What comes after certainty? Research libraries and the changing information environment

Based on a paper presented at the 27th UKSG Conference, Manchester, March 2004

The changing demands on research libraries over the last thirty years have resulted in a huge shift in how they are designed, managed and funded. The future promises at least as much change, as we come to grips with new challenges, such as those presented by e-science, resourcing models and the need for entrepreneurial skills among library directors. The Library Service of the new University of Manchester comes into being on 1 October 2004. It will need innovative and effective structures to meet the immediate needs of the University community, whilst remaining sufficiently resilient and flexible to cope with a rapidly evolving external environment. This paper examines and balances the drivers for change, and concludes that the flexibility and initiative shown by librarians has added real value to what their universities have achieved.

BILL SIMPSON
Director and University Librarian,
John Rylands University Library
of Manchester

Introduction

As the title implies, my concern is with what comes after certainty. Much of the following is based on experience at Manchester and elsewhere, and so it is partly a personal response to the whole idea of change. It also partly represents professional reflections, some of which I have come up with myself, and some of which I have gleaned from colleagues. Change, whether or not we are aware of it, is another name for life: what we are all living through at the moment is a process of very profound change. It has become endemic. It has become the normal pattern of life for all of us. The key issue is whether we can control it and make it work for us, or whether we become the victims of change in what we do. Talking from a research library perspective, I am going to be emphasizing, as far as I can, the element of our controlling the change.

Then and now

If I can just look back a little bit, thirty years is a long time: 1970 seems like the end of the Middle Ages. Judith Elkin very kindly pointed out a little

earlier in the meeting where this paper was presented that I might remember the first RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) twenty years ago. That was, I assume, a reflection on my greying hair and suchlike. But I do remember very well, when I began my library career in 1969, how different a world it was. One can mention a few elements here. We had hardly any computers. We had no RAEs. We had no concept of 'value for money' or 'quality audit', and, in terms of how libraries themselves were physically organized, they were more like they would have been in the Middle Ages than how they have become today. This is one of the things on which I reflected in my last job at Trinity College Dublin (TCD), where I had the great privilege of being able to preside over the building of a great new library.

The curious thing was that that Library, the James Ussher, which opened in 2002, was only thirty-five years later chronologically than the previous main library structure, the Berkeley Library. Yet the Berkeley bore more resemblance, in concept, to the Old Library that was opened in 1731 than it did to the new library we opened just

two years ago. This was because, like the Old Library, the Berkeley, which had been designed in the early 1960s, was conceived in a period when people saw libraries as being essentially static and unchanging. They were about keeping, preserving and curating the content, not about exploiting it or about responding to the real needs of the user community. In contrast, thirty-five years on, everything we do is geared to ensuring that we deliver what that user community needs and what society at large requires. So there has been a huge and very fundamental change.

The role of the University Librarian has fundamentally changed, too. The activity that our predecessors undertook was based very much on the idea that you interacted with the great and the good, and that your job was about collection building and acquiring great treasures. Thank God there is still an element of that today, but it is far less a part of our job than it would have been, say, thirty or forty years ago. Instead, we have had to become entrepreneurial research library directors. We have had to deal with the fact that we now have far more users than we have ever had before, because research universities are in the business of growing constantly and meeting the increasing demands of society. In creating the new University of Manchester, we shall have the biggest university in the country. We will not have the biggest university library, unfortunately, although we are pretty big, but mere size is not really our objective. The whole emphasis in creating a new University in Manchester has been to enable us to do big research. We shall be large anyway, simply by the aggregation of UMIST and Victoria University of Manchester student numbers. So, although the emphasis and the thrust are about competing globally in terms of scientific research and the like, the inevitable consequence of that is going to be much greater student numbers, imposing more demands on the limited resources that we have.

Also, of course, we are obliged to give people more choice. People now have choices as to whether they come to the Library. They may wish to do things from their desktop, from their laboratory or from where they happen to be travelling. Wherever they happen to be, they want immediate access. We did a review of libraries and information services in the run-up towards our integration of the two universities and one of the student representatives on the review body said:

"I don't want to know about any library I have to visit physically." That is something we should all think about very seriously. We have a role. We provide the content, but he was not interested in the physical contact. That is one of the challenges we face.

