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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this special issue of Library and Information Research News on the UK Higher Education Funding Councils' Electronic Libraries Programme (e-lib). The issue consists of papers and reports from a one-day seminar organised by the Library & Information Research Group held in September 1997 at the University of Hertfordshire.

The focus of the seminar was upon the evaluation of the e-lib programme. The programme has been supported by the UK higher education funding councils with funding of over £15m, led to over 60 separate projects, and has involved a considerable investment of time, effort, and commitment by a broad range of people across the UK higher education sector. The seminar sought to look at the impact of the e-lib programme and how the long term effects of the programme and of the individual projects could be measured.

Four papers were presented at the seminar. The Tavistock Institute were commissioned by the Funding Councils' Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to oversee the evaluation of the 60+ projects funded under the e-lib programme. We were fortunate in having John Kelleher of the Tavistock Institute to describe the framework for evaluation of projects, the processes adopted, and the lessons learnt from an exercise focussed upon capturing and disseminating learning. The report here provides just a taste of a thought provoking paper which touched not only the evaluation of e-lib but linked this to wider issues of innovation and change in higher education.

Andrew Green, who was then Director of Library and Information Services at the University of Wales, Swansea looked at the relevance of the e-lib programme to practitioners. Andrew's paper describes the approach adopted by e-lib where involvement by HE institutions has been encouraged through the funding of a large number of projects often undertaken by consortia. This has been coupled with a focus upon the development of working products and an emphasis upon evaluation and dissemination. But to what extent has the programme influenced practitioners? Andrew describes the views of

colleagues at Swansea on the impact of e-lib to them and where that impact has been felt. The multiplicity of projects and the failure to connect with other relevant IT developments in higher education may have reduced the effectiveness of the programme. However, he concludes that the e-lib programme will be shown to have been a major influence on the evolution of professional practice and culture in academic libraries. The paper by Graham Walton and Catherine Edwards of the IMPEL2 project based at the University of Northumbria looks at the paradoxes of the changes that we are experiencing in higher education as a result of the evolving technological and educational environment in which we operate. Drawing upon their experience and feedback from the IMPEL2 project, they identify five areas where there are paradoxes or contradictory characteristics'; access, IT and information skills, the organisation, collaboration, and professional identity. For example, the electronic revolution opens up worldwide access to information - but only if you have the hardware and can overcome the problems of system unreliability. Or, another example, LIS (and computing services) have an enhanced role in universities as greater emphasis is placed upon student centred learning, but political influence often rests with schools and faculties which leads to difficulties in formulating and implementing centralised strategies for IT and information provision. The implication of these different perceptions of reality is that LIS staff have a role to play in influencing the political and educational agenda by presenting a positive interpretation of how IT developments can benefit the HE community. The e-lib programme has helped practitioners in this goal by supporting the more rapid development of electronic services of demonstratable value to the academic community. The e-lib programme has also enabled LIS professionals to become involved in the numerous projects funded under the programme and to develop new skills and knowledge which will be relevant well after the e-lib programme finishes. However, the full benefit of the e-lib programme to the HE community will only be realised if we reflect on the experience gained and we disseminate more widely the lessons learnt.

The final paper was presented by Professor Charles Oppenheim who was then based at the International Institute for Electronic Library Research at De Montfort University. Charles' paper seeks to put the e-lib programme into context of other research into electronic libraries. He considers that four countries lead the field of electronic library research: Japan, the USA, Netherlands, and the UK - but that Denmark is the only country with a clear national strategy for electronic library research. He then goes on to identify six areas that need to be addressed before the electronic library becomes a reality: technical issues, legal issues, economic issues, psychological issues, and educational issues. Although the e-lib programme can be shown to have been very successful, there are still some significant issues to be addressed through a programme of fundamental research. In particular, work is needed on rights management technologies, copyright and other legal issues, user interface design and evaluation, cultural change issues, indexing and quality assessment of Internet resources.

The presentations by our speakers sparked off stimulating and fruitful discussions in the discussion groups. All four papers had identified the importance of the impact of the e-lib programme on cultural change within the HE community. So, it was interesting that Discussion Group A, which looked at the impact of e-lib on information users, felt that most of the impact so far had been the library community. The group also wondered whether market research amongst users would have been useful before the programme or was the programme a market research exercise for the hybrid library?

I would like to take the opportunity to thank our speakers for their presentations on the day and for providing us with copies of their papers for this issue of Library and Information Research News. Special thanks go to Sacha Shaw of Goldsmiths College who jointly organised the event and co-edited these papers. I hope that you find these papers as of much interest as the participants at the seminar and we apologise to you and to the speakers for the lengthy delay in their publication.

Philip Payne  
Chair