Developing access to major national libraries

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Introduction

The mission of the University of Sheffield is to maintain and further develop its position among the research universities in the United Kingdom, and to deliver high quality teaching in a research-led environment. All the efforts of my own institution, indeed of every research university in the UK, are currently focused upon the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise; under this scheme the research of every department in every university will be assessed and rated on a seven point scale, with the results published nationally. At stake is not only each department’s research reputation, but also its future financial viability: research income from the national Higher Education Funding Councils will be geared directly to each university’s departmental research ratings. Thus, where a department scores "1" or "2" (at the bottom of the ratings) it will win no research income for its university; for departments scoring from "3" to "7", the research income will rise accordingly. In the case of our own medical school, for example, an increase of only one point on the research ratings scale would win an additional one million pounds sterling per year.

The research ratings will be based almost entirely upon the published research output of each department; the assessments will be made by national panels of subject experts drawn from the academic community. Whatever one may think about the application of market place principles to research funding, it is clear that the universities understand the rules and must play the game as competitively as possible. We are now experiencing the new phenomenon of "academic inflation", as universities compete with each other to attract the best researchers - as well as retaining their own top
players. The objective is to have the best possible researchers in place on the 1996 research assessment census date; this "strategic investment" in new players fuels demand and pushes up salary costs, as universities compete to maximise research funding from central sources - "tactical investment" is probably a more accurate description.

Another major factor determining the level of a university’s research income is the volume of postgraduate work being undertaken - in effect, the number of research students registered for Ph.D.s. Here again, the universities compete strenuously for the best research students and a larger share of the limited national funding available to support them. An increasing number of universities, my own included, now offer fee-waived Ph.D. studentships together with maintenance grants, in order to maximise the financial return and bolster the 1996 research ratings.

Over the next five years we shall see the emergence of the UK’s "research superleague" universities - a group of twelve to fifteen who between them will attract the bulk of UK research income, distance themselves from the rest of the field and, as the proportion of their own funding from government declines, become increasingly independent. Although competing vigorously with each other, as a group they will dominate the UK research scene for the foreseeable future.

Within our universities too we see the effects of these new market forces: highly rated departments which bring in the largest income, demand a larger share of the institutional cake; weaker departments, under pressure to improve their research ratings, face the real possibility of redundancy if they are not "paying their way".

**Pressures upon libraries**

Over the past five years rapidly expanded undergraduate student numbers have been the most visible sign of pressure upon library services, with overcrowding, queues for services, highly vocal demand for extended opening hours, and too many students chasing too few books. The Director’s immediate preoccupation with this "supermark-
et end of the business tends to distract attention from the University's central mission to maintain and develop excellence in research.

The imperatives of increasing departmental research ratings requires our libraries to respond more effectively at a time when the collections on our shelves represent an ever-decreasing proportion of the world's publishing output and inflation in the costs of books and periodicals continues to accelerate away from our ability to pay.

Concentrating institutional research effort upon a limited range of areas of research excellence ("research clusters" at Sheffield) should allow us to shape our collections and information services accordingly, thus making more effective use of limited resources. At Sheffield, however, our success in recruiting ever more research students - in every subject area - tugs us in the opposite direction: each new dissertation tends to increase the diversity of research, to explore interdisciplinary boundaries, to unearth relevant information from unfamiliar sources not represented on our own shelves. This, in turn, places a heavy burden upon our Subject Librarians, in terms of user education programmes, getting to grips with unfamiliar interdisciplinary subject areas, and re-skilling in the access-to-information age. Never has the need to look beyond our own resources been more pressing.

Strategies for co-operation in supporting research

In December 1993 the Follett Report, which reviewed higher education library provision in the UK, brought library issues to the top of the academic agenda. Effective progress has been made in taking forward a range of practical initiatives, particularly in the application of Information Technology.

Most recently, in May 1995, a new Follett-based report, A National/Regional Strategy for Library Provision for Researchers, has been published: among its nineteen recommendations is a call for much greater involvement of the British Library and the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales in supporting the national research effort. This is a recommendation of particular interest to us at Sheffield; in early 1994, as we
sought to develop new research support strategies, we identified the British Library as a key research resource of major importance to us. We are among the UK’s heaviest users of the British Library Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa, with over 30,000 requests per year. We also send academic and research staff to Boston Spa on a free bus, known as "BL3eBUS", every fortnight. But rather than limiting our use of the British Library to inter-lending and document delivery services, we saw its massive resources of collections, technological development and subject expertise as of great strategic potential to our future research support requirements. We also saw that through a special relationship between Sheffield and the British Library, we would be in a stronger position to develop more effective links with other great national libraries.

