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International Dateline — Higher Education in the UK

by Martin White (Principal Consultant, TFPL Ltd., London) <Martin.white@tfpl.com>

NB: British spelling has been retained. — KS

Even though I have been a frequent visitor to the United States for over twenty years, I continue to be overwhelmed at the scale of the universities, and the stock and facilities of academic libraries. The extent of the welcome that I have received in many of these libraries has given me at least a passing understanding of the opportunities and pressures of academic librarianship in the USA. However, at the Charleston Conference last year, I found myself trying to provide coffee-cup length summaries of the situation in the UK to librarians who had not had the opportunity to visit here. Their interest was in trying to understand the background to various initiatives, such as the Pilot Site Licence Initiative, within the context of the publicly-funded further education environment that we have in the UK.

I thought that ATG readers might therefore be interested in an overview of the way that universities are funded in the UK, and also in the scale and rate of development of their collections and services. I write this with a degree of trepidation, never having worked in a university library, but consultants have ways of overcoming such trepidation, or they would starve!

Further education in the UK

To begin at the beginning, children start school in the UK at five, attending what are called “primary” schools, moving on to “secondary” schools at the age of eleven. This is also the time when children can compete for places at our “public” schools, such as Winchester, Eton and Harrow, though confusingly these are in fact privately funded and are better referred to as independent schools. (Just why they are called public schools can wait for now.) After five years of secondary education, students take their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in a range of subjects. Quite a high percentage of students then go on to a Sixth Form College, or a College of Further Education, to take Advanced level (A-level) examinations after a further two years of study. (The process is slightly different in Scotland.) These are effectively the entrance examinations for universities, so most students are 17 or 18 by the time they enter a university for the first time. About one third of all children in England and Wales, and a higher percentage in Scotland, go on to further education beyond the age of 18, but not necessarily at university, a total student population of just under 2 million. At university most will spend three years reading (rather than majoring) for a first degree, and then possibly spend a further year reading for a Master’s degree, or three years for a Doctorate.

There are 89 universities in the UK, and in addition 19 colleges and institutes of education which have the power to award their own degrees. Then there are around thirty colleges of higher education which provide courses leading to a degree validated by a university. For the rest of this article, I will be dealing mainly with the university sector. Incidentally the number of universities increased sharply in 1992 as a number of polytechnics, funded by local authorities, obtained university status. These are often referred to (sometimes disparagingly) as “new” universities.

One other bit of the university jigsaw is that three universities, Oxford, Cambridge and London consist of individually managed colleges, each with their own library. In addition Oxford and Cambridge have central libraries (the Bodleian at Oxford) as core libraries and these libraries are also entitled to a copy of any book published in the UK under the Copyright Act.

The universities are self-governing, and independent of government, though the funding comes from the government. The funding is administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and associated organisations for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Students receive funding from their County Councils, but the level of funding depends on the income of their parents. Until last year there were no tuition fees, but these have now been introduced by the Labour Government at a level of £1,500, to the intense annoyance of students and parents. Most students take out special loans to cover the costs of their university education, which are repayable over the first few years of employment.

There is just one private university, the University of Buckingham. Finally it is important to mention the Open University, which provides an amazing array of degree and other courses managed through distance learning. There is quite close control over the quality of university education through the Quality Assurance Agency, and there is also a Research Assessment Exercise, which evaluates the research performance of each department in a university, and which has a significant impact on the ability of the department to attract students and research funds.

Libraries in UK universities

Enough of the background. On to the interesting bit. Student numbers in UK universities are around the 12,000 to 15,000 level, though there is quite a wide variation. The best source of information on library budgets is provided by the Library and Information Statistics Unit of the Department of Information and Library Studies, Loughborough University (http://info.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu/lisuhp.html) and I am grateful to the Director, David Spiller, for providing me with a copy of their latest report LISU Annual Library Statistics 1998 to form the basis for this article.

The total expenditure on university libraries in 1996-7 was just over £500 million. Of this total, 53% was on staff, 13% on books, 17% on periodicals and 17% on other items, such as binding, library management systems and online services. The expenditure per user (students and academic staff) was around £420 in the old universities and £310 in the new universities. This difference in spending is reversed when the percentage of total budget spent on libraries is examined, as in the case of the old universities it is 3.2% and in the new universities 4.3%. Aggregating both categories together the total book stock is 85 million items, and there are over 3,000 professional staff.

Analysing the data sets for trends is very difficult, mainly because of changes in definitions, and the wide variations between individual universities. For example, the four largest universities, Oxford, Cambridge, London and Manchester, have 25% of the student population, but account for 33% of total expenditure.

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library expenditure. Universities with strong scientific and technological research interests are also hit by the fact that based on data provided by Blackwells the average STM periodical subscription is five times as high as a humanities journal. This situation is of particular concern to the new universities, which are primarily geared towards science and business, and accounts for why the percentage spent on libraries of the total institutional budget is higher.

