Franchising courses, library resources: the view from both sides

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Introduction

The provision of higher education through franchised courses has increased rapidly in recent years. Such courses are usually based at relatively small colleges which have libraries designed to support further, rather than higher, education. At a time when university libraries are having difficulties supporting their own students, it is not surprising to find that the franchise situation, where students have to rely on much smaller libraries stocked for lower level courses, is a cause for concern. The impact of franchised courses on library and information services from both the franchiser and franchisee perspective is currently being examined by the British Library Research and Development Department funded project: Library Support for Franchised Courses in Higher Education. The following discussion presents some of the findings of two national surveys - one of libraries in FE institutions and one of libraries in HE institutions - examining the theory and practice of the provision of library support for franchised courses in higher education.

A snapshot of franchising activities in colleges and universities

Almost half of the 156 colleges were involved in franchising activities with only a single HE institution. A further third were involved with two HE institutions. Few colleges had arrangements with more than three HE institutions. The 40 universities in the sample had been involved in franchising courses to other institutions for various amounts of time but for the majority it was a relatively new venture. About a third had been involved for only one or two years and about another third had been involved for three or four years. Where figures were available 34 franchised courses to 200 local FE colleges, and 22 to a total of 113 other FE colleges in the UK.

Almost three-quarters of university respondents were aware of written policy statements or guidelines relating to the development of franchising by the university. But in only 18 cases of the 27 was there reference to library and information services provision to support such courses. As for the development of HE provision within the colleges, well over half of the sample had some sort of written statement. But only 55 colleges went on to indicate that these documents considered library and information services provision to support such courses. Again, the extent of consideration varied and the most common scenario was that library and information services are considered "implicitly, not explicitly".

University librarians and franchised courses

The franchising process was broken down into stages and respondents were asked to indicate when and how they were involved. All 40 university respondents gave information about their involvement with pre-validation preparations. Seventeen respondents were involved frequently, six occasionally, five rarely and 12 never. This proved to be a reliable indicator for the level of involvement in later stages of the franchising process. Of the 17 who were involved frequently, two-thirds were involved on a formal basis. Most of this group had contact with college library staff in preparation for the validation event and all of them were involved to some extent in assessing the library and information resources of the franchised college. Establishing early

contact and a good working relationship is vital if the franchising process is to be successful, but there were as many approaches as institutions:

"There is a comparison of print/non-print holdings indicated on reading lists etc; staffing levels, budget commitment and perceived growth. Above all we consider whether the student experience will be satisfactory." This information is fed into the validation process by "verbal reports during the panel meeting."

"There is a visit following receipt of course documentation. Assessment is based on knowledge and instinct." This information is then fed into the validation process "directly by a written report from the Head of Learning Resources."

As far as college librarians are concerned, they were asked if they had any contact with university library staff in preparation for this meeting. About a third said 'yes'; a third said 'sometimes'; and just over a third said 'no'. At best contact was "mutually beneficial" with college librarians reporting "the university library staff were cooperative and supportive". At worst they complained of a lack of interest: "contact with the University Librarian was, and is, wholly our own idea and was not required as part of the franchising arrangements. The university couldn't care less about library facilities here - the validation visit never got further than a peek through the library door! It is a purely financial exercise on their part".

For the 17 university librarians who were frequently involved in pre-validation preparation 13 were then regularly and formally involved in the validation procedure. Eight of these found this level of involvement to be very useful and five found it reasonably useful.

Following a successful validation each of the 17 university libraries had some form of on-going liaison between university library and college library staff. It was thought that liaison, usually visits or meeting, is useful for college staff in that "college staff can see the type of support available in the University and University library staff can help with any problems which may arise with support in the College," and also that the "exchange of experience is useful in identifying where demands outstrip the ability of the colleges to meet them and this is useful for college librarians in making resource claims." It was also recognized that close links could help avoid problems in the future for students: "we aim to assist College Librarians in providing appropriate services and resources and to ensure that students are prepared to cope with using the University Library, which is usually larger and less able to offer a personal service than the College Library."

