

The "Steady State" Library: Problems of Acquisition and Discarding in a Small University Library

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THE "STEADY STATE" LIBRARY: PROBLEMS OF ACQUISITION AND DISCARDING IN A SMALL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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Many of the things relating to the topic, that is, the steady state library, have already been touched upon by other speakers. I will therefore go over it as we see it in one small British library. I will mention the Atkinson report, which Prof. Evans has already alluded to. If any librarian is not familiar with this document it is available from Her Majesty's Stationery Office. The Atkinson Report has been the subject of many, and often ferocious, communications in almost every British library journal in the last few months. It is the report on capital provision for university libraries. It ostensibly deals with library buildings. It, of course, wishes to restrain the building of library buildings, presumably in the national, or somebody's interest. However, there are at least two librarians here from Great Britain who have already got new libraries out of it. It is a rather strange report on economics which can provide new libraries for some people.

Buried in the Atkinson Report is far more than a mere building question. It brings up the whole question of whether libraries, university libraries, and technological university libraries, in particular, can expect to grow almost ad infinitum. Some British university libraries have assumed that in the past, and I think it is true to say that even some of us in the technological libraries had the impression that sometime in our careers the same might happen to us too, although we were perhaps, being a rather cynical bunch, always slightly suspicious of the possibilities of infinite growth. We have even made noises in official quarters pointing out that some form of restriction on growth might be not only acceptable, but beneficial. Restriction on growth could lead, of course, to what has been the steady state, which in its most extreme case could mean that as one book came into your stock, another went out the other end. This is the sort of reductio ad absurdum that every librarian has seized upon, and all sorts of qualifications have been made to this idea of steady state, a library which has a certain number of volumes and is not likely to go much above that number. There can be, for example, the passing out of stock, either to regional stores, local institutional stores or, that catch-all for every library problem, the British Library. This is, in fact, a modification of the real steady state. I noticed that Mr. Tanzer mentioned the passing of books from the regional libraries to the central libraries. This is the type of solution which may be accepted.

The response to Atkinson, as we have learned to call it, has of course varied with the size of the library. In general, the smaller libraries have often welcomed it. They are like the Flan O'Brian statement where they have to keep the wolf from the door because if they are not careful they might get out. This, in fact, is what we are doing. We have lived with the problem, not of steady state, but of minimal growth for a long while. The Atkinson Report, while saying that we may not expand beyond a certain point, laid down by various norms, does allow growth for those libraries which are very small. Therefore, some of us have had hopes raised by the appearance of this document, which has some official power. It has been adopted by the University Grants Committee, which in Great Britain is the body which eventually decides who gets money. Therefore, its adoption by that body is of some importance to those of us who are interested in buildings and in what goes into them. In any case, small libraries have had to look at this before.

At Salford we decided to make a virtue of necessity and, in fact, to recognize that for us the Atkinson Report might promise an extension to our present building, which it does on paper, but not in bricks and mortar, and that we, being political animals, could well use this document to make clear to our colleagues of all sorts, in all sorts of groupings in the

university, what a library is about. We were not so much interested in beating Atkinson, which happened in some universities, but rather in using the fact that for the first time this question of how big a library should be has been raised in an official document. This could be used to drag out all sorts of points which could be used to our advantage. We have therefore used every possible opportunity which exists for us. We already have a fairly full teaching programme in the library, and I can assure you that everyone who hears from us gets some idea, not only of how to find his way through chemical abstracts, but also how a library ticks, and whether it can go on ticking louder and louder as it gets bigger. We have seized every opportunity to either get ourselves invited to meetings of departmental boards, which run departmental policy, or to make enough noise to assure that we could force our way in the door even if we were not a member. We have even got the Association of University Teachers, a trade union, and now, by heaven, a member of the Trade Union Commerce, to pass a resolution stating that they regard the existence of an adequate library as a central tool for the academic in his teaching and research. None of this is a direct link to Atkinson, but, in fact, if Atkinson had not come out, made a certain noise in the newspapers, got people asking questions and generally rolling around on the ground and punching each other about library matters, we probably would not have had the opportunity to make this point to our colleagues.

Inside the library of course it is rather a different matter. Acquisition must lead to discarding if you are to maintain a steady state. We have never been worried at Salford about discarding. We have just grown up with the British Library; each of us is on a fairly short lead at times, there is not much squabbling and we recognize them as part of our natural surroundings of our sort of librarianship. So discarding is quite easy. But, of course, as even the chairman of the University Grants Committee, a name which is uttered with either awe or cursing, by some university librarians has admitted, the problems of discarding library books begin the minute you decide to add a book to your stock. I suppose that in an ideal world, the moment that the book is used the last time even it would gently subside into dust, like a mummy whose case you have opened, and you would be rid of the problem forevermore. Unfortunately, this does not happen. Clearly we are starting our problems when we bring something in. If we make bad choices in the beginning we are going to have awful problems at the end. As I mentioned, the chairman of the UGC, a chemist, a lapsed chemist one might say, but a chemist at any rate, has said in public that he sees no reason why the university library should buy the masses of textbooks which appear, for example, on chemical thermodynamics because, as he says, they do not differ one from the other except in the examples. If you people would not buy the things you would not have the problem of shelves and shelves of old-fashioned textbooks on chemical thermodynamics. This is a point which maybe one could argue about, but he at least has got that message I think. So, we have had to face that withdrawal problem, and this leads straight away at the last moment to the assessment of use. Mr Eatwell, I think, will mention what has been done in one university about periodicals.

