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Titel: The Role of a University Library in a Community Setting: Aberdeen University Libr...

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Ort: Graz

Jahr: 1996

PURL: https://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?514854804_0006|log67

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The Role of a University Library in a Community Setting: Aberdeen University Library, Scotland

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The University of Aberdeen is one of the most ancient of Britain's 86 universities and the most northerly. It was founded in 1495 by William Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen, with the active support of his king, James IV, and the approval of Pope Alexander VI. Its purpose was to provide a centre of learning for the people of the North of Scotland, who lived, wrote Elphinstone, 'in places separated from the rest of this kingdom by arms of the sea and high mountains,' and were, as a result, 'rude, ignorant of letters and almost barbarous.' The University has fulfilled this purpose for just over five hundred years, growing in the process from a single college of 36 teachers and students to occupy two large campuses with nearly 11,000 students (41% from the North of Scotland) in four faculties - Arts & Divinity, Social Sciences & Law, Science & Engineering and Medicine & Medical Sciences.[1]

The University's early statutes ensured that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries teaching and learning were

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[1] Jennifer J. Carter and Colin A. McLaren, *Crown and Gown, 1495-1995: An Illustrated History of the University of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen University Press, 1994).

confined behind its high walls and locked gates. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, it became more closely involved with the community outside, offering limited access to its library, remodelling its curriculum to meet the practical needs of the landed and commercial classes and pioneering extra-mural education for working-men. Today the University enjoys a close relationship with the community, enriching its intellectual life, contributing to its economic development and preserving its cultural heritage.

The University Library has an important part to play in maintaining and developing this relationship. With over a million books and journals on its six sites, including 150,000 volumes and 250,000 documents relating to its hinterland, it is well resourced to do so.[2] Its resources, however, together with its facilities and services, have recently been further enriched by a nationwide strategy to transform the academic into the electronic library.

The catalyst was the Libraries Review set up jointly by the three higher education funding councils of Britain in 1993 and chaired by Sir Brian Follett (*http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/follett/follett_report.html*).[3] The first such review for thirty years, it paid particular attention to ways in which information technology (IT) could help to meet the needs of library users and library management. As a direct result, the years 1994-96 have seen the investment of money in British university libraries on an unprecedented scale. New initiatives include:

- A programme of library building and extension, notably among the newer higher education institutions (HEIs).
- The Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) (*http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/elib/*) which, with a budget of around £15m over three years, supports over forty

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2   Colin A. McLaren, *Rare and Fair: A Visitor's History of Aberdeen University Library* (AUL, 1995).

3   *Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group: Report* (1993).

projects in categories such as electronic document delivery, electronic journals, digitisation, on-demand publishing and access to network resources.

- The Pilot Site Initiative, developing with publishers an innovative method of licensing, giving greater access to journals, in both print and electronic format, at no extra cost to the HE community and without loss of revenue to the trade.

- The dedication of around £10m over five years to the support of specialised humanities research collections in 62 HEIs.

The Follett Review has not, however, been the only agent of change in the academic library. Money from the proceeds of the National Lottery (1995) is channelled through the Heritage Lottery Fund (*http://www.heritage.gov.uk/LOTTAPP.HTM*) to support, amongst other things, capital projects for the preservation and conservation of heritage resources, including printed and manuscript material. The government-chaired Millennium Commission (ibid) may also support proposals of this sort, if they are conceived on a suitably grandiose scale. In both cases IT applications - notably digital reproduction and networked access - have been a prominent feature of funded projects.

The Library has already profited from each of the Follett initiatives described above. In addition, it has applied for support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and is associated with projects seeking funding from the Millenium Commission. In each case the outcome promises to enhance its service to the community.

The community itself is spread over the North East of Scotland (formerly Grampian Region), the Highlands and Islands, and the Northern Isles - an area which amounts to one-sixth of the landmass of mainland Britain and contains some of its most sparsely populated districts. Until recently, its economy was largely based on primary and related manufacturing industries, and on tourism. All three sectors have contracted, however, and

the community now depends heavily on service-provision and on oil and gas - Aberdeen is the main offshore oil centre of Western Europe.

The Library's contribution to the community, in the past decade at least, has been the provision of current information, either freely or as a premium service moderated by a service level agreement, and the support of learning.[4]It has six main client-groups:

- *The general public.* The public consult Library stock on site without charge or borrow it by taking out external membership on subscription.

- *The business community.* A review of external membership in 1988 revealed that there was a particular demand for a service to business, notably to medium/small enterprises without their own information units. It was a demand which the Library, with its extensive legal collections and in its role as a European Documentation Centre, was especially well equipped to meet. A a result, a subscription service was offered for corporate membership; there is no cost for staff help with enquiries, but online searches are charged for on a cost-recovery basis plus a fixed rate per hour for staff time.

- *Health professionals.* External funding from the Grampian Health Board, distributed through local Health Trusts, supports services provided by the Medical Library for medical staff not formally associated with the University.

- *Other libraries.* The Library took a leading part in the creation of the Grampian Library and Information Plan (1990), and is a leading player in Grampian Information,

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an organisation representing libraries and information providers within the region.

- *Distance learners.* The Library supports distance learning programmes run by the University's Centre for Continuing Education. It acquires and processes copies of core texts, makes material available on site to individual students, or fulfils requests by phone, fax or e-mail, at the student's expense. Much of the distance learning programme has hitherto been supported by learning packs, however, and the Library's involvement has been, as a result, restricted in scope.

