

# Reviews

Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Group: Report [The Follett Report] 1993, £5. Available from External Relations Department, HEFCE, Northavon House, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS6 1QD; Tel 0272-317436; Fax 0272-317463.

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The word that springs to mind in attempting a review of the Follett report is "balance". This is indeed what the Review Group responsible for this Report has sought: "aware of the inevitable tensions between a radical forward looking approach on the one hand, and the need to maintain a healthy realism and proper allowance for diversity on the other". There are few surprises, but what is proposed is done so clearly and imaginatively.

After presenting some current "background factors" of the university library scene, the Report considers information provision in higher education institutions under four broad headings:

- The management of library and information services in the institution;
- Libraries and teaching provision;
- Libraries and the researcher;
- Information technology.

The whole Report must surely be regarded as required reading for anyone concerned with information provision and management within the higher education sector (defined as "the business of libraries" in Para 69). I am going to focus here on the areas in which I have a particular interest: those indicated in last two headings.

Before doing so, however, the fact that the first recommendation is that "every institution should develop an information strategy setting out how it proposes to meet the needs of those working within it, and the place of the library in meeting those needs" should be noted. Professionals in this field will need no reminding that information provision is not synonymous with IT, but those outside it may. Readers may recall a significant report of ten years ago - it *seemed* significant at the time at any rate - which asked in its preface that "more attention to be paid to the I of IT".

According to the Report, "the primary concern which led to the Review related to library provision for taught course students". I recall, several decades ago in my Dip.Ed. studies, browsing Newman's Idea of a university. Memory grows furtive, but I seem to remember that his idea centred around scholarship and research. Presumably librarians were the handmaidens (a non-PC notion if you like) of such pursuits. So, despite this primary concern "it quickly became clear ... that there was also a need to consider the role of libraries in the support of research ...". The Report emphasized the uneven nature of provision across the newly unified higher education sector, compounded by the increasing selectivity of funding by research councils and price inflation in printed sources. Nevertheless, "institutional



libraries must continue to be responsible for ensuring that the basic library needs of their researchers are met". There is clearly a dilemma here for library administration: most libraries have made little or no explicit distinction in operational (or budgetary) terms between provision for teaching and research. While recognizing this, the Review Group recommends that "the principal library and information needs of research staff and students should be provided largely within the unencumbered grant for research provided by funding the councils". In other words, HEIs should be left to distribute funding as they feel best.

The remaining recommendations for this area largely amount to proposals to optimize the use of existing resources. The first is concerned with specialized research collections for the humanities. It suggests that a small proportion (up to £10 million a year) of the funds currently allocated for research through the main funding council grant should be reserved for allocation to support certain specialized research library collections and provision. This would enable support to be targeted at specialized centres on the understanding that the facilities provided would be equally available to staff and research students from throughout the HE system. The centres themselves would have to make a bid for such funding.

The universities of Cambridge and Oxford currently receive £1.1 million a year each in view of their position as "hosts" of legal deposit libraries. The Group accepts the continuation of this support but proposes it be conditional "on clear agreement that the facilities supported in this way at the two libraries concerned should be available without cost to all bona fide research staff and research students in the UK". Don't hold your breath on this one.

Finally, and as an extension of the above humanities-related strategy to other subject areas, the Report recommends developing networks and groupings of institutions based on particular centres to support particular subjects. "It would include integrated acquisition and disposals policies, and investment in document supply, electronic database and catalogue facilities which would make library research facilities accessible on a regional and national basis". It would also involve discussions "at the highest level" with a formidable list of councils, commissions and national libraries - a sort of UNISIST revisited for those of you old enough to remember. To achieve the full benefits of such a notion much investment in information technology would be required.

IT has the potential radically to alter the way in which information is provided and used and these opportunities should be "embraced with enthusiasm". The Report includes some interesting and, in my view, plausible scenarios of the virtual library of the future. Appropriately, discussion of IT developments begins with copyright issues. The Report points out that confrontational approaches between the supply and demand sides have not in the past been successful and are unlikely to be so in the future. It enjoins the HE sector to approach the problems realistically and looks forward to a constructive dialogue between the two sides.

