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Beyond the pale?: the implications of the RSLG Report for non-CURL modern university libraries

When the Final Report of the Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG) was published on its website (www.rslg.ac.uk) earlier this month it did not make many headlines, even in the specialist press. This is easily explained.

For a start, the recent Government White Paper on the Future of Higher Education has somewhat eclipsed it. (Presumably in this era of joined-up thinking the near coincidence of publication dates was all planned. It would certainly explain why the broad thrust of these two reports is so similar. Both clearly advocate an elite of research institutions to which all riches will flow.)

Anyway, we all knew what this Report was going to say long before we read it. Sir Brian Follett, the Group's Chair, had spent much of the past year addressing audiences of key stakeholders about what he saw as information needs of researchers. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he had more or less made up his mind before the RSLG began its deliberations. Those of us who heard him speak at the SCONUL Conference in Cambridge last April were left in no doubt about the main message of a Report eventually to be published only some ten months later. For Sir Brian everything is very simple: research in the UK (and for 'research' read 'scientific research') is pretty good, although most of our libraries are too small to be any use. Nor does he think the views of most librarians are worth much (with a few notable exceptions). He sees the British Library (BL) as the answer to most questions, although he is not quite sure how. In this (and in much else) he is basically quite right - although it is somewhat galling that he sees most of us as irrelevant to the debate.

Less crucial, but disappointing nonetheless, is the fact that this Report is so badly written. It needs to be much smarter and a good deal less patronising if it is to convince Universities UK and individual Vice-Chancellors. As it stands, it is repetitive, sloppy and at times just plain illiterate. (The final sentence on page 65 is particularly unfortunate.) Excruciating accumulations of abstract nouns and half-digested jargon conspire to make whole sections all but impenetrable. Examples of ugly wordiness abound:

“Some have suggested that the most serious risk we now face is of not moving quickly enough and thus ending up with sub-optimal solutions on the basis that these were the first to become available.”

No matter. We can now read in black and white what has been mooted for some time. The key decisions have already been made and further meaningful consultation is unlikely. We must make ready to exploit this ambitious new strategy so that we can all play a part in supporting the UK's vigorous research community. Others are better placed than I to take the broader view and analyse the Report and its recommendations objectively. For those of us in the smaller, wannabe research-intensive, universities with their clear remit for undergraduate teaching, (and not currently members of CURL) the future is not unproblematic and the potential tensions easy to spot. The one-size-fits-all model must be approached with caution; but with judicious tweaking it should suit us just fine.

It is however at best, naive (and at worst, downright disingenuous) for the Funding Councils to claim through this Report that their plans for us will all be for the best in the best of all possible worlds. This dazzling certainty ignores a number of basic realities. Most importantly perhaps, the Report ignores the distasteful, but inevitable, fact that we, as universities, are all in competition with one another. Our institutions struggle to keep pace with the Government's constantly shifting agendas for research, learning and teaching - and then maybe some more research - not to forget the teaching. So we all watch our backs. Confusing signals from different Government departments translate into ever more Byzantine policies for university funding. For those of us in the non-CURL libraries it is easy to feel miffed, even before we begin reading the Report. There is a real danger that this cynicism will colour our reactions to what is actually very good news for us too. (We were, of course, aggrieved that none of our members sat on the Committee and it is hard to believe that our interests were protected, but then this probably did not make much difference to what was decided anyway.) But this is an

immature and shortsighted response. The Report proposes a coherent planning framework unprecedented in our sector and offers exciting opportunities for us to punch above our weight and exploit our important resources more widely than ever before.

We should immediately examine the Report's recommendations to see what we can contribute. But first we must establish where our interests really lie - and this in itself is by no means straightforward. The missions of our libraries have not always coincided with those of our institutions; and in the past we have sometimes been tempted to build our own little empires. This is no longer a sustainable approach. At the same time almost all UK university libraries have an impressive history of collaboration, with or without the help of outside agencies, because we are basically quite co-operative animals. This Report, and the philosophy underpinning it, may, despite its best intentions, divide us as never before. It is, for example, hard to see what line SCONUL will take. The big personalities in our sector are often the loudest voices in SCONUL too, and we may face a period of destructive disagreement if the smaller players feel their interests are compromised by post-RSLG initiatives.

It is also regrettable that the Report does not see Resource as a potential partner. This can only reinforce the widely held view that Resource cares little for libraries, and has no interest at all in the academic sector. This Report might have provided an opportunity for a new relationship. At the very least Resource might have been publicly invited to endorse the proposed Research Libraries Network and maybe even (*whisper it softly*) to see help the public library sector might play its part.

But this is no time for righteous indignation, we should, and shall, respond constructively to what the Report describes, somewhat vaingloriously, as "the unique opportunity to create a body unparalleled among our research competitors". This sounds very exciting; it is the best way forward.

The Research Libraries Network (RLN) at the centre of the Report's findings has a key role for the BL. This is very welcome and a logical development of a strategy which its Chief Executive, Lynne Brindley, is widely known to favour. Her recent background in Higher Education gives her a clear understanding of the critical issues, and recent senior BL appointments have confirmed its commitment to work for the benefit of all researchers. So we welcome the fact that the Report advocates more money for the BL to allow it to meet its full range of responsibilities. Less predictably perhaps, it also appears to safeguard the Documents Supply Centre, whose fate had looked far from secure a couple of years ago. A strong and financially secure BL, with a clear remit to support research all over the UK is a pre-requisite for success. It will be good for top class UK research to see this translated into an ambitious suite of actions, but not entirely straightforward. In universities far from London, researchers who need printed rare or unique resources still show a certain reluctance to travel to the BL, so it will take some creative thinking and significant money to help them make full use of its collections and service in the future. We can be confident that the BL has the will to achieve this; with sufficient funding it will succeed.

So far so good, but beyond this the RLN's membership remains unclear. We are left to speculate. Presumably it will consist of current CURL members, but it should be broader than this. For the RLN is in danger of being an exclusive club, attracting all the extra funding for initiatives which effectively exclude many other significant players and thus effectively write them out of the script. In any case it is hard to see how our Vice-Chancellors will find any top slicing predicated on this model acceptable. It does not have to be like this. Most importantly, the composition of the Steering Group charged with leading the RLN is key to ensuring that all researchers' needs are met. Strong voices must protect the interests of the smaller institutions, not for their own sake, but because they have a good deal to contribute for the benefit of research as a whole. All in all the RLN could, and should, be a good idea - but only if it is well run. The Report advocates "a small core of staff of high quality with appropriate expertise and professional experience" (53) - well, yes. It also needs a clear remit and, crucially, the funds to fulfil its high ambitions. Here the Report is spectacularly vague. This is puzzling, particularly in view of the otherwise meticulously articulated work plan. Presumably this failure to address the resource implications of the proposals is deliberate. We must assume that the Government will come

up with the money needed. (Certainly Sir Brian Follett's record in this respect is encouraging. His last report on libraries in 1993 led to significant funding from which the whole sector, and its users, has benefited greatly.)

The Report explicitly supports a number of initiatives already under way. The SUNCAT will be an invaluable tool, especially if in a second phase it is expanded to include the holdings of all research libraries. SCONUL Research Extra, long overdue, will now happen come what may. It is soon to be launched with well over 100 committed members, and the Report makes it clear that for those who participate the rewards will be great. But possibly the most important specific recommendations relate to future licensing arrangements for electronic resources. If the RLN pulls its weight, researchers will be better served, with the major publishers more biddable than ever before. (Canada has managed to negotiate a national licence for all its universities. Maybe if we play hardball we shall do something similar.) Yet another reason to ensure that all those who direct the RLN are the big boys on the block.

Ironically for many of us the most difficult issues raised by the Report relate to collaborative collection development, "Deep resource sharing", the infelicitous phrase much bandied about over the past year seems to have been dropped, but the assertion that we all keep too much material is well made and few would disagree. But the model proposed in the Report, while intellectually defensible, does not take account of the vested interests of individual institutions. In any case, why should the Vice-Chancellor of a smaller university support a proposal to top-slice the cost of maintaining a distributed national collection unless it will directly benefit his institution; and why should he allocate more money to his library to help develop its collections in a certain field unless it is of direct benefit to his researchers? Evidence of similar initiatives over the past decade has not been particularly encouraging. At the same time the Report advocates a regional approach, albeit in a vague sort of way. It is not clear that this has been thought through. A collaborative store for libraries on the South coast of England, for example, would be far less use to members of the local universities than is the BL.

The modern universities are having to reinvent themselves. The Government is making it more difficult for them to support much of the excellent research they currently undertake, and at the same time they need to embrace the ambitious widening participation agenda and all it entails. This Report mirrors the larger Government intention to foster research only in a small elite of super- universities. For many such universities this is potentially distressing, especially since they have all worked so hard to improve their positions in the Research Assessment Exercise. More than ever before the message is that they should concentrate on teaching, so our libraries will need to reflect this.

One thing is certain. There will never be enough money for us to meet all the needs of our students and researchers. So if we should take advantage of the proposed economies of scale promised by this new infrastructure. This will make it easier for us to concentrate on providing the core materials for our students. Unfortunately the distinction between materials for teaching and research, while elegant, is not so clear-cut in practice. There is evidence that in the humanities and social sciences a surprisingly large amount of material serves both purposes. If lack of funds forces us to abandon our research library ambitions, our collections, both printed and electronic, will be greatly diminished in range and depth, and this downward spiral will be hard to arrest. For institutions like ours the only sensible response is to take the Report's articulated aims at face value, and ensure that we have seats at the table when the goodies are distributed. It will be better for everybody that way.

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Notes:

1. I am grateful to my colleague at the University of Sussex, Ben Wynne, for his advice in the preparation of this article.
2. The opinions expressed are mine and should not be taken to represent the official views of the University of Sussex.