There were also advantages for the University in maintaining links: "it allows the articulation and protection of standards, and is politically very useful"; "it is useful in developing personal contacts, advice on stock selection, reaching an understanding as to limits on university provision"; and "we can check on progress, identify problems and solutions, maintain professional links." One respondent particularly noted: "we also learn from the initiative shown by librarians with small budgets."

The college library's involvement in the franchising process

It would appear that college librarians are most likely to be involved with franchised courses during pre-validation preparations, (about a third were frequently involved and a further third were occasionally involved), and particularly during the validation event (getting on for one half of the sample were frequently involved and about a further quarter were occasionally involved). The

level of involvement would appear to decline following validation.

The lowest level of involvement was at the course planning stage. Not surprisingly, formal involvement is highest during the validation event. However, this good practice would appear to be outweighed by more unsatisfactory arrangements demonstrating limited or only informal involvement, for example, with staff "just expected to be on hand when validators visit." Although statistically the level of involvement in pre-validation preparation seemed high there were too many disappointing comments which demonstrate a reliance on personal links and the 'grapevine' within the college: " ... although we were pump-primed for our first intake we were not involved in other aspects of course planning, validation etc., at least only very informally and at my request through badgering specific individuals ... no system is in place whereby the library is officially consulted at any stage so giving any input is an uphill struggle."

Generally, college librarians were most likely to take an informal role during the course planning stage and especially during post-validation, and this is where practical problems, which could be resolved through personal contact, begin to have an impact.

What would improve the librarian's role in the franchising process?

Both university and college librarians wanted more regular involvement at an earlier stage, particularly at the planning stage. College librarians also wanted better relationships with teaching staff and management within the college and a structured and consistent level of funding, besides closer links between college and university library staff. The university can help the college library make a stronger case within the college and the value of this is not to be underestimated. Many librarians felt that the university did not fully appreciate the library implication of franchised courses, either at the colleges or at the university and where the university library was adequately involved there was a feeling that in some cases it did not carry enough weight.

Day to day relationships

The day to day relationships between the libraries were examined by assessing what level of services/support were made available and received in practice. No services/support were available to a franchised college library from seven of the university libraries. The remaining 33 respondents indicated that one or more of the following list of services were available. For the college libraries the figures illustrate links with 242 institutions. In some cases no services were provided whatsoever.

Services/Support	Universities offering	Colleges receiving
Individual teaching staff borrowing rights	84%	49%
Individual student borrowing rights	60%	46%
Free inter-library loans	15%	17%
Reduced rate inter-library loans	15%	6%
Free photocopying eg journal articles to add to College stock	9%	10%

Reduced rate photocopying eg journal articles to add to College stock	6%	7%
Free photocopying eg journal articles for staff/student's own use	0%	4%
Reduced rate photocopying eg journal articles for staff/student's own use	6%	6%
Computer link to university library catalogue	39%	11%
Microfiche copy of university library catalogue	30%	12%
CD-ROM copy of university library catalogue	6%	0%
Advice from subject librarians	75%	45%
Regular updating of reading lists	9%	10%

Day to day relationships between the FE and HE libraries: the university perspective

A few respondents made comments on how these arrangements work in practice. One person simply said "badly." Another felt that "contact is variable depending on individual college library staff. There are perceived problems with access rights, often a psychological problem as students feel second-class citizens. This is sometimes a problem if course documentation or admissions material provided by college or university schools/departments does not make their position and relationship with the university clear." Appropriate library induction could improve the situation here and whilst the figure seems relatively high, 16 institutions claimed to offer induction for franchised students, but in practice this was often limited to a single visit or to special cases: "certain courses and at a local college only." College librarians have complained about just receiving 'lip service' from their franchising universities[1] and this survey confirms that there is evidently a gap between what services are offered and what services are actively marketed by university libraries to their franchising partners.

