting topic to crop up on lislink recently, partly in response to the massive amounts of email to plough through these days, especially if the recipient is on several discussion lists. (Incidentally, I wonder how many LIS professionals in this country are on the ISPO (Information Society Project Office) list, which specializes in erudite and/or earnest exchanges about such topics as the use of the English language on the Internet and the role of the small firm in the Information Society). Notwithstanding that digression, one of the issues to be raised within this discussion is the evidence that librarians do not read the research literature and apply research findings, a topic now being explored at the Robert Gordon University. (An article on this research will appear in a future issue of LIRN). Professor Tom Wilson (again!) makes the point that LIS people are no different from other professionals in this respect; for example social workers and GPs do not keep as up to date as they might, sometimes with dangerous results as far as the latter are concerned.

Tom feels that one of the problems is the declining number of research librarians within institutions, whose job it would be to read the literature and work out if and how to apply the ideas. Another list contributor had suggested that the reason research was not applied was because it was irrelevant, but Tom felt a more deep-seated problem to be the difficulty of convincing the organization that such findings should be implemented, and of the consequent organizational change such applications would cause.

This is one of the few lislink discussions to cover LIS research, so it will be interesting to see how it develops and whether any consensus is reached.

European Commission Committee for Research, Science and Technology

Early this year the Library and Information Commission responded to a request from CREST (the European Commission's Committee for Research, Science and Technology) for input to a Survey of national research and development policies in the Member States in the Libraries Sector. This Survey will feed into a report on the coordination of national policies and programmes in the light of discussion last June on the EC's <u>Achieving coordination through cooperation.</u> Visions of directives on straight bananas spring to mind on reading such statements as "A review of such activities would be very useful not only to focus better our EU level actions but also to assess more precisely the value of the Libraries sector actions in the Member States and their potential for multiplier effects". Although we understand from the DTI that it would not be the intention of the EC to start telling Member States what to do vis a vis their research programmes, this exercise does flag up a very real possibility that a steer and/or constraints could emerge from this direction.

This is obviously an issue of interest to <u>LIRN</u> readers, so I will keep you posted. In the event it was quite tricky compiling the document, since the UK LIS research scene is in a state of flux, with a new regime at BLRDD and the Library and Information Commission now being responsible for UK LIS research strategy. My response covered BLRDD, the Commission, the Electronic Libraries Programme, ESRC (which has underway at Oxford a big project on social consequences of the Information Superhighway), and future coordination of research. The latter topic has been a bee in my bonnet for some time, since I have always felt proper contact and coordination of activities between the bodies involved (BLRDD, EC DG13, JISC, ESRC) to be at the best tenuous.

It is a pity we were unaware in December 1994 of CREST's intention to run this exercise, since BLRDD then held a seminar on European LIS R&D policy, which concluded, not surprisingly, that the research scene in most of Europe is very fragmented, with several organizations in most Member States responsible for policy. Other coordination problems identified were: national culture and identity versus international bureaucracy; need for coordination <u>within</u> countries as a precursor; inadequate funding; language barriers; and last but certainly not least, different interpretations of what is meant by research and by library and information science.

Since CREST had asked for suggestions on how coordination might be achieved, we suggested that since there are probably no more than about 30 significant LIS research funding bodies within the EU the Commission could bring them together for a constructive dialogue. It will be interesting to see what emerges from CREST's deliberations...

It goes without saying that if any readers have views on this or any other topic raised here, I would be very pleased to receive them.

New Chairman for the British Library

As the British Library moves into even more "challenging" times, following cuts to its budget last November, the Department of National Heritage has announced that Dr John Ashworth will take over from Sir Anthony Kenny as chairman of the British Library Board. Dr Ashworth, Director of

the London School of Economics and Political Science since October 1990, takes up the reins on September 1, for a period of five years.