The expenditure on books as a percentage of total library expenditure has decreased over the last ten years, in the case of the old universities from 14.9% to 10.8%. The decrease for the new universities has been less marked, from 15.9% to 13.9%. For periodicals the equivalent decreases are 20.6% to 18%, and 15.1% to 11.8%.

Overall, the total spent on libraries in the academic sector rose only 3% in 96-97 compared to the previous year, and yet student numbers continue to rise, especially part-time students, who now number over 600,000 compared to the 1.2 million full-time students.

Networking to survive

Academic library managers face very considerable problems at the present time as they face continuing increases in the cost of books, and especially periodicals, and changing needs of the student population. To be fair to all concerned, this problem has been recognised for a number of years and was brought to prominence in the 1993 Follett Report. This was commissioned by the funding councils referred to above, and highlighted the problems that lay ahead as library resources increasingly became scarce they were unable to cope with teaching and research requirements. One of the initial results of this report was the establishment of the eLib (Electronic Libraries) programme, with initial funding of over $25 million. Another result was the development of the Pilot Site Licence Initiative to explore a methodology to overcome the periodic price spiral, especially in STM publishing.

Much of the overall management of these projects from a funding perspective is through the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) which has the mission: “To stimulate and enable the cost effective exploitation of information systems and to provide a high quality national network infrastructure for the UK higher education and research councils communities.”

As well as initiatives from the central funding bodies there has been a significant interest in the creation of purchasing consortia on a regional basis. On a national basis there is CHEST, the Combined Higher Education Software Team, which acts as a focal point for the supply of software, data, information, training materials and other IT related products to the Higher and Further Education sectors. It is a not-for-profit organisation with its headquarters at the University of Bath. Although CHEST is now substantially self-funding, it is strongly supported by the Department for Education and Employment through the joint committee of its funding councils. CHEST agreements are formal contracts between CHEST and the suppliers of IT products. These agreements are usually for up to 5 years and almost all

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Adventures in Librarianship: To be or not to be.

by Ned Kraft (Smithsonian Institution Libraries) <NKRAFT@sil.si.edu>

A young, para-professional colleague just mentioned starting library school. When I hear that enthusiastic, helpful, supportive self wants to tell him all the reasons why he should do it, why it’s a grand profession. Then, creeping close on all fours, comes the cynical, cautious, doubtful self that wants to bite that young man’s ankle, show him the error of his ways.

“You think I should matriculate? Is it worthwhile?”

He should know better, talking to me so early in the morning, before coffee and email. Not too bright. Wonder what his GRES were? But look at that fresh, hopeful face, that innocent grin ready to organize and classify the world. What should I say?

“Sure, it’s a great job ... and every town on the map needs at least one librarian,” I say this while my demon reminds me that many staffs are shrinking. Much of what used to be done by librarians is now done by lower paid clerks. And many libraries are selling chunks of their work to private companies with rootless, drifting, temporary help.

Then I add, getting into the swing of it, “You’re, you know, part of this great academic mission.” Uh-huh. The noble cause. Picking, parsing, providing the world’s intellectual riches. That’s true of course, but when you’ve just spent your day so glued to your screen that your eyes feel nummified, you might have to squint to see the noble cause. When you’re hired in acquisitions to spend your days claiming overdue sci-tech titles (claims that the publisher will likely ignore), or in cataloging to code serial holdings, or in the stacks to shelve AR through EC, you might define your place in the world with a little less enthusiasm.

Just to torment myself, I blurt out: “It’d be great to have you as a fellow librarian!” Right. One more competitor in an overfull field. Just what I need. A young competitor at that, no mortgage, willing to work for peanuts and a pat on the back.

“I’m starting to twitch. I need my coffee. ‘You uh, you work hard, work smart, and move right up the ladder!’ And the demon asks, ladder? Is there still such a thing? Aren’t promotions mysterious things, often unrelated to talent, work ethic, and IQ?

“And, and, there’s no stopping me now: I’m stuck in the war between the good librarian and the bad... and it’s a steady job, you know, calm, contemplative.” Oh now you’ve done it, the bad one says. You’ve crossed the line. You’re spouting outright lies. Librarianship is a field changing so fast you have to run to keep up. And if you don’t run, you’re dead.

The hair on the back of my neck is standing up as I say, “Books. We’re all book lovers here. That’s why we go g-g-g into this profession.” That’s right. And if in a few years, libraries no longer care much about books, would you still want to be a librarian? Hmm? Or would you end up counting yourself among the many lost and disappointed souls?

The kid perks up and says, “But it’s so expensive,” just as my left eyelid begins to twitch.

“Well worth it,” I insist. “Worth every penny.” Have you done the math? Have you? Do you know how long it will take for a graduate education on the average starting salary? Can you spell ‘eternity’?

Maybe sensing my condition, the young man smiles his innocent, sympathetic smile and says, “Thanks. I think I’ll take an intro course this summer. Just try it out.”

“Good. Good,” I say, watching him leave and check-...