Information strategies in UK University Libraries

John Arfield

Loughborough University of Technology
In December 1993 the UK funding councils for higher education published the report of the Joint Funding Councils’ Libraries Review Group, a report that has come to be known by the name of its chairman as the Follett report\(^1\). This report was the first major survey in nearly twenty years into library provision in higher education and contained a large number of recommendations on, among other things, buildings, information technology and library management. One recommendation, and the one I want to talk about today, was that, in the words of the summary, all institutions should: "develop a clear strategy for meeting the information needs of their students and staff".

It is worth pausing here a moment to comment on the use of the word "strategy". We now have in the UK and elsewhere a well-developed culture of strategic planning. This requires universities to produce institutional strategies, financial strategies, estates strategies, and information technology strategies; and now the Follett report has made the recommendation that the funding councils should specifically request an element on library and related services in the strategic planning information they require of universities, a recommendation that has been endorsed by the Funding Councils.

"Strategy" is a word which is now so commonplace in higher education, certainly in the UK, that it is easy to overlook the attitudes and thinking that lie behind it. In its modern application, of course, it is taken from management theorists who have stressed the need to think systematically about the operations of an organisation. In this discipline we consider those factors which, as far as we can tell, are likely to impinge on our business in the future: social, political, technological and economic trends of
which we must be aware and in relation to which we must position ourselves in order to gain maximum advantage - "competitive edge" in the jargon. This has the advantage of making us much more self-conscious about what we are doing, much more aware of the purposes and consequences of our actions. We then make choices and act in a way which is consistent with this position. We have a vision of the future, we mark out a plan which will take us from where we are now to where we wish to be. We can then measure our success against this plan and chart how far we succeed or fail in meeting our objectives. So the process is good for us; it produces efficient and effective organisations. But we are not the only ones to benefit from this process. We have said that a strategic plan gives us a measure that makes clear to us how well we succeed in meeting our objectives. It also makes this clear to others, including funding bodies, who are able to see what the universities intend and how far they are meeting their own stated objectives. This makes a strategy not a purely internal affair, but something which can - and will - be used to assess the quality of a university and to influence the funding available to it. So strategies are not to be undertaken lightly. They are potentially powerful political levers.

Now we have to add to the list of university strategies an information strategy. As public documents they can then be used in several ways. One illuminating example of this has recently emerged as a recommendation of the report of the Group on a National/Regional Strategy for Library Provision for Researchers, a group spawned from the main Follett review. This group has recommended that information strategies:

1. should require that institutions' information strategies provide detail on how the institutions intend to secure adequate access to library material for research in the various subject areas in which they claim to be active

2. should provide details of acquisitions and retentions policy, their policies on library collaboration with other institutions, and policies on access by researchers from outside the institution

3. and should be published in sufficient detail to enable other participants to form stable working relationships with them and, where appropriate, to share with them collection and retention responsibilities.
This is an interesting extension of the role of information strategies to the point where they form the basis of mutual agreements between institutions.

So you see information plans are good for libraries, they are good for universities, they are good for Funding Councils, and they are good for national policy for supporting research. Such all-encompassing documents are beginning to sound like rather baggy monsters. How will we recognise one of these beasts if we see one? The main difficulty we have at the moment, I think, is in having a clear view of what they are and what they look like. As one respondent to a recent survey commented: "We do not have an information policy as such, nor do we have a satisfactory definition of what an information policy is. There is a lot of talk about institutional information policies, but no-one has yet nailed their colours to the mast and defined what it encompasses and, more importantly, what it will achieve."

Firstly, what will it achieve? We've already noted what strategies in general are supposed to achieve. But what does Follett say will be achieved by an information strategy? Three benefits are adduced:

a. a clear statement of the aims and methods by which they are to be met will be available for both managers and users of the library.

b. this will help institutional management and teaching departments to ensure that the proportion of their recurrent budget which is assigned to the library will be sufficient to enable it to fulfil the roles required of it: in other words, the inputs required should be determined once the objectives and expected outputs of the library have been decided.

The report then goes on to add, in another paragraph, that a further advantage is that planning should foster closer and better relationships between those responsible for the planning and management of library and information services on the one hand, and those responsible for other aspects of institutional management on the other.

What does the report have to say on what an information strategy encompasses? What should it be about?
There are four factors which the Follett report says need to be taken into account: "developments in information technology, developments in the organisation of teaching and learning, and developments in research provision, as well as the organisational arrangements which govern the library's place in the institution".

These are the four key factors, the four key areas of change to which information strategies should respond. But what, more specifically, should they cover?

References to information strategies are to found scattered throughout the report, but it is chapter 4: "The management of library and information services in the institution" that has most to say on this subject. There we find that an information strategy should pay particular attention to:

1. defining the needs of the various groups of library users
2. performance measures and indicators
3. quality assurance and assessment
4. management of staff and physical resources.

The university should also decide who should be responsible for the delivery of information services and then the report goes on briefly to discuss convergence saying that it "considers that there are many advantages in organisational convergence between library and other support services".

