Gaining an Understanding of Technical Services Operations in the United Kingdom: Report from the 2010 Marcia Tuttle International Award Recipient

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The organization and operations of technical services has been a passion of mine for over a decade. Even prior to becoming a department head at K-State Libraries, I was intrigued by staffing issues and workflows. How can we do this better, more efficiently? NASIG conferences provided me the opportunity to talk to colleagues from across the country about their serials departments and their management of electronic resources.

After attending the UKSG Annual Conference in 2008, it struck me that it would be fascinating to visit academic libraries in the United Kingdom and have these same discussions. I'd broached the idea as a sabbatical project for spring 2010 with my dean, spoke to colleagues in the UK about their willingness to spend a half day with me, and then realized that the availability – if chosen – of the Marcia Tuttle International Award might ease the financial stress of the trip I planned out.

Exploring libraries' behind-the-scenes operations was accomplished through my arrangements to visit serials, electronic resources, acquisitions, and/or repository librarians at university libraries in the UK. Many of these meetings included discussions with their library directors, collection development librarians, and with information technology staff. My hosts were generous with their time, often provided me tours of their facilities, and extended invitations to follow up with additional visits or e-mail. One tremendously successful

outcome of these meetings was my ability to extend my network through these librarians at the UKSG Annual Conference and Exhibition in mid-April. Everyone I spoke with was intrigued by my sabbatical project and amazed at the schedule I'd set; I had invitations to visit several other libraries if time permitted.

Narrative of Activities

UK Libraries' Technical and Digital Services

I'd spoken with two librarians from UKSG about my ideas prior to submitting the request for sabbatical leave, which was approved in December 2008. At the UKSG 2009 conference, I broached the topic with several other individuals who expressed a willingness to set up visits. It wasn't until fall 2009 through February 2010 that I mapped out possible itineraries and sent formal inquiries to thirteen institutions. I finalized arrangements for eleven meetings prior to my departure from Kansas in mid-March.

Nottingham served as my home base for three weeks, which placed me within two to two-and-a half hours of six of my initial site visits. Following the UKSG conference in Edinburgh, I would visit three libraries in Scotland, then plot out the remaining visits with other librarians and UKSG officers on my travel south toward London.

I arrived in Nottingham on March 17. My first meeting with librarians at Cranfield University was on March 19 and turned out to be fortuitous: Dr. Hazel Woodward, university librarian at Cranfield University, is heavily involved with UKSG after many years' service. Dr. Woodward also gave me an overview on funding for

higher education in the United Kingdom, something I'd not considered might add value to the information I gleaned from the librarians I subsequently visited. In addition to Cranfield (with 6,000 FTE), I met with librarians at:

Manchester Metropolitan University (33,000 FTE)
University of Nottingham (32,000 FTE)
University of Birmingham (26,000 FTE)
University of Edinburgh (24,000 FTE)
University of Hertfordshire (24,000 FTE)
Nottingham Trent University (23,000 FTE)
University of Glasgow (17,000 FTE)
University of Huddersfield (16,000 FTE)
University of Sunderland (12,000 FTE)
University of Stirling (7,000 FTE)

I had expected to see comparable staffing patterns across those libraries with FTE similar to that of K-State (approximately 20,000 FTE). What I discovered at these UK institutions was a wide diversity in the deployment of technical services and digital libraries staff with significantly more emphasis on acquisitions vs. cataloging, and ongoing attention to identify ways to deal with electronic resources and digital initiatives.

Many of these UK libraries, like their U.S. counterparts, are struggling to find the right balance of staffing in these areas and look for flexibility in the do-more-with-less era. The majority have witnessed decreases in overall staffing: most through attrition, some through lay-offs. There is a much higher level of part-time employees. Shifts in job responsibilities to incorporate processes for electronic resources, or the set up of separate units to manage those processes—all of which require a higher level of professional or paraprofessional staff—are common.

Overall these UK libraries have not, at least until this year, seen the level of budget cuts that many state-supported institutions in the U.S. have experienced over the last two to three years. Budgets at most libraries have been flat during this same time period. However, almost every library anticipated cuts from 3% to 15% for 2011; because of VAT (value-added taxes) on purchases

of electronic resources, most have had annual journal cancellation projects—some significant—in place for the last decade. Several libraries dropped out of big deal electronic journal packages because of their inflexibility.

Cataloging

Cataloging activities, which include responsibilities such as the enhancement of bibliographic records, subject analysis, and the creation of original records and authority control, are minimal at the majority of the institutions I visited. I learned this has been standard practice at UK libraries for several decades, unlike the priority placed on it by libraries in the United States. Retrospective conversion is another activity, appearing to be most common at the libraries with larger staffs.

Acquisitions

Most monograph materials are ordered shelf-ready (90–99%) at every institution I visited, with the exception of Glasgow. Receipt processes for those materials at the majority of institutions are being managed by acquisitions rather than cataloging staff, and there is virtually no checking and no enhancement of the vendor-supplied records. Most continue to process print journals. Some libraries have transitioned to electronic-only where possible, but many maintain print and electronic subscriptions in order to avoid paying VAT. The value added tax is not applied to print, but is applied to electronic resources.