- *Schools.* Close links have been developed with school library services by the Library's Schools Liaison Officer, who arranges open days for school librarians and for senior pupils working on course-related projects, and gives training in the use of the Library's OPAC (accessible to schools by dial-up). In addition, until 1994, schools had free consultation and limited borrowing facilities.

As the electronic library is only now moving from concept to realisation, its impact on these services to the community, is a matter of speculation rather than experience. At Aberdeen the outcome is promising, although it will involve, initially at least, additional cost.

- *Current information.* The Library's capability to meet business requirements for current legislation, statistics, directives etc, notably in the context of Europe and in relation to the oil, gas and engineering support industries, has already been greatly enhanced by access to bibliographic, statistical and full-text databases, online and on cd-rom. It will be reinforced by the opportunities for full-text retrieval of journal articles and on-demand publication foreshadowed in several of the eLib projects. There are, however, limits to its potential role as an

information provider to the community. As a HEI, the Library currently receives substantial discounts on its cd-roms and online services; it is bound by site-licensing agreements; and the eLib projects themselves are essentially for HE purposes. There are legal and statutory limitations, therefore, on the extent to which it can exploit its new capability off campus; it would certainly have to recover as much as possible of the increased costs incurred from the renegotiation of site licensing agreements through increased charges to its external customers.

- *Distance learning*. The Library has recently reviewed its role in this area, taking account of the mainlining of remote learning as a HE process and, specifically, proposals to develop locally delivered HE in the North of Scotland. It foresees a significant increase in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate remote learners, who will require to be treated on an equal basis with students on campus. They must have, for example, the opportunity, and the skills, to access and exploit the Library's OPAC and its electronic resources (online and cd-rom); and they will need mediated or end-user access to off-site resources and resource-centres, and facilities for on-demand document supply. It seems likely that these aims can be achieved using the Web, if necessary through a Z39.50 client, for access; e-mail for communication; Web-compatible versions of the Library's current computer-aided learning programs in library and information skills; and high bandwidth links to support (subject to licensing) full-text, electronic document delivery. Securing parity for distance learners in these and similar ways, however, will represent a markedly greater load than the Library has hitherto borne in support of distance learning and the

marginal costs of distance learners will be significantly higher than those of students on campus.

In its electronic form, however, the Library offers a further service to the community. It can provide virtual access to the written, printed and visual heritage of its hinterland. The Library has hitherto made its heritage collections available for consultation on site. Now, through digitisation, it can make them available on screen in local schools, colleges, public libraries and museums - wherever there is the technology to access them.

The Library began this process in 1995, supported by Follett funding for specialised collections. Its Humanities Research Support Unit has a four-year digitisation project, which will make available on the Web, using Photo-CD, a digital database of the Library's most heavily-used manuscript, printed and image-based collections, including the 40,000 glass negatives of the George Washington Wilson Photographic Archive, 1860-1914. A pilot project, the digitisation of the twelfth-century Aberdeen Bestiary, was completed in June 1996 (*http://www.clues.abdn.ac.uk: 8080/besttest/firstpag. html*).[5]

The Unit has a second, complementary project: to mount on the Web descriptive lists of all the Library's manuscript and archival collections. Metalevel descriptions of these currently appear on the Library's OPAC. Using the STATUS/IQ CLIO system, the Unit will publish the lists in full, enriched by images and offering unitary, batch and comprehensive search facilities.

The Library is continuing the process of virtual access with the creation of the Elphinstone Centre, to upgrade the storage of its heritage collections and to house facilities for disseminating them electronically. The Centre will have state-of-the-art environmental control; consultation, exhibition and performance space; a

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[5] The Bestiary URL will be changed in the course of 1996. Further details of this, and of other AUL projects described below, will be posted initially on Aberdeen University's home page (*http://www.abdn.ac.uk/*).

digitisation laboratory; and a teleconferencing suite. It will be closely associated with the University's Elphinstone Institute for the study of the history, languages and culture of the North of Scotland. The Centre has been costed at over £8m; a bid for funding is currently with the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The projects of the Humanities Research Support Unit and the proposed Elphinstone Centre match closely three initiatives currently in progress at a national level:

-   SCRAN (Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network) 2000 (*http://www.nms.ac.uk/scran/*) has received funding from the Millenium Commission to make electronically available collections held in Scottish museums and galleries.
-   LAIRD (Library and Archive Integrated Resources Database) 2000, initiated by the National Library of Scotland and the Scottish Library and Information Council, aims to create a database of images, primarily photographs. The plan is - at present, anyway - to seek funding from the Millenium Commission.
-   The Scottish Archive Network 2000, initiated by the Scottish Record Office, aims to create an 'electronic search room', giving online access to lists of its holdings and to those of other repositories, such as Aberdeen University Library, which are in a compatible format. It is currently seeking support from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

If the last two projects are as successful as the first, Scotland will have by the end of the century a unique array of three national, digital databases, complemented at a regional level by databases such as that in construction at Aberdeen. But if these are to receive maximum use within the community, however, local institutions, such as colleges of further education, museums, schools and public libraries, will need the facilities and the skills to access and exploit them effectively. Until comparatively

recently, these were lacking - in the public library sector at least. Things there seemed no better than in England, where a public librarian declared: 'Superhighway? We're on a B road!'[6] Neverthless, the achievements of Project EARL (*http://www.earl.org.uk/earl/*) and the aspirations of the Library Association's Millennium Project, to give but two notable examples, suggest that in England the situation is rapidly changing and that there and in Scotland the discrepancy may soon be made up.

[6]   Quoted in ASLIB, *Online and CD Notes* (September, 1995), p 3.