

Tilburg University

Review of the book Libraries and IT

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Libraries and IT. Working papers of the Information Technology Sub-Committee of the HEFCs' Libraries Review. Bath: UKOLN, 1993. UK£20.00 (within Europe); UK£25 (outside Europe). 306 pp. ISBN 0 9516856 2 7.

The Review of library provision which was set up by the Higher Education Funding Councils in 1992 comes at a very important stage of library

development. There are changes in the libraries' environment, in national policy with respect to participation in higher education, and rapid changes in the information cycle with a growing emphasis on electronic information and online access to information. Libraries have to make up their mind to define a strategy for the future and to identify their role in the new networked environment. They have to do so locally in conjunction with the parent institution and nationally in cooperation with each other and with other important partners in the information sector.

Useful information for this process is provided by the publication of the working papers of the IT Sub-committees of the HEFCs' Review Committee, chaired by Lynne Brindley. More than twenty distinguished information professionals give an overview of various topics, presenting ideas and information as an input for recommendations by the Committee. The topics vary and so do the papers, but fortunately there are quite a number of elaborated, clear and innovative contributions. Of special interest – because of the state-of-the-art overview which is provided – are papers on the present status of electronic publishing by David Brown, on the SuperJANET project by Michael Breaks and on standards of relevance to networked library services by Lorcan Dempsey, Anne Mumford and Bill Tuck.

It is clear that the presentation of working papers from various sources can lead to some overlap. But this does not matter too much when important issues are discussed. I would like to emphasize four important issues in the various working papers:

1. The need for a *policy* for the future development of information services within institutions of higher education. As suggested by Lynne Brindley, the HEFCs could develop a framework for the *information strategy* of institutions.
2. The need for a *forum* in the UK for the discussion of networking information and for the implementation of decisions. The papers clarify the importance of integration and interoperability between different systems and of *agreeing on protocols, formats and standards*.
3. For any institution *an effective IT infrastructure* will be a basic requirement. Keyword in this respect is the need for an *open* architecture. The use of windows and client-server architecture can provide a framework for integration and transparency. The increasing relevance of Z39.50 as the protocol for seamless access to heterogeneous resources through existing user interfaces is stressed. On a national level the implementation of SuperJANET can provide the bandwidth which will be required in the near future for the transmission of data, voice, still and moving images.
4. The need to encourage projects to examine the numerous opportunities in

electronic communication, electronic document delivery, electronic publishing, distributed databases, etc., but also to identify the pitfalls and constraints of the 'virtual' library. In this respect I would like to stress that the economic factor of the electronic distribution of information will be *the vital issue* both for the publishers, the information brokers, the libraries and, of course, the end-users.

There are also some elements which could have been more fully elaborated in the various papers. The most important element is the impact of new technologies on people, for example on our staff, which will have to work in a quite different manner, needing new skills. Even more important is the impact on the user and the user environment.

Another topic I would like to mention is the importance of the development of knowledge navigators in order to facilitate the search process of the user in the information chaos. In her paper on 'Networked information: tools and training' Jill Foster touches on these topics, but focuses too much on network training. In the new electronic environment libraries and librarians have to show that their services can add value to the process of higher education. I personally would like to emphasize the need for a close liaison with researchers and teachers in order to support them in solving information problems. For that reason we need employees with a combination of skills. The most important ones will be electronic information management and subject knowledge.

It is obvious that the library situation in the Netherlands differs from that in the UK in a number of ways. First of all, there are important differences in the system of higher education and in government policy. With respect to the 'library world' the role of the British Library as a national library and the existence of quite a lot of different library automation systems in the UK are significant. The Dutch situation is very much determined by the cooperation of the vast majority of university libraries in the Center for Library Automation (Pica) now offering a very good national infrastructure with shared cataloguing, an automated national ILL system and corresponding local library systems. The national infrastructure looks good because of the growing cooperation between Pica and Surfnet, the Dutch equivalent to JANET. Nonetheless, there is as yet no national information policy identifying the role of the various players. New initiatives, to be fully implemented in 1994, will focus on:

- end-user access to central and distributed databases;
- local projects to store documents and images on various servers;
- electronic document delivery.

Pica, in cooperation with Surfnet, will soon offer end-user access to the National Catalogue and to an Online Contents database with bibliographic

information on 14,000 current journals. Pica and Tilburg University are now developing a Document Delivery Server for the electronic transmission of journal articles, which can be located in distributed or central databases. Journal articles can be delivered electronically from one library server to another and from the local server to the end-user workstation.

In our efforts at Tilburg University to develop a new and future oriented library, which was opened in 1992, we faced a lot of the problems addressed in the working papers. The most important lessons we learnt are

- the need for integration of library information services with other computing services in order to provide a better support to learning, teaching and research;
- the need for a full agreement on the future IT strategy within the university;
- strong cooperation between the library and the computer center;
- the need for a sophisticated infrastructure based on open solutions and agreed standards;
- the importance of staff development and of education as a continuous process.

The driving force to implement new information technologies is evidently not the fascination with new techniques but the opportunity to improve the services to the end-user.

A recent recommendation of the Scientific Technical Council of SURF ('Investing in Knowledge Infrastructure') stressed the importance of a coherent university infrastructure and desktop integration as a model for the end-user environment. In this respect Tilburg University is mentioned as an example for the Dutch situation. In this way pilot projects can stimulate developments which aim to take full advantage of new technologies, but actions must always start with plans and ideas about future directions. I am sure that these working papers of the IT Sub-committee can contribute to the discussions on these issues, internationally, nationally and locally. And, finally, every single library will have to make up its mind whether to be involved in the process of user-oriented innovation or not.

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