Monograph and serials acquisitions remain separate units, or are managed by different individuals in most of these libraries, but there is overlap at smaller libraries. Integration of print and electronic acquisitions is becoming standard operating procedure for most; however, there is a real mix at larger institutions, some of whom have a further divide between serials print and electronic responsibilities. Many have separate staff managing overall e-resources processes beyond acquisitions, including activities such as troubleshooting, usage statistics gathering, and access.

Electronic Resources

Mongraph e-resources acquisitions are becoming integrated almost naturally with print processes for individually purchased titles at almost every library I visited. Many libraries have begun strategic targeting of budgets for e-books, with one institution reporting that 55% of its monographs budget is allocated toward that format. A small handful are devoting funds toward patron-initiated purchase for e-books; almost every institution is at least considering this model, but share concerns about the types of material that might be added to their collections. All noted decreases in the purchase of print books driven by serials inflation and the increased emphasis on electronic products.

As I previously noted, many large institutions have separate units whose responsibilities incorporate all aspects of subscription-based e-resources, from acquisition to access. This includes management of the knowledge base for journal A-Z listings and the ERM, when one has been implemented. These units, like similar ones I am aware of at U.S. institutions, are notoriously understaffed considering that budgets are split 70/30 or 80/20 in favor of electronic resources and serials. This disparity is being acknowledged by some administrators and FTE is shifting—slowly—to provide the staff to support the activities related to the electronic content.

Digital Libraries

Few of the libraries I visited are actively involved in digitization efforts related to their own collections. However, deposits to institutional repositories (IRs) hosting the scholarly output of the university has, at almost every institution, been mandated within the last two years. Compliance is rare, except for electronic theses (the equivalent to our doctoral dissertations). The librarians I spoke with are very anxious to play a part in providing access to the research output of their universities; they are also very anxious about how to manage the potential influx of materials when staff across all areas of their organizations is being downsized.

The majority of libraries are responsible for their IRs, some with support from separate IT units. The libraries have undertaken the role to educate faculty on compliance, open access, copyright, and the submission process. At least one has chosen to reposition and re-brand its IR, in order to purposefully not identify itself outright as a library function.

A few institutions have a dedicated IR manager and staff—generally 1-2 FTE—but the majority of duties are being integrated into existing positions. I commonly heard that .5 FTE shifted from acquisitions, or that ILS staff input citation information. While faculty or their administrative staff can self-submit at most institutions, the majority of submissions are managed by library staff in technical services units who create the metadata and verify copyright compliance. A couple of institutions do subject analysis of the works. The amount of marketing and advocacy of the IR varies from institution to institution; most do very little at this point but see this as a new role for subject liaisons. Cranfield, with dedicated IR staff, took part in a JISC-funded project to identify and find solutions to barriers in the IR submission process; marketing and educating their faculty is a high priority.

The biggest revelation in my discussions was that the majority of these institutions' IRs are citation databases, not full text. One estimated only 20% of the content in their IR was full text. Budgets at UK public institutions are tied heavily to research output, and the IRs were employed to track scholarly publications. As advocacy and awareness of the benefits of open access increase, everyone I spoke with expects to see an increase in full-text deposits.

Scholarship or Professional Benefits

The information-gathering I completed via research, face-to-face meetings, and UKSG conference attendance was successful and provided many insights. I discovered that technical services and digital libraries operations in the United Kingdom have many similarities to those at K-State and other U.S. institutions that I am familiar with, but also have a few

profound differences.

My observations of library staffing are fairly general in nature, attempting to identify trends and similarities amongst various institutions. One of my goals was to look for best practices and honestly, I feel that my own organization is on par with, or ahead of, almost every institution I visited. We are building an environment through our own major reorganization that will allow for increased flexibility in a time when libraries are redefining missions to highlight their value to their institutions. These uncertain budgetary times certainly drive some of those initiatives, but technology and the way we do business is just as big a factor.

A few of those best practices did surface in my discussions about IRs, especially in the areas of marketing and advocacy. NASIGers who aren't already involved with their institutions' IRs might be interested in the Embed Project, http://cclibweb-2.dmz.cranfield.ac.uk/embed/index.php/Embed_Wiki. While the report is specific to IRs, lessons for marketing and outreach—whether that be of NASIG or of the work of individual institutions—might be gleaned from it.

Final Thoughts

The Marcia Tuttle International Award was a significant help toward my living expenses. I wish to extend my gratitude to NASIG's Awards and Recognition Committee and to the NASIG Board for this support.

Networking is one of the best ways to extend one's knowledge and experience. This sabbatical allowed me to meet new colleagues in the UK and to share experiences on the systems we both work with on a regular basis: Voyager, Verde, and DSpace. As I described K-State's programs, staffing and priorities, I saw many nods of agreement. We all face the same issues; we all are looking for ways to increase efficiencies. Our libraries are experiencing transformation from book depository to a place where students and faculty have the resources—physical space, tools, and materials in all formats—to succeed, and we all need to be on board to make that happen.