It became apparent that, where no guidelines existed regarding appropriate support, particularly referring to access to stock, libraries tended to fall back on 'external borrower' status or make up regulations on a more or less ad hoc basis. Both are unsatisfactory, for example, external borrower status invariably implies fewer loans and no inter-library loans, and in practice no access to short loan collections. In some cases reference access only was allowed. What is worrying is that in some cases access levels also varied between courses and institutions. For example, regarding teaching staff, one library offered "access for local colleges only but a separate deal can be struck for borrowing", another restricted access to "reference facilities only whilst teaching on the course", and in another library use was "limited to course development phase only."

For students the situation was equally confusing: "everything except interlibrary loans"; "if a fee is agreed, the full service. If not, reference only service"; "external borrower rights only (limited number of 'normal' loans, ie no short loans"; "the students are registered as university students and

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[1] For more details see Goodall, D. Franchised courses in higher education: implications for the library manager. Library Management vol 15, no 2 1994 pp27-33.

therefore have rights identical to those of on-campus students. This includes inter-library loans and the short loan collection"; "some students have full membership, others 'external' membership only depending on what was negotiated through the faculty."

University respondents were also asked to comment on the amount of use made of the university library by students on franchised courses. Perceived use tended to be very low, even where initial induction sessions took place. In some cases this was because use was not encouraged, or because only reference facilities were available as noted above. In others it was a matter of distance: "use is mixed depending on location of college." It was difficult to identify franchised students as a specific user group unless they were creating problems, for example: "difficulties arise when local colleges with poor resources have franchised courses", or unless staff were aware of particular demands: " ... specific use was made of the CD-ROMs following a student exercise given to university and franchise HNC students."

Day to day relationships between the FE and HE libraries: the college perspective

Distance is clearly a problem and affects both relationships and practical use: "the differing relationships are governed by physical distance. The first two institutions are part of our own catchment area, the third is 50 miles away, the fourth 120 miles away."

Some links are clearly good: "we find the university library staff always very helpful in providing loans, photocopies and general advice." Some colleges take an understanding attitude: "we do not demand too much - only where we know they will be definitely able to help. Theoretically we have to pay but we have not done so so far."

Others are more critical: "our relationship with the university has been difficult and patchy. We are unable to get any photocopies done because they say there is no time available and we have just managed to persuade them to lend the odd book. Access is a real problem for our staff and students due to the distance and costs of travel to our franchising institution, so cooperation with interlibrary loans and free photocopies is, in my opinion, an essential service our students are not getting. Advice is available if we specifically ask for an appointment to go and visit the university but no help has ever been offered. Promises were made of regular visits and liaison but again, despite frequent reminders, such links have never been established."

A particular problem is borrowing rights, or rather the lack of them. Within the colleges HE students tend to have the same borrowing rights as other library users. Only 21 respondents specifically noted that HE students were allowed to borrow more books than FE students, or have greater access via inter-library loans and the short loan collection. Even so, in some cases the number of books allowed still seemed barely adequate for degree level study, with one respondent noting that HE students "can borrow five books instead of three."

The impact of franchised HE courses on library provision

The impact of franchised HE courses on university library provision for franchised students had not significantly changed the way the library is organized, nor the range and style of services.

In contrast college librarians noted a number of changes including:

Opening hours - usually to allow (longer) evening opening but also to enable opening on Saturday mornings.

Staffing - to cover the longer opening hours. There were 11 examples of professional staff being appointed and in at least four cases this was the first time that a professional librarian had been employed by the college.

Major changes also included the introduction of computerized cataloguing/circulation systems and new or better facilities such as improved study areas. Most dramatically one college noted that "a new library has been built and a qualified librarian appointed for the first time."

Stock - extended and enriched to cater for higher level study.

Services - such as short loan collections and inter-library loans.

Greater and varied use of information technology.

