

Research Reports

Current research at the School of Information and Media, the Robert Gordon University
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There are a number of research projects at present underway at the School of Information and Media in Aberdeen. The School, with an established portfolio of courses in information, library studies and publishing, has recently grown through the incorporation of communications and modern languages teaching staff. The growth of the School from 10 academic staff four years ago to a current position with approximately 50 academic and research staff, is reflected in a corresponding growth in research activity and in the range of research interests represented. New course development, in particular the Postgraduate Diploma/MSc in Information Analysis, has also fuelled the research effort. Following the last Research Assessment Exercise, a policy decision was taken to invest much of the funding achieved in the appointment of Research Assistants who could support the development of research initiatives in the School. The mix of research interests is reflected in the establishment of four research clusters, which seek to draw together staff working in broadly related areas, in order that they may share experience and develop best practice. These clusters focus on information management, information technology/information retrieval, education for information, and publishing and mediation of information. Some of the groups are large, boisterous and possibly hyperactive: others are smaller and more recently established. It might be interesting to ponder the most effective size and orientation of such groups for maximizing productivity and enhancing quality, but that is an issue for another day. This article briefly describes the activities and interests of each of the clusters.

Information management

The Information Management Group is a broad, diverse and active one. Under its ample banner, a number of areas of research interest may be found. A survey of business information needs and an audit of existing information sources in rural Grampian has recently been carried out with financial support from the Scottish Library and Information Council. Based upon an earlier pilot, this study has revealed some interesting findings, such as the high level of need for health and safety, European regulatory and financial information, but a correspondingly low level of use of existing information providing agencies. The ongoing study also seeks to shed light on the information versus advice debate in information service delivery.

The manner in which help desks have developed and their effective management as a tool for user support in IT services is presently under examination in a British Library funded project. There has been little research on help desks to date and a gratifyingly high level of interest has been expressed in the results of the study by a range of people, both those responsible for and end users of help desks. The results are expected to have some significance for converged library and information systems.

Another British Library funded project is investigating the implementation of the Public Information Relay in public libraries in the United Kingdom. The Relay is a European Union funded initiative which aims to get information about the workings of the European Union across to the general public. The project hopes to identify issues, concerns and best practice in the provision of such a service. As the United Kingdom

is the first member state to establish a Public Information Relay, the results are likely to be of interest across Europe. A PhD student has also embarked on related research on European Union information policy, its historical development and implementation and the impact of LIS lobby groups on the policy making process.

In a third British Library funded study the feasibility of providing online information to the oil industry through cable networks is considered. Although the project is not yet complete, early indicators show that the oil industry has concerns about data security which might affect the marketability of such a service. This, however, flags a potentially very significant issue for information providers in overcoming such fears of insidious intruders and creating tools to secure internal data more effectively. A PhD project is also investigating the quality of online information with specific reference to business information.

The Group has also been involved in projects relating to environmental information. A Scotland-wide survey of public access to environmental information was carried out for the Scottish Office. Agents of the public appear to have no problems in finding the environmental information they need on major issues, but a distinct lack of locally relevant information was identified. Little or no evidence was found of motivation for groups or organizations to network, largely due to a lack of resources, although benefits might accrue to the public if networking were to take place.

Again in the environmental sphere, the School developed promotional material for UNESCO, designed to raise awareness amongst decision makers of the importance of environmental information. The School has subsequently developed an educational programme for decision makers and information professionals in developing countries, which will be distributed by UNESCO in Eastern Europe and Africa.

Health information research is another broad area of active interest for the Information Management Group, encompassing the fields of consumer health information, public health, information for purchasing and providing healthcare and continuing education in the areas of IT and information skills for healthcare workers. The group has almost completed a British Library funded project on drug information for patients and ongoing PhD research is looking at the information used by healthcare purchasers in Scotland.

Finally, a recently completed Nuffield Foundation funded project tested perceived gender differences in the oral communication of technical information. It found that there were indeed perceived differences and that, in the majority of instances, these perceptions allowed the accurate determination of the gender of the communicator. There are potential ramifications for education and technology in the results of this study and it is hoped that funding will be achieved for a follow up study which will look at the effect of gender on the **quality** of the oral communication of technical information.

Information technology / information retrieval

Within the School, identifiable and related areas of information technology and information retrieval were seen to have a close relationship and considerable potential for the formation of a cluster group. The group formed reflects expertise in both these broad areas from most teaching areas within the School's profile and is also involved in intra-cluster multidisciplinary research discussion with a view to interdisciplinary research within the University but primarily with the School of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Gray's School of Art and the Aberdeen Business School. The group has established collaborative links with the Centre for Land Use and Environmental Sciences at Aberdeen University and also Aberdeen Art Gallery, both partnerships resulting in funded research.

