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**Meeting new demands:**  
**The Role of the Library as a centre for Education and Research**

**ABSTRACT**

The world is increasingly hungry for information. The demand for better access to information is even more marked in higher education than in society as a whole and, as research becomes more specialised and at the same time more interdisciplinary, the range of information sought by all engaged in higher education is expanding. Libraries are faced with the problem of the timely and adequate supply of information held not only in conventional printed and manuscript documents but also in electronic data in various formats including on-line data. An ever greater number of users seeks these materials. The paperless society which was forecast by some to accompany the revolution in information technology has yet to arrive and new approaches are needed in respect to how the library copes with the continued growth of material and demand. Libraries are increasingly constrained by escalating costs. More significantly, they are still constrained by unrealistic aspirations towards some ideal of self-sufficiency, by out-dated practices, and by lack of a clear strategic development plan which will promote new concepts of service and exploit new methods of access to information.

This paper seeks to explore the impact of this demand for information upon the academic library, and to consider how the academic library can develop in these changing circumstances to meet with increasing effectiveness the information needs of scholars, researchers and students.

It examines the need for new organisational structures to enable the library to influence the strategic planning and allocation of resources in support of its role at the centre of a learning and research institution. It recognises that as teaching methods change to become more learning centred, the library must have both the authority and the vision to meet its responsibility for providing easy access to all forms of information. It must organise better access in the context of a realistic awareness of cost, value for money, and an effective service to its users.

The author considers how the library should modify its collection development and service policies in the light of information technology. It is critically important that new policies should be set in place that are built on a better assessment of user needs, informed by greater collaboration between the user and the librarian. This implies a major change in conventional practice, and attitudes. It requires change in the perceived role and responsibilities of the librarian. These responsibilities include not only the management of resources, but also the contribution the librarian needs to make to the development of the educational and research objectives of the university. The development of the library staff as experts in providing access to information and effectively managing the dissemination of information throughout the university is an essential part of any new policy. New priorities must be set to achieve new objectives.

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The paper explores what yet needs to be done if the library is to achieve the vision that it lies at the heart of all learning, that it renews and augments the knowledge of all teachers and researchers, and that it provides access to information that is indispensable to lifelong learning throughout a wider community.

## Meeting new demands: The Role of the Library as a centre for Education and Research

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE. MICHAEL SMETHURST

Michael Smethurst was Director-General of London Services (formerly Humanities and Social Sciences Division) in the British Library from 1986 to 1995, and Deputy Chief Executive from 1995 until his retirement in April 1996. His earlier career was as an academic librarian. He was Librarian of the University of Aberdeen 1972-1986, and previously he worked in various university, institute and college libraries. Throughout his career he has played an active part in the work of various national and international professional bodies. He has been President of the Scottish Library Association and Chairman of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries in the UK, President of LIBER (1990-1995), Chairman of the International ESTC Committee (1986-1995) and Chairman of the Consortium of European Libraries from its foundation in 1993. He has served on the Board of the British Library (1986-1996) as a Trustee of the National Library of Scotland, and on the board of directors of RLG. He was appointed a Commander of the British Empire in 1996 in recognition of his professional work.

The true university of these days is a collection of books. Thomas Carlyle wrote these words in an essay, *The Hero as Man of Letters*, in the 1850s, a time when university education in most countries was available only to a privileged few. Today, in an information revolution that is changing our society as radically as the industrial revolution, there is a temptation to rewrite the quotation to read *The true university of today is the Internet*.

Given the impact of the World Wide Web, there may be some truth in this. The Internet offers us unrivalled opportunities to access information without the limitations place imposes on access to the printed artefact. The hero is perhaps no longer seen as man of letters but as cybernaut. But it would be a disastrous mistake to assume that electronic networks of information will displace print on paper for the communication of knowledge and research. Information technology is not displacive. It is complementary. The book and the printed word are not dying; electronic and paper systems will continue to exist side by side.