Problems encountered with the university library's involvement in franchised courses

Problems centred on the institution's approach to the franchising process, and criticisms were made of senior management ("their unwillingness to grasp implications of library support required in franchised colleges"), teaching staff ("too ready to offer all kings of library services without realising the impact on their own university students"), as well as students ("a major problem is franchised students' perception of rights to access the full range of university library facilities and services.") Librarians were also conscious on the demands being made on their own time by the university, noting "it can be time consuming with little perceived return for own staff."

On a day to day basis some respondents struggled in dealing with franchised students not necessarily in terms of numbers but because "the few students who do use the library from franchise colleges often take up a disproportionate amount of staff time because the assignments they have been set at the colleges are unrealistic and take no account of resources available, or because demand was unpredictable - occasional, unannounced, heavy demand for information for project work" - and time consuming to satisfy - "students from franchised institutions often need more basic and individual help in using the library."

Problems encountered in extending the college library service to HE level

About a third of the respondents mentioned funding, which caused a number of difficulties as well as that of not being able to buy enough resources. Only 41% of the sample had a specific budget allocated to the provision of higher education materials and services within the library. The comments indicated the diversity and variability of funding for franchised provision. Typical problems were that " ... often funds are available for start-up costs, but not for recurrent expenditure" and "as HE funding comes from the same budget I've had to cut more generalized provision to allow for HE provision." There are few examples of funding being influenced in a long-term way. More generally costs tend to be absorbed by the overall library budget.

The next most problematic area was stock. Difficulties here centred on the expense of texts compared to FE, and the expense of providing multiple copies and purchasing specialist resources for one-off assignments. Journals were "a particular problem as so many validations insist on

increasing periodicals holdings ... much more expensive than those we've been accustomed to using, renewals are a problem if the recurrent funding is not forthcoming especially if there is little evidence of actual use." Some college librarians felt they did not get sufficient help from teaching staff in selecting stock. This was compounded by the fact that many items on the university reading lists were out of print and/or out of date.

Benefits of involvement with HE work

Eleven university librarians felt that the experience was not beneficial. One commented "within our set student numbers some are taught and study off our premises and theoretically this reduces pressure". More positive comments focused on staff development, professional contacts, networking, and achieving a raised profile within the university.

In contract virtually all of the college librarians respondents could answer 'yes'! About a quarter mentioned an improved level of stock, and particularly that the wider range of stock is of use to other students. A further quarter commented along the lines that being involved with HE work had raised the status of the library within the college. This has practical advantages, for example, "we now have a much higher profile with senior management and our need for more stock and premises has now been recognized." Also, about a quarter of the sample felt there were benefits in dealing with more mature students on higher level courses, and of having contact with other institutions. For example, "students are more motivated (and teachers) which makes more demands on the library but also increases job interest/satisfaction."

Some concluding thoughts

It is interesting to see that the problems cited by college librarians tend to be practical issues, such as stock management, whilst the benefits are perceived to be more of a managerial or professional nature. This is a critical issue and one which underlies many of the findings of the survey of FE libraries. Indeed, the key to successfully developing provision for franchised courses in FE libraries seems to be an ability to, concurrently, acquire resources and achieve status.

The university librarians themselves also complained of a lack of understanding by their own senior management about the impact of HE courses both in the college and university libraries, and yet, compared to college librarians, few appeared to be actively trying to improve the situation by raising their own profile. One of the most significant findings in the survey of HE libraries is that the provision for franchised courses had not significantly changed the way in which the university library is organized, nor the range and style of services. In practice efforts seem to be concentrated in encouraging the FE libraries to provide a comparable student experience by duplicating reading lists, setting up short loan collections and subscribing to journals etc. Not enough thought is being put into developing value-added services and yet one of the accepted rationales of franchising is to increase access to higher education for students who are geographically remote from such an institution. That such developments may have implications for the provision of library and information resources seems to have been overlooked by many of the franchising institutions.