Primary areas of research include imaging, its potential and problems in retrieval and quality within databases; multimedia support in teaching and the creation and development of interactive multimedia packages in higher education; networking multimedia with emphasis on ISDN and the Internet; computer assisted learning packages for higher education teaching applications; information access for the visually impaired; online public access catalogues; expert systems; electronic journal for the arts; web-based image

maps etc. These areas support current MPhil/PhD work within the cluster's membership and are the foci for research submissions.

The group has been actively generating research proposals since its formation and three externally funded projects have been completed and published. Additional proposals submitted and under current consideration focus on education for libraries in electronic networking of information using multimedia, the transfer of multimedia skills to the business sector, the development of front-ends for multimedia student information support and the establishment of criteria for best practice in developing web-based local information resources.

In addition, conference papers, journal articles and externally funded lecture programmes have been produced/delivered by cluster members whose continuing enthusiasm and ability to reflect topical areas within a broad remit contribute to the rapidly establishing research ethos of the School.

Education for information

This cluster group is concerned with research into educating individuals for life in an information-rich society. The School has a long standing active research interest in the development of information skills within education, ie. developing skills in future end users and producers of information. Recent work has included an investigation of the impact of a hypertext programme on the development of information skills at FE level, a project which produced some significant insights into the learning strategies and styles of students. On a more practical note, the School worked with Glasgow University to develop this programme for use in Higher Education, under the TLTP initiative. A current PhD investigation is well on the way to producing interesting results about the information skills of student teachers and the way this impacts on their ability to develop information skills in their own pupils. The emerging results should be highly topical in the light of recent curriculum changes, which promote independent learning and a life skills approach to information handling from primary school upwards.

Information needs and management within the education sector were also dealt with in a recent project, funded by the Independent Television Commission, into flows of information relating to broadcast resources in schools. The educational sphere is further reflected in funded work being undertaken for the Scottish Office and the Scottish Consultative Committee on the Curriculum, into the development of key term glossaries and navigational maps for Scottish education.

The School has attracted a number of part-time PhD students in the area of information provision and information skills in schools, including for example a study of library provision in the independent sector and a new project examining learning in relation to IT resources.

The second main strand of research interests in the group is the development of professional information skills for practitioners. Springing from an initial interest in professional development in health sector librarians, a British Library funded project is set to start in 1996 which seeks to establish a framework of special librarian's transferable skills, with particular emphasis on health service and oil industry information professionals. This project is a direct result of feedback from a series of seminars on career development run with groups of librarians over the past year.

On a more international basis, in less developed regions, TEMPUS and SOROS funded work has focused on investigating the needs of Eastern Europe in updating professional library and information education and research to meet the challenges of a more integrated Europe. Funding is currently being pursued for a joint project looking at the development of education for librarianship and information studies in Latin America.

Publishing and mediation of information

This research group is concerned with the processes and practice in publishing and mediation of information. This group represents interests in the School for a number of years, eg the impact of mass media on information flow, as well as newer interest areas emerging from staff connected with the School's Publishing Studies courses. The group has a number of small projects including, for example, a survey on the acquisition by public and academic libraries of the output of Scottish publishers, an investigation of the relative shelf life of hard and paperback books and a project with the Northern College of Education into how children's reading skills may be affected by aspects of typography. The group is also currently seeking support for an investigation of the portrayal of Scottish cultural identities in the media. An interesting PhD study, nearing completion, has been looking at the handling of environmental information by news media, primarily at the local level. The research should provide a useful model of how information undergoes change in the process of its mediation by news reporters.

Although the School has not yet received large scale funding in the area, a major new interest for staff is that of electronic publishing, the focus for current development work in the Publishing Studies courses. This is an area of common interest to a new multidisciplinary cluster group which has formed within the University, bringing together the research interests of staff from information, design, and computing backgrounds.

Perhaps particularly germane to this article is a PhD, currently in its final stages, which is examining the causes, frequency and impact of alleged excessive publication of research results in scholarly journals. Although it might be a topical subject over the next few months until the results of the next Research Assessment Exercise are published and digested, the results of this research will probably not be available until 1997.

This has necessarily been a very superficial taste of what is going on in Aberdeen. Further information about any of the projects described above are available from the School of Information and Media, the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

UNNDERPIN at St. George's Hospital, Morpeth : a case study of library service provision and user needs in a climate of change

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UNNDERPIN (University of Northumbria at Newcastle Development of and Research into the Provision of Information to Nurses, and nurse educators) has been an 8 month study jointly funded and undertaken by the Information Services Department and Department of Information and Library Management from the University of Northumbria, and the Bede, Newcastle and Northumbria College of Health Studies, which is also now part of the University of Northumbria.

The general aim of UNNDERPIN has been to undertake an examination of library and information services in a climate of change where user information needs are changing and demanding changed services to meet those needs, in order to support patient care and clinical developments. A picture has been built up of individual users' information use, needs, problem areas and possible solutions.

Against the background of change in health information provision (its move into higher education; the implementation of Care in the Community; the withdrawal of conventional library services and the increasing use of electronic information) the project has examined :

- library services currently available;