Unfortunately, some University administrators welcome the new technology because they consider it to be displacive. They believe considerable savings can be made since we won't have to buy books, catalogue and

store them. Everything will be available on demand from electronic databases. The University Library will offer access rather than holdings. To our dismay, they are often encouraged in this view by the enthusiasm of some librarians for the virtual library.

No technological fix can satisfy the information needs of a university. Digitised material will never form more than a small percentage of the needed material, nor can the needs of the university be fulfilled simply by the provision of unstructured information. The information age does not require us to abandon the ideal that a university should be a place of light, of liberty and learning. Future generations will not understand us or forgive us if we replace the university library we inherited with a battery of computer screens. The University Library must of course be a centre for information; it must also be a centre for culture, for entertainment, for relaxation, for intellectual pleasure, and for making and meeting friends. Above all it should be a centre that merges new and old technologies to provide a gateway offering the widest access to knowledge, no matter how it is packaged.

Technology can remove many of the inherent obstacles to the communication of knowledge in the academic world. E-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and list servers now support that invisible college of scholars so essential to research. In many ways this college supplants the journal as the way of disseminating current research, although it does not yet provide the validating peer review that still depends on formal publication. Not only does the Internet allow for the communication of research, but through the World Wide Web, it allows remote access to data files, abstract services, library catalogues, indexes and digitised texts at the desktop. The server, the network and the desktop terminal are vital links in the information chain. The web offers access to an unbelievably rich resource of information and data. However, as one commentator has remarked 'the Internet is a populist, anarchist, quirky intellectual playground in which ideas, data, insults, comments and drafts...are exchanged at a rate that defies rational use. It is not a substitute for the relatively ordered, filtered world of print publishing and it is not free.' It is not the alternative to a university library.

The intelligent use of technology in a University lies in achieving cost effective solutions to recognised problems, rather than seeking applications for the technology. For the Library this means adopting the technology to improve its integration with the academic community, to disseminate information more effectively, and to improve its services dramatically for least additional cost. In doing so, it must avoid the error of believing that technology is the sole solution to the problems of providing for the university's needs. Indeed, it would be foolish not to recognise that technology brings its own new problems. The Library must also avoid the temptation simply to automate its present systems, for, if that is all that happens, it will fail to integrate with the learning and research activities of the university community. Existing systems in libraries and traditional ways of working do not provide the synergy between the library and its users that is so needed;

too often they lead to alienation rather than integration.

Rather, the University Librarian must seek new ways to meet the changing demands and expectations of the academic community in the late twentieth century. Within this community, new subjects for study and research proliferate, old boundaries between disciplines disappear. To meet society's needs for mass higher education, educational methods too are being forced to change as student numbers increase. The old style lecture and seminar are being augmented if not replaced by student centred learning, project work, group discovery and individual reading programmes. New combinations of subject options, modular courses, and new subjects expand the already broad curriculum. The students' courses must lead them to be competent not only in assimilating knowledge today, but in acquiring those skills that will allow them to continue to acquire knowledge in the future. Moreover, our universities must cater for mature entrants, teaching new skills and offering new qualifications to those in mid career. Our society can afford no less.

Unfortunately, too often, our allocation of resources for the library service and for collection development fails to recognise these changes and to exploit the key role that the library can play. We lack the information that will allow us to anticipate the needs of our users. Our systems are often unresponsive and unfocused, and the in-built inertia that is characteristic of these systems is one of the major reasons for failing to meet the needs of our readers. Our automated catalogues cover only limited areas of our collections, and have too often translated the card catalogue with all its faults and imperfections into an inaccurate, over-complicated database that baffles even the library staff. Our services are fragmented, under-resourced and highly dependent upon the potential reader visiting the library. We are too busy coping with the bread and butter work to find time to do that which we know will free us from much of the unproductive bureaucracy and enable us to

make better use of our time. Partly because of this, many of our users are far too conservative in their expectations of the service.