The current inequalities in access to academic networks are well recognized here. Institutions will need pervasive internal networks if they are to take full advantage of the networked information services that will be available over SuperJANET. "It is important that *all* [my italics] institutions be able to benefit from SuperJANET". The following recommendations are made in this context:

- institutions should review their internal network as part of their overall information strategy;
- the funding councils should support a study to assess the cost to non-UFC institutions (eg the former polys) of bringing their networking facilities up to standard;
- SuperJANET should be extended to Northern Ireland;
- the funding councils should collaborate in securing access to advanced data and telecommunications networks for the HE sector as a whole.

Further recommendations are made on support for the development of navigational tools, of standards for communications and data transfer and of electronic document delivery (£1 million a year over three years for the latter). A further £500,000 grant is proposed for a few large scale demonstration projects to convert into electronically-readable form some backruns of journals. A more forward-looking recommendation is for £2 million over three years to contribute to the development of a limited



number of refereed electronic journals. An imaginative codicil to this is that "the funding councils should make it clear that refereed articles published in this way will be accepted in the next Research Assessment Exercise on the same basis as those appearing in printed journals".

A welcome recommendation is for support to promote the creation of digitized texts that can be customized to individual requirements (£1 million a year over three years). The basic idea here is to obtain software and systems to be mounted on university hosts, to provide a framework within which on-demand publications could be generated to support taught courses. This pilot service would also tackle the problems of access controls and copyright requirements.

Not surprisingly there is support given to the initiatives already in train, through JISC, on dataset acquisition. Access costs have "generally and rightly been borne by libraries" but they will need extra money to support the "mass provision of information services".

All these emergences and convergences "provide many opportunities to enhance the role of librarians" but some may be "daunted by such a challenge". "Enthusiasms can be dampened where relevant training is not provided" and a programme (£1 million over three years) "for librarians and information scientists working in academic libraries" is recommended. (Members of the IIS will be relieved to see this recognition of their existence in the closing paragraphs of the Report.)

All the above, and much more, is considered in the Report. Were its analyses and proposals to be accepted and implemented there would be much upheaval and a requirement for a great deal of extra money. We must now wait - undaunted and undampened - the deliberations and the verdict of the funding councils and the universities.

## **Reference**

Cabinet Office, Information Technology Panel. Making a business of information: a survey of new opportunities. London: HMSO, 1983.

## **Gibb, Forbes (Editor)**

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This new journal aims to reflect the changing interests of information scientists and information managers, which are broadening out from the more conventional or traditional aspects of information and text retrieval to embrace new documentary forms, information systems services and user environments. Its scope as stated by the editor, Forbes Gibb, provides some insight into the rationale for the choice of title. The journal is to cover "all of the key aspects of the document life-cycle, and the technologies which are used to support these: document creation, acquisition, conversion, analysis, storage, retrieval, publishing, distribution, archiving and destruction". (The concept of document destruction as opposed to preservation or conservation is not trivial in the context of the current explosion of electronic documents.) The journal is also concerned with "strategies for delivering effective and innovative systems, and with the organizational and external factors which can affect their design and implementation".

The first two issues contain papers based on selected presentations of the IIS Text Retrieval Conference held in October 1992. In 1993, this annual conference changed its name to Document and Text Management '93. It is intended that the Journal will continue to publish the conference papers but not exclusively. Whilst this may be one way to bring the conference paper to a wider audience, there is potential for this journal and it should be able to stand on its own. Moreover a refereed journal holds greater value for academics, especially if they are to ensure that their publication output gets full recognition in the Higher Education Funding Council's research assessment exercise!

The current contributions deal with retrieval in relation to a diversity of techniques and perspectives including: natural language processing; linguistic aids; query analysis; query expansion; multilingual aspects; multimedia and navigation in hypertext. Both academic and commercial developers are well represented.

An impressive, predominantly European editorial board has been created, bringing together a wide range of expertise from the different information sectors and related disciplines.

The need to bridge the gap between research, development and practice in this core area of information science has never been greater. This initiative by the Institute and Taylor Graham should be welcomed. It is now up to potential authors to respond accordingly and the subscriptions should follow.