

External Evaluation of CURL-CoFoR Collaborative Collection Management Project and Partnership

Report commissioned by the Research Information Network (RIN) and the Consortium of Research Libraries in the British Isles (CURL)

Summary

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1 Purpose and methodology

- 1.1 The purpose of the study¹ was to carry out an evaluation of the CURL-CoFoR collaborative collection management (CCM) project that has been supported by CURL, and to make recommendations as to possible long-term CCM directions for research libraries across the UK.
- 1.2 The evaluation was based on the responses to a questionnaire sent to the partners and associates involved in the CoFoR partnership in Russian and East European Studies – to which 19 out of 21 responded – and 20 meetings involving 40 library senior and middle managers in all. The work was carried out over a period of two months in February and March 2006.

2 CCM and the CoFoR project

- 2.1 The search for collaborative collection management (CCM) solutions stems from a widely shared concern, acknowledged in the *Final Report* of the Research Support Libraries Group² in 2003, that uncoordinated development of research collections in university and other libraries may increasingly jeopardise the UK's ability to provide for researchers a comprehensive coverage of research material in key subject and disciplinary areas. The aim of CCM is thus greater co-ordination across institutions in the acquisition and retention of resources, with a view to minimising both unwanted duplication and undesirable gaps in the distributed national research collection.
- 2.2 Research libraries have, however, shown some reluctance to engage in the kind of 'deep resource sharing' under which they would commit not only to make their resources available to others, but also to sustain and develop their collections in specific subject areas for the benefit of researchers across the UK. The study on *Barriers to Resource Sharing among Higher Education Libraries*³ concluded in 2002 that 'the primary barrier to greater and deeper resource sharing [is] that no strong and convincing case for it has been made to HEIs'; and it recommended that studies be undertaken to demonstrate the benefits – financial and otherwise – of different forms of resource sharing.
- 2.3 It was within this context that CURL decided in 2004 to fund CoFoR (Collaboration For Research), based on the COCOREES (Collaborative Collection Management for Russian and East European Studies) project, the most advanced of all existing CCM initiatives at the time.
- 2.4 The project established a voluntary CoFoR-REES partnership, under which research libraries with significant Russian and East European Studies (REES) collections make commitments on retention, transfers and acquisition in specific areas. There are 19 research libraries from 17 institutions in the partnership: 14 HEIs, 2 national libraries

¹ The study was undertaken on behalf of RIN and CURL by Marie-Pierre Détraz of the MPD Consultancy (<http://mpdconsult.co.uk/>) ; the full report is available on the RIN and CURL websites respectively at www.rin.ac.uk and www.curl.ac.uk .

² Report produced in 2003 and available at <http://www.rslg.ac.uk/> and at www.rin.ac.uk

³ The Final Report (January 2002) of the study is available at <http://www.rslp.ac.uk/circs/> . See item 13 in the Executive Summary.

(including the British Library) and 3 specialised libraries. Together they comprise the majority of substantial REES research collections in the UK, with an overall annual acquisition expenditure on REES materials of ca. £700,000. The partnership has now been in existence for ca. 1½ years.

- 2.5 Through the partnership the project has developed a *Collaborative Collection Management Toolkit*⁴, which describes the CoFoR methodology for setting-up and maintaining similar schemes in other subject areas.

3 Findings

The CoFoR-REES Partnership

- 3.1 The partner libraries have signed a Partnership Agreement to cover the ten years 1 September 2004 – 31 August 2014. The Agreement lists specific retention, transfer and acquisition commitments allocated to and agreed by each partner. The main features are that:
- Retention commitments are expected to last for the full 10 years, with any stock being considered for disposal offered for transfer to other members of the partnership;
 - Partners are not asked either to increase the current scale or scope of their acquisitions as set out in their existing collection policies;
 - Commitments are reviewed regularly, and at partners' request 'in the event of serious and unforeseen changes of circumstances', including changes in institutional research priorities;
 - Partners will provide 12 months' notice if they intend to reduce commitments, cancel unique serials titles, or withdraw from the scheme;
 - Partners are expected to provide the scheme administrator with data annually, including expenditure and acquisitions data, and updates of collection-level descriptions and collecting policies.
- 3.2 The report presents a mixed picture in terms of the commitments made by individual partner libraries. Thus it finds that most partners have identified a number of subject areas where they will accept transfers of material from other institutions. The report argues that this list of subject areas is a better indication of partner libraries' collecting strengths and priorities than is the list of retention commitments. For many institutions – including the largest ones – have simply re-committed to their current policies of 'near-total' retention.
- 3.3 The picture on acquisition commitments is patchy. Only ten partners have made such commitments, and only two have specified their length. Moreover, the overall list of subject areas covered by the commitments omits important areas such as politics and 20th-21st Century literature. The relatively low level of acquisition commitments, particularly from HE libraries, arises from uncertainty as to future budgets levels, coupled with a requirement to meet the changing needs of the institution's researchers.
- 3.4 The report also finds that it is difficult to judge the scale of the acquisition commitments made so far. For individual institutions have committed simply to maintain 'current collecting levels' in specific areas. And the commitments made by two of the three major HE partners (accounting together with the BL for 75% of all REES acquisition expenditure) seem to represent only a small proportion of their overall REES acquisitions as set out in their existing collection policies. The difficulties are exacerbated because acquisition commitments are not publicised in the same document as the libraries' collection-level descriptions and collecting policies. Thus it is not easy to judge the scale (of holdings and of new acquisitions) of a collection with