At the same time, we have the challenge of providing twenty-four-hour access seven days a week for those people who do want to use our libraries physically. Those include people who have no alternative in terms of where they work, who do need to use physical stock, who are non-traditional in how they organize their study. We have also to meet people's demands for a wide variety of resources. We think very glibly, and probably for much of the time correctly, in terms of electronic resources, but a library such as ours still has a huge print legacy and, in terms of the historic Rylands, we have the most magnificent special collections. They still need to be resourced and funded. We are currently going through a major programme of refurbishment for the Rylands, and although I find that much of my time goes into Project Unity, an awful lot of the rest goes into 'Unlocking the Rylands' as another major project. I tend to do the day job in the evenings on the back of all that. This is typical of the demands made on our time. Increasing demands are made on our resources. We are trying, like most research libraries, to meet needs for physical access to traditional holdings at the same time as providing electronic resources to wherever somebody is in the world; all this whilst still maintaining that huge and wonderful historic legacy that we have.

So we have to balance all these things while receiving less money in real terms, probably, than our predecessors would have had. We are quite generously funded in Manchester and we hope that will continue, but I am very conscious all the time of the hard choices that one always has to make in terms of what we can do. To broaden our options we have to be entrepreneurial, to go out and generate more income to enable us to do things that we cannot afford from our recurrent funding. We have a major fundraising drive on now for our Rylands project, but we are also looking to build up an endowment once the Rylands project is complete. We know that we shall never have sufficient money from the University because it cannot provide enough to enable us to do all the things that we want to do. So we

are building an endowment to enable us to go beyond the constraints of university funding derived from government, and to engage with those areas of activity – not just historic, but looking to the present and the future as well – in which we shall need to become involved to meet the demands of our user community.

Engaging with the environment

I am trying to be entrepreneurial, as I am sure colleagues in other places are. I sometimes wonder if we are better at it than our predecessors were. I suspect that we are, not because we are better people, but because we have had to do it in a way that they did not. I have used the phrase: 'Use your imagination, Bill'. It stems from an experience I had when I was at the University of London Library, where we had the problem that at the start of every academic year we had no guaranteed funding to run the Library; so we had to go out and 'sing for our supper' in negotiation with the Colleges of the University. I can remember at a working party on one occasion, a very senior academic from LSE said to me, when I pointed out that technically we had no money to pay the bills: "Well, Bill, just use your imagination. You don't really need money up front." I said: "Are you joking? We have staff to pay and bills to pay and all the rest of it, but you say use your imagination!" I have no wish to be rude to academic colleagues, but I did think at that point, "What game are we in here?" There was, though, a truth in what he said, in that increasingly, we do have to use our imagination and we have to think outside the proverbial box in order to do the things that we need to do. We are called upon to be more intuitive, to show vastly more ingenuity and a lot more initiative than we might have been asked to show in the past. Ultimately, the buck does stop with us. Nobody else is going to do it for us. As University Librarian, I know perfectly well that if we get it wrong the V-C will have my head on the block. So the buck stops with us, not with our colleagues and this, together with the need to deliver, has probably driven us to do it better, or at least more vigorously (some might say desperately) than our predecessors needed to.

Looking to the future, which I mentioned a moment ago, I see a number of issues as being key ones that we need to address and that will be drivers for how we go forward. The biggest challenge is that of e-science, or e-research if you like. It is an issue that causes huge concern because I am sure you know that all around us, as we speak, there is massive, globally-based research going on. People are communicating using technologies we can only dream of, and languages for communication with which we are not wholly familiar. As librarians, we have the problem of how we engage with that. Do we engage with it? Is there any way at all in which we can provide the metadata, or be involved in the ultimate storage and retrieval of the digital data being created? We do not know, but the danger is of our being marginalized unless we can engage with this whole area. At the moment, the scientists who are doing these things are not terribly interested in the meagre skills we can bring to the process. We have the job of persuading them, if we are to have a role in this, that we can add value to what they do. This will involve our engaging seriously with the problems of e-science and e-research.

It raises the question of whether we are still relevant and whether we are going to be in the future. Many of you will know Bernard Naylor, formerly Librarian of Southampton University, a very distinguished colleague. I remember Bernard saying to me that he thought that in a hundred years' time the Bodleian, Harvard and similar university libraries (including TCD, where I then was) would survive, but Southampton would not. He was not for one moment denigrating his own Library (and I do ask the indulgence of colleagues from Southampton). The point he was making was that what he believed would survive was the special collections. Here he had assumed that libraries such as the historic Rylands would survive, but the danger was that we would become marginalized – to the extent that we would be seen as being only responsible for historic artefacts, glorious though they are, and as having no immediate relevance. So I think the challenge of e-science wonderfully pinpoints the wider challenge that we face, whilst at the same time raising the question of what kind of role, what kind of relevance we are going to have in the future.