Bouquet for BLRDD

At the recent launch of the British Library's Health Care Information Service Margaret Haines, NHS Library Adviser, indirectly complimented the Department for its work in the health area: "The British Library's support of research on health libraries in the UK surpasses all other funders. We must recognize the contribution this has made to improving the delivery of information to clinicians and ultimately the effectiveness of healthcare in the UK. Now the British Library is adding to its support of the health sector with an "enhanced" health care information service..."

This was a reference to BLRDD's support in this area, which began in 1992 with the "Cumberledge" seminars, chaired by Baroness Cumberledge, Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health. These three seminars, supported by BLRDD, brought together health care information professionals to discuss the current issues relating to the management of the knowledge base of healthcare in the UK, with a view to formulating a programme leading to more efficient and effective use of health care libraries and information services. The Department has also supported a number of other projects in this field, for example an investigation of information seeking activities amongst staff in general practices, and an examination of the relationship between libraries and the practice of nursing research. BLRDD has also just commissioned a review of health care information research, for publication by Bowker Saur.

New research grants

BLRDD has recently issued several new grants. Research into practice will investigate the extent to which research findings impact on practitioners' decisions, focusing on management, teachers and librarians in schools concerned with decisions about information skills development. It will be carried out by Dorothy Williams, Michael McConnell and Kay Wilson at the Robert Gordon University and it is hoped to have an article on this research in the next issue of LIRN. For further information email Dr Williams (d.williams@rgu.ac.uk).

Bob Usherwood at Sheffield's Department of Information Studies, is building on his considerable work in the public library area with a Social audit of public library and information services. At present there is no way of measuring the impact the public library has on its community. The project aims to investigate this impact but also to produce a tool whereby local library services may carry out their own assessments and thereby measure how far they achieve their social objectives. Such work is very timely, public libraries being under the spotlight following the DNH/Aslib Public Library Review, Borrowed Time, and other studies, not to mention the policy paper eagerly awaited from DNH. You can find out more by contacting Bob (r.usherwood@sheffield.ac.uk).

Still on public libraries, Public libraries, ethnic diversity and citizenship will study a range of issues concerning the public library in multi-ethnic and multicultural settings. For further information contact Professor R Burgess at the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research, University of Warwick (Tel. 01203 523523).

Children and IT in public libraries will investigate the current level of provision of IT for children in public libraries, providing case study evidence of good practice, indicating possible future

developments and producing guidelines for practitioners. The contact for this project is Debbie Denham at the University of Central England (debbie.denham@uce.ac.uk).

Professor John Feather (Loughborough University) is leading a new project on National preservation policy: a manual for libraries, archives and record offices. This work follows a 1993-94 project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which undertook a wide-ranging survey of preservation practices and policies in British libraries. The results will contribute to the development of a national preservation and retention policy. Further details can be obtained from John (j.p.feather@lut.ac.uk).

Measurement: a threat to survey quality

Anyone who uses questionnaires to obtain "factual" information needs to be aware that the data provided is not necessarily accurate. The latest Survey Methods Newsletter (Vol 15, No 2) reports on a seminar on measurement error in surveys. The seminar was part of the SCPR Survey Methods Centre series held in December 1994. Patrick Heady of OPCS reports on a study, the Census Validation Survey, which reveals that the number of rooms in homes was inaccurately reported in more than quarter of cases in the 1991 Census. Nick Moon of NOP Research describes an experiment to look at variability between those coding completed questionnaires prior to analysis. Susan Purdon of SCPR looked at objective and subjective measurements of dampness in a house condition survey. She compares the different assessments of "dampness" obtained through visual surveys by qualified surveyors and those obtained through meter readings. Surveyors' reports suffered from the difficulties of being able to observe thoroughly in a household survey. Interestingly, though, 29% of rooms considered to be damp on a visual inspection by surveyors were not found to be damp on a meter reading. The Newsletter is available from Social and Community Planning Research, 35 Northampton Sqaure, London EC1V 0AX and costs £15 per year for 3 issues. The activities of another centre, the Centre for Applied Social Studies, supported by ESRC, will be coordinated with those of SCPR. This Centre also produced a newsletter and anyone wanting to go on the mailing list could contact the Centre (email cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk).