United Kingdom 1992

Michael Evans, the Head of Technical Services Division at the ANU Library, has recently come back from his travels with some insights into the UK scene. He has sent us these notes:

DURING MARCH and April I attended three conferences in the UK: 'Funding and Financial Management of Academic Libraries', University, College and Research Libraries Section, Library Association in Aberdeen, 26 March–29 March; 'SCONUL' (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) in Sheffield, 30 March1 April; and 'Networking and the Future of Libraries', UK Office for Library Networking (UKOLN) in Bath, 2 April–5 April.

I have gathered my impressions of these very well organised conferences below, under general themes. The conferences were all interesting, but they are particularly relevant because of the historical connection between British and Australian Higher Education, and the similarity of present higher education policy. A major difference between Australia and Britain is that the latter has very centralised decision making. The proceedings of the networking conference are to be published by Meckler (£25, ISBN 0 88736 863 8).

The first two conferences naturally tended to focus on the present challenges to higher education libraries and constructive ways of approaching these. As may be expected the situation and response of individual libraries varied and I have concentrated on general matters which I believe to be of most interest.

The future of UK higher education

Expectations to the year 2000 might be generally summarised as
- Mass education, i.e., expansion of 50% in student numbers.
- Cheap expansion, i.e., no significant increase in the percentage of GNP. Schools will have a higher political profile than higher education.
- The binary system will disappear, Polytechnics will become universities but not all universities will be equal.
- Innovation and flexibility are needed, e.g., semesters, credit transfers, distance learning.
- Accountability will be increased.
- There will be an increasing funding gap between government provision and needs.
- Research capability will be further questioned.
- There will be a cost centre approach to departments including libraries.

- Guaranteed research funding will go, research funding may devolve to the Research Councils.
- Contract research will be limited by the economic circumstances.
- Teaching will be reviewed, and efficient departments rewarded.
- Because individual departments will be assessed on a 1 to 4 scale, universities will effectively fall into three groups i.e., 15-20 may be R (research), 35-40 will be X (mixed, i.e. research and teaching), and about 100 will be T (teaching). The boundaries will not be exact and may shift from time to time.
- The system has spare capacity if judged on use of facilities in terms of hours per day and weeks per year.
- Capital is likely to be substituted for labour, i.e., greater use of teaching/learning technology to increase productivity.
- 2 year degrees with a teaching year of 45 weeks.
- Institutions may be asked how their expenditure is divided between teaching and research support.
- Cost of space may be charged back to the unit as part of a cost centre approach. Usage may be more important as part of a cost centre approach. Use may be the major criterion in deciding whether to buy, borrow, or buy on a one-off basis especially if linked to document availability time.
- The higher education system will have to increasingly rely on local teaching collections and obtain other material from appropriate nodes.

A summary of higher education was expressed in the phrase 'Pile them high and teach them cheap'.

The future of higher education planning in the UK is uncertain because of the establishment of Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Their roles, and national coordination, are not clear. This may make some difference to areas which have a national focus e.g., networking.

There appears to be reasonable funding for new initiatives, especially in computing and networking. It was not thought that a change of government would have a major effect on higher education funding, although a Labour government might be 'softer' on staffing issues.

Library budgets

The variation in devolution varied very widely and some polytechnics (now new universities) appear to have extremely low devolution, e.g., the library does not control its staffing budget.

The period mid-1960's to 1980 can now be regarded as an aberration—the good funding is not likely to return. A budget overview can depend on the viewpoint taken, e.g., Parry did not consider capital cost, Atkinson did not consider recurrent cost.

Libraries could be funded according to three models:
- Service agency, i.e., fully-funded.
- Service provider, i.e., part centrally-funded and part charges.
- Service organisation, i.e. recoup all costs.

Some higher education institutions are experimenting with models 2 and 3 above but these have some problems.

If the departments agree to fund the library individually, and this funding level varies from department to department, how does the library offer a differential level of service to those departments? How are interdisciplinary areas to be accommodated? How are major purchases, e.g., a computer, to be funded? How are staff to be redeployed? How is strategic planning to be undertaken?