There are other issues we have to address. The whole digital conundrum, for example. How do we deal with the great mass of digital data? Not just e-science, which we perhaps struggle to

understand, but that great mass of other digital data that is being created. How are we going to ensure that we store it and retain access to it in the future? Various initiatives are under way at present. No one has really cracked the problem. It is something which we are going to have to do collectively, as a national or even an international effort, which will certainly involve research libraries and probably others, too.

We have to confront the issue of deep resource sharing. One of the problems we have to overcome is the reluctance of academic colleagues to walk a hundred yards, to accept that providing the best level of value, the best quality of service overall, sometimes means foregoing something locally. We have a job there in persuading our academics of this. One of the things we are looking to do in our new University Library is to transform the people we have called Subject Librarians into Academic Liaison Librarians. The change in the nomenclature is more than simply messing about with semantics. It is a very real attempt to engage with the academic community, to ensure both that we know what they need and that we are able to respond to their needs, whilst, at the same time, persuading academic colleagues of the benefits of going beyond the normally accepted ways of doing things. We will ask them to accept an element of risk and sometimes to give something up locally in the broader interest, which ultimately will benefit those academics themselves. It is an issue in relation to which we have so far failed to deal with the academic resistance and it is something we do need to deal with, particularly among the research libraries. We hope very much that the RLN (Research Libraries Network), which is being launched later this year, will help us to do that by providing a national framework within which we can look at, and hopefully resolve, some of these bigger questions.

Is 'future proofing' possible? It is a very good question, and one which we can only address collectively by trying to look perhaps ten, fifteen, twenty years ahead. The President of our new University is doing that now. At the same time as planning ahead though, I think we have to build flexibility into the structures and the organizations we create and to be flexible ourselves, both in terms of how we respond to existing challenges and in how open we are to accepting new ones. Only this will enable us to deal effectively with

whatever the future throws at us and, as far as possible, to control that future rather than be overwhelmed by it.

The approach to change

As I said, we have a new University Library coming into being in Manchester. It is a tremendously exciting time. We are all working very hard to make it work. It is taking up much of the lives of many people. It involves the merger of three libraries, the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, the Library and Information Service of UMIST and the Library of the Manchester Business School. These are three libraries which have operated independently, each with its own traditions, though we have worked in close co-operation over the years, and it is a very sensitive time. Many people are still passing through a period of uncertainty because we are still allocating roles. Everyone will have a job and there are to be no redundancies, but for very many colleagues there is uncertainty as we work through the processes required legally to ensure that we are seen to be doing everything correctly and openly. During this process I have been enormously impressed by the degree of commitment shown by staff in all three library services. I spend time now talking to the staff of UMIST and MBS, as well as staff at JRULM. What has struck me most is the buy-in to the concept of the new University Library, and the fact that people do genuinely see a huge opportunity to make a step change both in what the Library will offer and in relation to their own development.

In terms of how we organize ourselves, we are doing it by evolution, rather than by revolution. We feel that this is a much better way. This is partly because I think that, if you throw all the bits up in the air and try to start all over again, the danger is that you miss the point of what our users want, and we do have to map ourselves very carefully onto the academic community and its needs. Also, because we are having to move very quickly indeed to have the new set-up fully in place by October, we do not have the time for a revolution. We are still, though, looking to create a new entity and, ultimately, to make that step change as we go forward with the University. We are looking at matrix working with colleagues in academic areas

and in Manchester Computing, but not to converge what we do. Matrix-based working in areas such as e-learning will enable us to use the talents of people from across the spectrum, irrespective of their institutional base, to deliver what the new University will need.

I touched on technology and I asked the question: "Do we use it or does it control us?" What really matters is what our academic colleagues want us to do in terms of all of this. I have just talked of e-learning. One of the key concerns that we are addressing through our matrix working is the problem that, in terms of e-learning, academics have tended to think that they always know best. There have been many cases in other universities where we find that librarians feel wholly excluded from the process. It may be the fault of librarians. It may be that we are not assertive enough. We do not necessarily put ourselves forward, or bring to the party what we might, but we intend, through matrix working, to ensure that all who can contribute their skills are brought into the broader equation.

In terms of empowering ourselves and being bold, I mentioned just now the fact that we do tend to be a little bit hesitant in coming forward. In relation to SPARC and areas like the open archive initiatives, one of the things we are trying to do in terms of our academic liaison is to ensure that we overcome the obstacle we sometimes find of academic colleagues who are wedded to traditional publishing methods, often for very good reason. What struck us when we had our review of libraries and information services was that academic colleagues were very often far more conservative than the librarians or the information specialists. We were saying: "Think new, think big, let's find new ways of doing things", and they were saying: "Really, you are pretty good. We would like more of the same, but even better, please." That is interesting, and I do think we have a task there to get outside and sell things like open archive initiatives to academic colleagues, yet, at the same time, to do it by engaging with them and being sure that we are addressing their real needs, rather than imposing a 'librarians' construct' on them.