If the library is to be at the heart of the university then we must change our practices, and our users expectations. We must offer new leadership to the academic community. Those librarians who are unwilling or unable to provide visionary and practical leadership for the development of new information service strategies will inevitably find that the library becomes marginalised, or that its administration and funding is subsumed under a dominant computing service. The library will indeed become a virtual library, as it begins a downward spiral where resources are even more difficult to obtain as it increasingly fails to meet the needs of the community. It will eventually provide only a virtual service to virtual readers - the perfect virtual library no doubt.

But this is a pessimistic and gloomy scenario that need not and must not continue to be played out, if universities are to sustain their role as providers of life long education and as guardians of a cultured, enquiring and democratic society. The University Librarian has a once in a lifetime opportunity to create a dynamic new integrated service, and to stop running up the down escalator.

Technology provides the catalyst for change, but other factors will also influence how we fulfil our role in the modern university. Firstly, increasing financial and political pressures upon a university require us to educate more students and to undertake more research at a much lower unit cost. Secondly, given the expanding range of literature and information being published and disseminated, libraries are having to be increasingly selective in what they acquire, and to recognise that self sufficiency is impossible for even the largest and most well endowed libraries. Thirdly, information technology, as well as providing the tools and infrastructure we require to deliver service, also impacts upon the learning process and

the research method. Our goal must be to match the institutional needs and budget against the available information and its cost, and to develop a focused library service to achieve the most effective use of the resources for each user. This means achieving the right mix between collection development and on-line provision, between holdings and on-demand document supply, taking into account both costs and user needs. It means offering both local and remote facilities for accessing information, and, importantly, providing the most effective support and navigational services to make access easy.

In order to achieve this goal, the management of the University's library and information services must be fully integrated with the management of the network provision. A number of universities have already shown that with such integration, and a strong central decision making body within the university, a clear central strategy can be implemented to secure positive opportunities for educational change. Funding is considered strategically, and resource allocation is undertaken at the highest university levels defined by the university's overall priorities and objectives, and not dominated by the historic demands of academic departments. The Director of Library and Information Services is a key player in this decision process, since the hybrid library and information service manages the vital areas of information provision, access to knowledge and the infrastructure needed to support research and teaching. It sets its targets for expenditure upon realistic assessments of the costs for delivering agreed objectives and negotiates as an equal partner with other cost centres for an appropriate share of the university budget. It has claim to a proper share of research funding for the development of its information provision in support of the research objectives, and to funding in support of the teaching and learning functions of the university. (The library, it must also be remembered, has valid claim for funding support for its own research programmes). In return, it is

expected to deliver against its agreed targets and to be fully accountable. The Director, as the professional manager of the total service, has responsibility for decisions on how to meet the information needs of the university, in the most timely, economic and effective way. He has both the responsibility and the authority for the delivery of a defined service, rather than as so often happens now, responsibility for the delivery of an infinite and undefined service with little authority over how it should be delivered.

If the Director is to succeed, he or she will need specialists on the Library staff who can make informed responsible decisions within their own areas of responsibility, who share ownership of the total system, and its strategic planning. Increasingly, these key staff will be drawn from areas of expertise outside the conventional library, not only from computing and from audio-visual centres, but also from computer learning, from educationalists, and from public relations. What they have in common is expertise and the goal to create an effective seamless service across the campus. The library will of course continue to need its specialist staff in all the principal areas of librarianship - particularly in collection and information management - and all need to be aware that their main responsibility is to improve the library service.