In developing our relationship with the British Library, we were very much aware also of the desirability from their point of view of having a special relationship with a major research-led university; in particular, they needed a test-bed for developing new links with research institutions in the UK.

The University of Sheffield - British Library Concordat
Following negotiations at senior level, the Chairman of the British Library Board and our Vice-Chancellor, signed a special "Concordat" in May 1994. The areas and projects included within the co-operative programme were:

1. Digitisation of archival and other materials in the collections.
2. Improving and developing research use of the collections, through postgraduate training and joint research projects.
3. Library and information studies projects.
4. Job familiarisation and exchange of experience between the library staffs of the University and the British Library.
5. Remote learning and the provision of materials and services to remote users.
6. Exhibitions and public relations projects.
7. Research and development.
The Concordat will run for three years in the first instance, concentrating particularly upon the Arts and Social Sciences. We decided to concentrate upon three programme areas in the first year:

**Digitisation and text-based research projects**

Colleagues from the British Library Manuscripts Division have worked closely with academic and research staff, on the technical aspects of existing Sheffield projects, such as the Hartlib and Canterbury Tales Projects. British Library subject specialists now undertake joint supervision of Sheffield research students. Two further joint research projects are under development.

**Developing research use of British Library collections**

Training in research methodology and the identification of information sources is a prerequisite for all Sheffield research students before they undertake their doctoral programme. During 1994-95, four postgraduate training seminars were jointly run by Sheffield academics, our own Subject Librarians and British Library subject specialists in the fields of Biblical Studies, Medieval History, Russian and Slavonic Studies, and Newspapers. The Russian and Slavonic Studies Seminar brought to Sheffield not only the British Library’s Slavonic and Polish Curators, but also subject specialists from the Russian State Library in Moscow, and the Russian National Library in St Petersburg: we see this level of support as an ideal model for future postgraduate training, particularly in the humanities. These seminars attracted postgraduate students from other universities in the region, thus strengthening our own regional position, as well as giving British Library staff the opportunity of direct involvement in supporting the research process. A further seminar series has been planned for 1995-96.

Following the popularity of the free bus service to Boston Spa we are now considering how to offer a free bus or train service to the British Library in London - without finding ourselves subsidising Christmas shopping trips...
Job exchanges

To date two Sheffield librarians, our Official Publications and Geography subject specialists, have had short-term attachments to the British Library. Reciprocal visits by British Library staff are planned for 1995-96.

From the Sheffield perspective, the Concordat has yielded particular benefits within the limited range of development areas planned for its first year. Our working relationship with British Library staff has blossomed and given Sheffield academic and library colleagues a much greater appreciation of the British Library’s potential strength in supporting our research effort.

For the British Library, the Concordat serves as an important pilot study for its planned "British Library University Research Support Service" (BLURSS). Through its second and third years both parties will place increasing emphasis upon the regional dimension of the Concordat: Sheffield wishes to consolidate its position as the leading research university in the region; the British Library plan to use the Sheffield development as a model for a limited number of other regional "BLURSS" centres. Recently cited by the British Academy as an example of "best practice" in collaborative support for research, the Concordat exemplifies in practical terms much of what has been recommended in the National/Regional Strategy report published last month.

The University of Sheffield - Russian State (ex-Lenin) Library Agreement

Using the British Library Concordat as a model, we signed an analogous agreement with the Russian State Library (RSL) in February 1995. Incorporating the principles of "privileged access" for Sheffield researchers, participation by RSL staff in postgraduate training in Sheffield, and technical co-operation in text-and-image-based research projects, the Agreement also offers RSL staff professional development opportunities in the Library and the Department of Information Studies at Sheffield. The success of the Russian and Slavonic Studies Seminar at Sheffield has convinced us of the importance of developing strategic links not only with our own national
library, but also with other major national libraries around the world. We are currently seeking special funding to take this initiative forward.

Conclusion

In developing these strategic partnerships with the British Library and the Russian State Library, we have involved our academic colleagues from the outset. Our guiding principle has been that while technical co-operation between libraries may be interesting for Librarians and in itself be a "good thing", it will only yield real benefits to the users of those libraries if it is focussed upon clearly defined research need and taken forward on a research and development project basis. It has been all the more important, therefore, for us to work closely with our own academic colleagues in defining their research (and research training) needs, as a prerequisite to developing effective strategic partnerships with these two great national libraries.

We see these partnerships not only as important new components in our own University's research support strategy, but also as an innovative model of developing access to the collections, scholarship and technical expertise of major national libraries.