The report then goes on to say that there are other areas to which attention must be paid (though not necessarily, presumably, particular attention) including, as examples: resource allocation; liaison in course design and planning; the role of the librarian; acquisitions and disposals policy.

At this point it is worth asking ourselves how closely work that has already been done measures up against these Follett recommendations.

In December last year the Standing Committee of National and University Libraries published "Working papers on information strategies". This is a compilation of
working documents, mostly produced for internal use, which gives a flavour of the state of the art in the latter part of last year.

There are documents from 13 universities, but 5 turn out to be, under closer examination, concerned with information technology rather than with the much broader information strategy. Many institutions already have an information technology policy, and it is not always evident that the difference between an information technology strategy and an information strategy is clearly appreciated. Even in my own University, where the distinction is frequently emphasised, discussions can all too easily centre on computer equipment.

In the Working Papers publication there were eight documents that could be considered information strategies, or notes and discussion documents relating to information strategies. If we list the 11 features that have been mentioned by Follett or the Group on Research Provision and also note the number of them which either cover the feature or at least refer to it as an issue to be dealt with, this is what we find:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Covered</th>
<th>Refer to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define needs of user group</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI's</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality assurance and assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of staff</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of physical resources</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for information services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource allocation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaison with teaching and learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to research material</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisitions and retention policy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access by outside researchers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now not too much should be made of the detail of this. But there is at least a strong indication that there is, as yet, no consistent pattern emerging about what an information strategy looks like and that there is very little relationship to the areas that are nominated by Follett. And at this point I would like to make a number of observations, largely based on experience at my own university.

The first is to suggest that there should be some serious thought given to what we mean by "information". Professionally we have been keen to include the word "information" alongside the word "libraries" in the titles of our schools of information and library studies, our Information and Library Services, and so on. In so doing we have been keen to show that our core skills are not restricted to the physical objects of books and journals that are conventionally thought of as the stuff of libraries, but have skills in organising and retrieving information from all sorts of sources in all sorts of places. But I suggest that this still has been thought of as basically the sort of information that was hitherto sought in books and journals. But there can now be a major shift in this perception due to developments in IT, and especially in networking. The ability to make data readily and widely available through a single delivery mechanism, or at least a closely related set of mechanisms, radically alters our horizons. Just think of all the different types of information that there are in a university: information for prospective students about courses, accommodation, food; information about student societies and activities; advice centres; careers centres; university regulations and administrative data; lecture notes, course packs. You can make your own list, and it will be a very long one. And that's only written information. How about the huge amounts of verbal information? Meetings, lectures, seminars. What about visual information of all sorts? The trouble with the word "information" is that it is almost boundless; in one sense, indeed, it can be said that there is very little in a university that is not, in one sense or other, to do with information. To be practical, decisions will have to be made as to what constitutes "information" for the purposes of the strategy. If the definition is cast too broadly then the strategy is in danger of being so shapeless and all-encompassing that it fails to achieve its purposes.
At the same time there are dangers in drawing the boundaries too narrowly. This is the predominant feature, I believe, in those strategies that have emerged so far. Up to quite recently written information has been produced and held quite separately in different parts of the University. Administrative data was confined to the Registry, the Finance Office and so on. The Publicity Office dealt with producing information about the University. The Careers Office held its own information. But now communications technology has opened up ways of making information from all these sources widely available over the campus and beyond through familiar and common interfaces. Thus the old barriers which locate information in various parts of the organisation are removed and new questions arise: questions of responsibility for information, compatibility and common standards, security, and access policies. To give one obvious example, the Library need no longer be merely a place to go when you need a book, it can become a service providing the support materials and information for teaching and learning. Or, to take another example, what happens to funding for the library, a central resource, when information is widely available through networks and services delivered directly to the user’s desk? The old comfortable framework no longer applies and we are posed with new questions of how the library fits into this different environment. The issue is much more than should or should not the library converge with the computing centre, and if so should it be operational or organisational convergence. The Follett report is too short-sighted, it seems to me, in this respect. The question that should be asked, and it is an extraordinarily difficult one, is what are the organisational structures that we need that best fit the information-rich environment in which teaching, learning and research will be taking place? It will be obvious that not only is this a very difficult question, it is also a highly charged political one since it involves the role of the University Librarian. In a way it is unfortunate that the Follett report gives such prominence to this issue in its discussion of information strategies since it does lend substance to the suspicion that any attempt by the Librarian to promote serious discussion on an information strategy is really a covert attempt by the Librarian to increase his or her power and influence. The feeling is only slightly exaggerated in this email message that circulated around the Staff Training and Development community some months ago: "Am I the only one
that is worried about the training and other staff implications of the Follett Report (you know, the one that says that Librarians should rule the world)."

There are parts of the Follett report which do appear to be special pleading for the Librarian. As we have seen, one area that is singled out for attention is the role of the librarian:

"...he or she is both a professional in his or her own right, and also the provider of a support service for those engaged in teaching and research. The librarian is responsible for managing one of the single most important services in the institution, and is well placed to provide a strategic view."