To meet the new demands, the Library must also find new ways of working with both teaching and research departments, and with individual scholars. In the past, some progressive University Libraries have tried to do this by appointing subject specialists, professional librarians with responsibility for collection development and for liaison with academic departments. Whilst this has been a valuable development, particularly when the specialists have been given the time to develop close contacts with the departments, it has generally been too limited a provision. The proper flow of information between the user and the services is critically important. This, I believe, requires the creation of new teams of library research officers who will

work within the departments or faculties themselves. They will be people who are experienced in relevant research disciplines and also in the management of information and who can act as the on the spot facilitator to ensure that the users' needs are clearly defined both in general terms and in the individual particular profiles that will enable literature searches to be conducted efficiently. They are the eyes and ears of the library within the department, and vice versa. They have sufficient knowledge of library and information systems to be able to advise on service development and troubleshoot for both the department and the service when things are not right. They are both navigators and enablers. They hold hybrid posts, being full members of the department but also responsible for their performance to the Director of Information Services as members of his professional team. I believe that only by giving additional support in this way can we establish sensitive, responsible communication between the faculty and the library service, gain the feed back we need to develop our service, be responsive to the real needs of individual users.

Librarians and faculty need to follow a complementary programme of attitudinal change to achieve a meaningful collaboration. Librarians can no longer afford to stay in their offices and back rooms, using their issue desks, catalogues, bureaucracy and jargon as a defence against the reader. The faculty can no longer afford to neglect its responsibility for creating a well-resourced library, and for developing students' information retrieval skills as part of the basic university curriculum. If we are in the business of lifetime learning, as we are, it is not satisfactory that students should be able to pass their degrees without acquiring these skills. A university education should not be about 'cramming' from simplified handouts or relying on one text book that unfortunately has never been ordered for the library. Students need to have that basic knowledge that will allow them to enjoy the library rather than to be terrified by it. They should be able to explore the book collec-

tions with profit, use the audio-visual collections and on-line services and, if they so wish, become familiar with rare book collections as responsible readers. But getting this to happen will not be easy, particularly if the student finds our catalogues impenetrable and unhelpful, our organisation of the information interface inadequate, our staff more concerned with status than with service, our doors locked at the time when lectures finish.

We also need to work together to establish a clearer understanding of sensible expectations. Too often in the past the expectation has been that everything wanted is needed and that everything is needed instantly. Neither is true, but many librarians are not very good at saying so, and many academics are notoriously bad at organising their use of libraries and information services. To establish sensible expectations is particularly important at this time. A new credibility gap is opening up between the claims of the futurists who believe that the virtual library can deliver everything promptly on demand and instantly, and the day to day experience of practising librarians who see for themselves the very real limitations that exist now and which technology won't lift in the foreseeable future.

The dialogue between the professional librarian and the user begins with the recognition that both are accountable for the judicious use of resources. It leads on to shared responsibility for the development of a new hybrid university library, one that is both placed within the physical buildings labelled university library, and one that is without walls, a multi-media service accessible at the point of need, which draws upon the world network of information resources. Our shared responsibility is in agreeing the guidelines and priorities for collection development and service provision in advance of our allocation of resource. Decisions on what materials must be to hand, and what can be obtained from external sources when required are not easy to make, but if they are not made sen-

sibly within an agreed policy, resources will be wasted and the user's needs will not be met. The humanist who needs texts to hand has no greater or less an entitlement to good service than has the scientist who needs current journal articles, or the sociologist who needs to access and manipulate survey data. This has always been the case, but in recent years we have singularly failed to resolve how conflicting needs should be met from over-stretched resources. We need a full discussion with users of how we best make use of these resources in the interest of each user, and of how information technology can modify traditional patterns of expenditure. There is no universal answer, but a balanced answer can be found that takes into account local circumstances and the objectives of the university.

Student needs must also be better defined. We must use technology to improve access to material in heavy demand, creating prepared course materials in appropriate media. We must provide serviced facilities both within the library and elsewhere on the campus, staffed and supported by the library, where students can log on to PC's to access documents and images, course notes, extracts from recommended texts and other data, or where they can prepare essays, create bibliographies, complete exercises, store their data on disks and contact their tutors online. Such services are beginning to appear, but what is too often lacking is the concept of the integrated development of these services by teachers and librarians where the only walls are those erected to safeguard the physical artefacts.