We are tackling things in somewhat the same way. We are also studying, to a higher degree than ever before, the actual use made of our stock, with the view towards ridding ourselves of material which does not earn its keep. We have found that even in this we have been able to attain closer contact with teachers and researchers than ever before, and also to make them understand something of the problems they are setting us if they suggest, as some of the poor souls do, that everyone of the class of fifty students is going to buy himself an obscure textbook which costs £25. They are just wrong. It is not going to happen this way. On this basis we can show them something of the use which is made of it and act accordingly. We have wanted of course to find easy criteria. We find, of course, that it is the local criteria that matters. It is the peculiarities of lecturers that matters. Therefore, we have to do this sort of work for ourselves by trying to assess use, by talking to people and finding out just what is happening. We were happier in this respect in the days when we were a technological university pure and simple. Now that fashionably we are moving into the social sciences and humanities, without of course losing our technological flavour we find ourselves up against a set of entirely different problems, which are arousing a whole lot of discussion. We have retired some stock to a sort of limbo, in which it is still available in the open shelves, but it is not part of the main stock. We want to see what happens, and we use some very crude criteria to do it.

My last point on this is as one large British university has said, "Yes, Atkinson is all very well, but I shall want 20 extra senior staff to do the withdrawals." If you do that there seems to be something wrong with the whole process. If we are to achieve steady state, if we have to or even if we want to keep ourselves a small, good library, there has to be something that can be done on a fairly mechanical basis. We cannot afford highly skilled academic staff to do the same job again which they may have done with the book selections.

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Over the past three decades, librarians have devoted a great deal of attention to assessment of the use made of books and journals, - Line and Sandison (1) included an exhaustive list of studies in their review of obsolescence and changes in the use of literature with time. The majority took their data from circulation records, which were readily available as far as books were concerned, as well as for journals where these were loaned. Sampling has often been used (e.g. Jain) (2) while studies carried out by MLLST such as those by Wood and Fowler (3,4) on biomedical and social science periodical literature had ample statistical case at hand.

Problems arise when an academic library wishes to review the use being made of its journals collection when these journals are on display on the open shelves, but not subject to any circulation procedures. Investigations have been carried out into specific subject areas where this purely reference element applies, - for example physics journals at M.I.T. (Chen) (5) and chemistry journals at the University of Surrey (Panton and Reuben) (6) In both these cases the procedures were explained, but little help is to be had from the literature when considering a full-scale, long-term survey of journal use.

It was such a full-scale study which had to be undertaken some years ago in the University of Surrey Library. Because of escalating journal subscription costs, it had become clear at that time that some reduction would have to be made in the 2800 titles currently taken. The percentage increase in Book Fund per annum was in no way matching increases in prices, and thus an excessive proportion of available funds was being taken to pay for existing subscriptions, to the detriment of book purchasing. In the circumstances it became difficult to add new journal titles, even when new university courses were introduced.

Journal use was decided on as the most satisfactory criterion in limiting expenditure, but because of the absence of statistics on which to base a survey, some reasonably painless method had to be found of assembling the necessary data. It was agreed that all titles must be surveyed, not merely a sample, and that to obtain any kind of accurate assessment, a short-term study would be of little value. A period of one calendar year was decided on, the process to continue through term and vacation alike.

Since no additional funds or staff were to be had, any tasks performed needed to fit easily into the routines of the Journals Section, which consisted at that time of one Assistant Librarian and three Library Assistants. The method chosen was to attach a paper slip to the cover of every incoming journal issue slips bore the heading - 'Survey of Journals Use', and included the request that users should write the date of each consultation. Current issues only were included in the scheme. Publicity was given to the survey and a start made in January, 1972. Journals assistants attached the slips, which were 6" x 4" in size and pre-gummed, at the same time that issues were recorded and ownership-stamped. Issues already on display needed special attention but this was a once-only task, and was easily fitted in. Care was taken to affix the slips by one edge only, so that vital information on the front cover should not be obscured. If the cover material prevented adhesion, stapling was used. Cost of stationery and printing (by the University Printing Unit) was met from current library funds.

It should be explained that in the University of Surrey Library current issues are displayed on the open shelves in two main areas, Science and Engineering on the one