However much we may agree with this sentiment, statements like this can undermine progress right from the start. There is a school of thought that, recognising that the issues are much more fundamental and wide-ranging than purely the relations between the library and computing services, believes that it is better that the information strategy should not be handled by the Librarian at all. There is much weight to this argument, since in this wider review there are many more toes to be trodden on than just those of the Director of Computing Services. However, it is often the Librarian who has the clearest understanding of the importance of the issues and the vision for change.

So universities will have to give careful thought to the mechanisms they use, and the personnel they involve, in developing information strategies. Consultation of course there must be in open institutions like universities. To stand the greatest chance of success the strategy must be understood and "owned" - to use the jargon - by the whole university. In an endeavour to achieve this at Loughborough we sought to consult as widely as possible with academic colleagues as the draft was refined and revised. But I don't think my experience is unique in discovering that academic colleagues have other more pressing things on their minds. The only comment on our draft document in one school board meeting I attended was the question of whether the Library would be opening for longer in the evenings in the Summer vacation.
I felt that somehow they had missed the point! But what really matters is that the senior management of the university should understand the issues, and the importance of the issues. This is, of course, essentially a top-down approach, since university-wide strategies are central control mechanisms whose essence, in political terms, is to restrict the freedom of academic departments by insisting on compliance with centralised decisions. As such they potentially conflict with moves towards decentralised decision-making and devolved budgetary control.

Yet, if it can be very difficult to involve library users in the development of a strategy, it is essential that they should be involved in its implementation. User-centredness must be embodied in the strategy. This was something that featured prominently in the Follett list of requirements, but was noticeable for its absence in any of the draft strategies that have so far emerged. It is the second principle in the Loughborough draft strategy. It is easy to state the objective - meeting the information needs of staff and students; much less easy, though, to achieve it. Do we know what those needs are? We have become used to user-surveys in libraries. But there is very little experience as far as I am aware of surveying the information needs across the whole spectrum of university information. This will probably involve some sort of communications audit or other analysis of information flows. We have little understanding in this area, though some work is being done, including some work at Sheffield University which analysed the information needs of heads of academic departments.

But even if you have gone about it in a way which has got the backing of everyone involved, if you have written a strategy which fully addresses all the key issues, you have still got to put it into practice. There were two questions that were made at every presentation that I made on our draft strategy: what are the priority actions, and what are the cost implications? There is a good deal of justified scepticism about strategic plans. They are usually full of high-sounding rhetoric, worthy ambitions and bland and unexceptionable sentiments, but all too often they seem to be totally ignored in the actual business of running a university. The reality of resource allocation in
institutional politics is that strategic plans are often ignored or forgotten. So if they are to make a difference to the way a university handles its information needs there needs to be some effective link to action plans. The approach we have adopted at Loughborough is that the Information Strategy itself is quite brief, consisting essentially of eight principles, but there is an appendix to the strategic plan stating the actions which are seen as the most important steps that need to be taken. I have to say, though, that in our case there is no direct linkage between these actions, costed as they are, and the resources needed to meet them. At the very most all we can say is that the existence of the plan with the recommended actions, can be used as part of the case for funding. In a couple of cases we have been successful; in the others, not yet. The lesson is that to be effective there must be clear and effective linkages between the strategy and the funding needed to implement it. We have already noted that if information is viewed in the wide sense it cuts across all the traditional organisational divisions in an institution. It is these groupings that, in my university at least, and I think we are fairly typical, are still the funded units. There is not, and there probably cannot be, any single organisational unit which can be funded to implement the strategy.

In our case the strategy was developed by a small sub-group of our Information Services Committee, a committee which spans the Library, Computing Services and the Audio-Visual Service, chaired by the Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor. The three services represented each have their own budget. There is no budget for implementing the strategy. Each unit can use the strategy in its own case for funding, and there have been opportunities to bid collaboratively for non-recurrent funding. But the fact remains that there is no budget for implementing the strategy. An Information Strategy Implementation Working Group has been established but the only power it has is to recommend and attempt to wield influence. In the future we may have to consider radically different funding arrangements that link resources to outputs and programmes rather than organisational units.

The situation may be somewhat different where a university has merged - or converged - its information services into a single unit. Here there is a budgetary unit which can
at least implement an information strategy in its narrow sense. An information strategy can be translated into operational plans for a budgetary unit and funded accordingly. Yet even this structure does not often have the resources to implement strategy in the areas of teaching and learning, university publicity and, usually, administrative and student information. Simply because information is so all-pervading in a university's activity there is no obvious funding locus for it. Institutional strategies are essentially centralising documents, setting standards and goals centrally. Yet the funding units, in my university at least, remain the academic departments and faculties.

The development of information strategies provides an important opportunity for higher education institutions to rethink and redefine their approaches to a changing educational and technological environment. There is still a long way to go, but there is an opportunity, if we can grasp it, through successfully developing and implementing information strategies, to change the way in which information is exploited in higher education.

References