This brings me on to how we deal with the great and the good in our universities. The Library is always everyone's second favourite, as we all know. Everyone says they love the Library, what a

vital resource it is, until it comes to voting for resources compared with their own school, department or faculty, when the library always comes second. So how do we get over that? Well, try to get the boss on board, the V-C, the President, or whoever. You have to cherish your V-C. Try to persuade them of the value of what you are doing. You do not get your message across to people by saying: "If we haven't got the resources we don't do it." You do it anyway, and you do it as well as you can; then you make the case for getting the resource on the basis of what you are achieving.

It is all about being realistic. I have found over the years with library colleagues that I have sometimes had to say: "However important we regard the Library as being (and we see it as the centre of our universe), the reality is that it comes somewhere down the pecking order in the University." Most Vice-Chancellors (and Sir Brian Follett, himself a former V-C, said it not long ago) do not think about the library very much, unless it is in a total mess and people are screaming about it. Your V-C is much more concerned about how to fund big science and whether the students are revolting. If the library is reasonably well managed, it does not figure high in the pecking order. Hence the importance of lobbying, engaging, being seen to deliver, and having the academic community on board as your loyal and positive supporters.

At the same time, being friends with your neighbours is crucial and involves much politics and many practicalities of co-operation. We try to be very good neighbours in our region here. We are the biggest library in the North of England and our ambition is to be seen as THE Library of the North. That will happen, I have no doubt, but the politics and the practicalities are vital in terms of our being seen to deliver, and being seen as a good team player in what we do. We recently signed up to a consortial agreement within the North-West with NoWAL. We had some reservations about this in terms of our own needs, but we felt that politically, and in order to be seen as good team players and supportive of smaller libraries in the region, we should sign up. The cost was not astronomical and it was helpful to the wider community, so we decided that as a major research library we had a responsibility to do this. We do try to ensure that we are feeding something in as well as taking something out of our surrounding libraries and our community. We also try, through

our special collections in particular, to engage with our wider local community. We see the historic Rylands as a way in which the University puts something back, because the University maintains it, and we have in it some of the most magnificent collections in the world. We say to people: "Come in, use them and enjoy them. This is something that the University and the Library give back to the community of which we are a part."

In terms of the benefits of consortia, it is obviously not just the big boys giving to the others. Everybody brings something to it. I remember that in my last job at Trinity we set up an organization called ALCID, which stood for Academic Libraries Co-operating in Dublin. It became a national body a little later, but I can remember having quite a job selling it to my Library Committee, who thought that, because Trinity was the biggest library in the country –a legal deposit library, everybody would go there. I had to say: "Bear in mind that legal deposit restricts our ability to buy other things. There are unique holdings in other libraries as well that people will use." At the end of the day we did it, and the traffic was roughly equal. Everybody brings something to the party and that is what we try to remember, even as a research library. All contribute, we do share the resource, and we all gain from that kind of sharing and consortial activity.

Conclusion

We value ourselves. We are proud of what we do. We pass on a historic legacy of which there is nothing to be ashamed. We have a huge historic resource but, as with other libraries, in terms of the quality of service and the commitment we show, we pass on more than artefacts and information. We try to be sexy and we try to add value. We try to ensure that what we do is relevant, we make use of today's jargon, and we use fancy names to disguise the fact that we are still libraries. That does not matter. The key thing is what we are passing on, and what we are delivering to our community. What we are really delivering, and we have nothing to be ashamed of in this, because we do it pretty well, is quality on a shoestring. Because, if you look at what we add to the universities, the fact is that every time a department grows, every time a faculty grows, it will probably get more resources. If it is reasonably lucky it will. The Library does not. If every department in a forty-department university gets fifty more students, the Library gets another two thousand. It gets no recognition for that, but we deliver on it and, whether we are a research library or not, we are offering that kind of added value constantly. It is *real* quality on a shoestring, and I do wish that element could be reflected for libraries in the RAE as well. So let us keep it simple and keep up the good work whilst not neglecting the challenges and opportunities.

■ **Bill Simpson**
Director and University Librarian
John Rylands University Library of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 9PP, UK
E-mail: bill.simpson@man.ac.uk