⁴ See at http://www.cocorees.ac.uk/docs/COFOR_Toolkit.doc

- an associated acquisition commitment, as against a collection for which no acquisition commitment has been made.
- 3.5 Nevertheless, the report finds that 7 out of 17 partners believe the scheme has already made an impact on their collection management (CM) decisions and that they have taken decisions or made plans in the light of their participation in the scheme. But quantifiable outcomes - in the form of withdrawals, subscription cancellations, transfers, space or financial savings, or acquisitions - arising from these commitments and decisions to date, or planned over the next two years, are so far negligible. In this context, it is not surprising that the report also finds that costs falling on institutions have so far also been very small; but they might rise if activity were to increase significantly.
- 3.6 Overall, the report finds that there is a feeling amongst the partners that the CoFoR scheme has at this relatively early stage yet to come into its own; but that it is important to preserve and develop it further because
- it has raised awareness of UK research libraries' collecting strengths and priorities in REES and made it easier for librarians to discuss CM policies with academics;
 - it provides a framework for making difficult retention and acquisition decisions in a more rational and nationally-responsible way;
 - the framework has also facilitated the compilation of a "Desiderata List" identifying major collection gaps – expensive but important research resources that no partner library has acquired – which could provide a basis for nationally-coordinated acquisition efforts and initiatives; and
 - the framework will become increasingly valuable as libraries experience growing space and budgetary constraints.

The CoFoR Methodology and Toolkit

- 3.7 One of the major outputs of the project has been the CoFoR Toolkit, which describes the CoFoR methodology, including, in particular, the Partnership Agreement and Allocation Scheme templates. The report finds that the document has been well received as a basis for conducting the discussions and negotiations between libraries - and between librarians and academics – necessary to make CCM a reality.
- 3.8 The report also finds that there is a perceived need for a 'lite' version which omits, in particular, the current guidelines referring to the mapping of research activity, and the listing of serials holdings, both exercises having proved cumbersome and costly⁵. It is suggested that the research mapping exercise could be replaced by the inclusion of succinct summaries of relevant institutional research priorities in the annually-updated Collection Policy Statements that partners provide. And any future serials listing project should be based upon the SUNCAT pilot serials union catalogue for the UK.
- 3.9 With these amendments, the report finds an overwhelming view amongst HE library managers and representatives of subject-specific library groups that the Toolkit represents a starting point – no more - for any extension of the scheme to other subject areas. For the terms of the agreement and its underlying principles would have to be discussed and negotiated with each relevant faculty in each of the partner institutions in the same way as CoFoR-REES was.
- 3.10 The report argues that the need for such discussion and negotiation arises because academics are unfamiliar with the concept of cross-institutional sharing of collecting responsibilities and are reluctant to take full account of all the implications of libraries' space shortages and declining purchasing power. Moreover, both academics and university senior managers operate in a competitive environment that is not always

⁵ See CURL-CoFoR Project. *Final Report of the Project Management Team (abridged)* at <http://www.cocorees.ac.uk/Coforfinalrepo2.doc>, p. 9

conducive to collaboration. The report therefore recommends a high-level co-ordinated advocacy campaign to promote the benefits that CCM initiatives such as CoFoR, the National Research Reserve (NRR), and large-scale digitisation efforts, will bring to both institutions and their researchers.

