
**COLLABORATION IN RESEARCH
LIBRARY PROVISION
AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW**

**A report from the Information Strategy Research Unit
The University of Brighton**

January 2002

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Nick Moore

Margaret Wallis

Audrey Marshall

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SUMMARY

The overall aim of the study is to identify, describe and analyse the international experience of collaboration in research library provision.

The overall position

In many countries, and in different circumstances, research libraries are working together to find solutions to their problems. This collaboration is a dynamic process and the agenda is shifting in response to the new demands generated by digital information.

Systems of *collaborative collection management* and development bring significant benefits and provide the basis for much other joint working. They require fairly centralised administrative and political structures.

Joint licensing of electronic information offers concrete, measurable benefits to participating libraries and has taken off successfully in different countries. It provides a stimulus for work on digital libraries and scholarly communication.

The need to preserve digital material is providing a new impetus to the issues of collaborative *preservation and retention of material*.

It seems likely that in future, the provision of *access to digital resources* will receive a higher priority than conventional *bibliographic access* among many of the collaborative schemes.

Inter-library lending is not a top priority for many, with the exception of the development of international standards for inter-library lending, to allow seamless access to collections both nationally and internationally

The pressures leading to collaboration

Without doubt, the single most important pressure leading to collaboration is money - or rather, the lack of it. There is a perceived need to get the best possible value out of material.

There is scope for achieving savings through joint acquisition of digital material. Librarians are coming together, to strengthen their market power in relation to powerful multi-national publishers, negotiating favourable prices and purchasing on their own terms rather than on those set by the suppliers.

There is a need to demonstrate cost effectiveness in the use of resources. The new digital technologies offer new opportunities to collaborate and to achieve improvements in cost-effectiveness.

There is, therefore, no single factor that can be said to cause collaboration, although there is a consistent undercurrent of financial pressure. Many participants see the activities as very positive steps towards service improvements. By working together they are able to share experience, to pool resources and efforts, to take advantage of synergies and to become empowered in ways that would not have been possible if they were left to work alone.

Management arrangements

There seem to be two possible ways of managing collaboration among research libraries. One is to incorporate the management into an already-existing organisation. In the alternative model, the collaborating partners combine to establish a mutually-funded management organisation.

Success factors

A wide range of factors seem to contribute to the success or otherwise of collaborative schemes. Perhaps most important is a clear sense of vision: one that is shared by all participants in the collaborative venture.

This raises the issue of leadership and, in particular, the role of the national library. Many of the collaborative schemes have been driven forward by a lead organisation, which has frequently been the national library.

The next most important success factor is money. Participants must feel that the collaboration brings tangible benefits and this usually means financial benefits of some kind. A minimum requirement is that the cost of collaboration does not unduly erode core budgets.

The cultural context is also important in determining, not only the success of a collaborative venture, but the most appropriate structure to be adopted.

Constraints

First among the constraints on collaborative activity is money, or the lack of it. The competitive model for managing higher education also imposes constraints on collaboration. The failure to keep up with the pace of change can be a constraint, as is the perceived or real loss of individual control by the individual institution.

Inter-relationships

It appears the collaborative ventures that are most successful are those that are multi-functional. Relationships are developed and collaboration in one area of activity is stimulated by collaboration in other areas. However many research libraries, particularly in the United States, are members of multiple consortia and this can create conflicting priorities.

A developing collaborative agenda

It is apparent that there are two strands of collaboration emerging. One is concerned with conventional print-based collections and includes issues such as bibliographic access, collection description and inter-library lending. The other is concerned with digital libraries and includes subject gateways to digital resources, joint licensing and scholarly publishing.

The emphasis for the future is concerned with digitisation and the development of digital libraries. In addition, there is a need to demonstrate accountability and value for money. The development of library statistics and tools for performance measurement is firmly on the current agenda, as is training and intellectual property.

Conclusions

Research librarians in the UK have much to learn from the collaborative arrangements overseas that are concerned with collection management and development; the storage of little-used material; bibliographic access and the management of collaborative ventures.

The UK is in the forefront of developments with: the joint licensing of electronic resources; preservation of printed and digital material, and collection-level description.

There is much that could be learned from an international exchange of experience about digital and hybrid libraries and access to digital resources.