It becomes imperative to do life-cycle costing so that the real cost of the library activities are known and can be apportioned.

Income generation

While a major issue in UK libraries there did not seem any radically new approaches. The basic problem is how to handle a mixed economy, i.e., some services are free and some charged for. Are libraries to cover direct cost, cover full cost or maximise profit? What is the optimum mix of support to the institution and income generation? Is the process to be influenced by the links between the institution and others?

An approach may be:
- Protect and enhance services presently offered.
- Add services on a self-financing basis.
- External activities should be genuinely profitable.
- Focus should be on a few projects at a time with high added value and with the collaboration of departments.

At the University of Aston the library service to the science park was withdrawn because 'information' is a poorly defined term and clients think in terms of products, the library was not

seen as a deliverer of information and companies did not have a highly developed business plan with a need to use information. A survey of the North East Region indicated that of 700 businesses some 650 had a very limited need of information that could be provided by a library.

Staff training and professional development

The pressures were summarised as pressures on expenditure, competition within and between institutions, demand for quality, technological change and changes in demography.

The approach was the effective management of change and what is best done at the various levels, i.e., national, regional, local.

The effective management of change needs appropriate resources at the planning stage and a staff development implementation plan needs integration into the corporate planning, resources (e.g., finance, time, expertise), planning must be for all staff, middle and senior managers have to be targeted as they are key figures in implementation, staff appraisal and staff development needs have to be designed and implemented and learning is a life long process.

The Library Association has proposed a new framework for continuing professional development. As a guide 28-42 hours per person per year should be devoted to such activity.

European orientation

This is a major influence in the UK. European influence is apparent in the areas of greater personal and institutional contact, funding for economic development projects, funding for research and development projects, specific programs, e.g. Erasmus, Tempest and telecommunication standards.

British Library

A theme from all three conferences was the possibility of the marginalisation of the British Library in a library environment dominated by electronic networking. Criticism was generally aimed at the senior management and their lack of strategic planning especially in an age of networking.

The British Library was seen as isolated and insular, especially as new developments could increase the efficiency of regional nodes. The great needs were seen as email connection (BL had only guest mailboxes on JANET), a networked OPAC, consideration of end-user document delivery, and a telecommunication standards policy relevant to the UK.

Network planning

While the UK Office of Library Networking strategic workshops were undoubtedly valuable, the exercise seemed to become one of referring many items to others and this may be all that could be accomplished given the number of organisations that exist in the Britain. It was very useful in defining issues and tasks. Practice is usually ahead of policy, and policy is therefore usually based on practice. There is a major problem in reconciling American and European standards.

Information policy

Neither the Conservative or Labour parties has a national information policy so it may be necessary to work through European policy in order to have an effect in Britain. The UK Office of the Arts and Libraries was seen by one speaker as 'Bread and Circuses' and libraries need to be part of a more important ministry.

SCONUL/COPAL

SCONUL represents the present University sector and COPAL the Polytechnic sector. While both bodies agree to cooperate there is some doubt as to how far they could be integrated in the new university sector given the diversity of interests and mission. A major present concern of SCONUL is a methodology to identify library support for research as opposed to teaching.

Issues relevant to Australia

Australian academic libraries are well up with developments in academic libraries world-wide and the following issues seem to be the most relevant:

- UK higher education policy is very pertinent to Australia as the political language and approach are similar and many trends in the UK are, or may become, relevant to Australia.
- a formula approach to the allocation of resources is likely to become more important.
- the library will need to know its resource distribution in detail.
- income generation is likely to be a high priority, it should be targeted and with specific products to be marketed.
- staff training and development needs to be targeted to the future needs of the organisation and staff skills needed to support this.
- the concept of the virtual library should be pursued vigorously and the needs of users, e.g., for browsing, kept to the fore. Achievable demonstration projects are needed to show users the potential of this approach.
- the future academic library depends on a computing and networking foundation.
- any library organisational structure will need to be flexible to accommodate change. ∎