We need to remove the barriers to a seamless service whether they are the departmental barriers that have grown up within the library itself, or those between the library and other university services. Our objective of getting each reader the information he needs when he needs it will not be achieved by fragmenting resources across complementary services in such a way that each is under-funded and yet funds are wasted by

duplication of provision on different sites. Artificial funding lines between budgets must go. Why, for example, should we penalise twice the reader whose wanted book or journal article has not been bought by the library by making him pay for an inter-library loan and limiting the number of requests he can make? Why should we continue to provide services on the principle that books are available without charge but that on-line services must be paid for by the individual user? We must produce flexible budgets organised to support the provision of a variety of services, and if necessary we must find new models for raising revenues or apportioning costs. We must collaborate with other libraries to create a greater total resource, and to establish regional shared purchasing schemes, and shared specialised services.

Our educational responsibilities obviously go much further than introductory courses in the use of the library to new students. They extend to the continuing education of library staff and user alike on all aspects of information provision and training in the skills that the changing technology requires. For most people, books are easy to use and knowledge is organised and presented in a disciplined and structured way. But using a virtual library and on-line access to unlimited information sources at a screen, although it is undoubtedly the ultimate form of self service, is far removed from the traditional self service concept of the open access library. There is not only the problem of finding the source material, there is also the problem of using the source material. We cannot leave it to the reader to acquire the skills by trial and error, if for no other reason than that he will cause our computer systems to crash even more frequently. On-line services require on-line help desks. These must be staffed by highly competent information officers, who can switch into the work station, and take the user through the process screen by screen, in much the same way as staff should now be on call to help the reader find what he needs in the book collections.

However, if the library is to be a centre for education, dealing with the technical issues is only part of our responsibilities. We have to promote the library as the place you want to go to and the place to be. We are too apologetic. We have rarely done much promotion beyond the somewhat amateur creation of displays of books from our collections in our entrance halls. Why should we not do more to share our own excitement of what a library is? To many, too often, the Library is a dull place, where most enjoyable things seem to be prohibited, where institutional formality, and at times our patronising ways, frustrate and irritate. It is time that we developed exciting programmes within an educational and cultural service whose purpose is to bring the reader into the library, and to take the library out to the community. We should not, of course, fall into the trap of thinking we can do this successfully by ourselves, nor should this work be undertaken on a shoe string. We don't need another lame dog service, apologetically offered, under resourced and considered by all to be no more than a peripheral element of the library, the first to be axed when economies are needed. Rather, let us integrate it as a core service to the university, that can be seen to be part of the university's central mission to educate and to promote research. Let us promote courses, workshops, conferences and individual training sessions on all aspects of the service and its key components. Let us lead and stimulate the debate in the university on the impact of technology upon education. Let us develop centres that explore the cultural heritage of the printed and written word. We have expertise and knowledge that we should share enthusiastically with others; we have no lack of friends whom we can call upon to contribute from their own expertise and experience. It should be part of our common cause to enable others to enjoy and to appreciate the culture of the book, the craftsmanship of the binder, the printer, and the engraver. We all need to understand the economics of book production, the cultural routes for dissemination of ideas, the technical advances in digitisation,



the impact of technology on the organisation and dissemination of knowledge, the copyright issues, and the myriad other specialist areas that we embrace in our world of libraries and information. We have access to the world's culture, within our own collections, and in the collections of others with whom we should collaborate. We also have the resources of the World Wide Web. We have a whole campus at our disposal for this work - lecture theatres, class rooms, and sometimes even conference centres and recital halls. Our academic colleagues promote their research as a matter of course. Let us begin to promote the library, not merely as a collection of books, but as the source of knowledge, and of pleasure. Let us promote it as the gateway to our cultural heritage and to our future prosperity. If the library is to be the centre for education and research, then, within the university we need to promote the vision, not, as Carlyle suggested, of the Hero as Man of Letters, nor as I suggested earlier, as cybernaut, but, the vision of the Hero as Librarian.