- 3.11 The report concludes – on the basis of discussions with those involved with CoFoR and with other library groups - that neither this high-level advocacy work nor the development and implementation of other subject-specific schemes will take place without some additional resources. Tight library budgets and pressure on staff mean that subject librarians cannot carry out the necessary tasks such as negotiating and updating commitments or regularly gathering data. And subject-specific library groups do not have the necessary resources to undertake these tasks themselves or hire others to do so.
- 3.12 The report estimates that one full-time CoFoR officer would be able to work with subject groups and assist them in setting up and maintaining a dozen or so subject-specific schemes over a period of three years. The creation such a post would also help to achieve consistency in advocacy and data collection across the disciplines, while ensuring that the framework remains light-touch.
- 3.13 In the light of the responses from CoFoR partner libraries the report finds a consensus on the need to concentrate on area studies and related languages (e.g. Asian, Latin American, REES studies), which cut across disciplines (e.g. history, politics, law, literature), and on foreign languages and literatures in general. Such an approach may fit with broader measures now being put in place by HEFCE and others to support ‘strategically important and vulnerable subjects’. There seems to be less interest in CCM approaches in the natural sciences and engineering. The report notes, however, that the Mapping Medicine project, which is currently on hold, may provide an opportunity for further discussion of CCM issues, at least in areas such as the history of science.

4 Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study, the report makes a number of recommendations:

- 4.1 The CoFoR initiative should be supported and further developed into a multi-disciplinary framework, building on the work achieved to date but with improvements in two specific areas.
- *Leadership and advocacy.* There should be a high-level and high-profile advocacy campaign aimed at researchers and senior university managers, in order to promote the benefits of a more pro-active approach to the cross-institutional sharing of collecting responsibilities;
 - *Data gathering.* There should be a more sophisticated data-gathering methodology, taking account of the specific requirements of each subject area, in order to gather better information about holdings, expenditure and budgets, and to help identify specific collecting efforts;
- 4.2 The framework for supporting this work should be based on a structure combining both central and distributed elements, broadly as follows (and as set out in Diagram 1, with indication of estimated costs for a period of 3 years)
- *Central elements.* A centrally-funded Co-ordinating Unit should be established with one officer and some IT support which should work in partnership with Subject Groups and a Steering Group to
 - co-ordinate the high-level advocacy campaign;
 - develop the data-gathering methodology;
 - assist Subject Groups in setting up and maintaining subject-specific schemes by carrying out such tasks as negotiating and updating commitments, gathering

- and updating data, facilitating transfer decisions, and co-ordinating and acting on “Desiderata Lists”;
 - assist the Steering Group in developing further initiatives to maximise the impact of CoFoR.
 - *Distributed elements.* Subject Groups including subject librarians (drawing as appropriate on existing subject-specific library groups), should build on the experience of the current CoFoR Management Team and work in partnership with the Co-ordinating Unit to
 - develop and supervise the subject-specific schemes;
 - liaise with the relevant learned societies and professional associations;
 - liaise with the relevant subject-specific library groups, especially to discuss ways of improving the data-gathering;
 - develop strategies to implement the advocacy campaign at institutional level.
 - *Governance.* A Steering Group should be established consisting of senior library managers and the chairs of the Subject Groups, to
 - oversee the development of the various CoFoR schemes and the work of the Co-ordinating Unit;
 - develop further initiatives aimed at maximising the impact of CoFoR, and establish a case for their funding;
 - report to the CCM Strategy Board.
- 4.3 The Steering Group, in partnership with the Co-ordinating Unit, should develop and seek to secure funding for the following initiatives
- A CoFoR-SUNCAT Project to determine whether SUNCAT can identify duplicates and unique holdings of serials in the areas designated by the various subject-specific schemes;
 - A CoFoR-COPAC Programme to add to COPAC (the union catalogue of the holdings of CURL libraries) in a co-ordinated and systematic way the catalogues of research collections held in non-CURL libraries that have been recognised as being of national significance in their relevant subject area
 - A CoFoR Desiderata Lists Programme, to enable subject-specific schemes to make a case / bid for extra central funds to finance some of the collecting gaps identified in such lists;
 - A CoFoR Collection Programme to enable libraries to bid for central funds to continue developing and providing access to major research collections which no longer support their own institutions’ research priorities. The case would have to be made that such collections are of national significance and the material nowhere else collected to an appropriate research level in the UK.
- 4.4 Further CoFoR work should concentrate on area studies and related languages (e.g. Asian, Latin American, REES studies), which cut across disciplines (e.g. history, politics, law, literature), and on foreign languages and literatures in general. Specific priorities within these broad areas should be identified by the subject-specific library groups listed in Diagram 1. Encouragement should also be offered to subject librarians in other subjects and disciplines, including the natural sciences and engineering, to consider whether similar approaches can be applied to their specialist areas.

Diagram 1. Structure of CoFoR Framework