

CURL Members' Meeting 17 March 2005

The Research Libraries Network: some very initial thoughts Michael Jubb, Director, Research Libraries Network

There are two key points to bear in mind when considering the genesis of the RLN: firstly, that there is indeed a long history to the establishment of the RLN, which has resulted in the long involvement on the part of academics in helping to give shape to the new body, and secondly, that the information world has changed radically in the years since the Follett Report

The draft mission that the RLN is currently working on encompasses several significant key words and phrases, which strongly indicate the emphasis in role that the RLN will seek to have in its first years. These key phrases are: leadership, although this implies a deficit that is actually not clear; collaboration – a crucial element in the way the RLN will be operating, since in order to succeed it will have to work in partnership to lever the funds and resources required to make a difference in its initial term - and finally we have the phrase “for the benefit of researchers.” This phrase points both to a relentless focus on end-users that the RLN will be maintaining throughout its life, and to the fact that the RLN is for all professional researchers, not just ones in UK HE. Since its remit will now be broader than straightforwardly supporting libraries that are attached to research institutions, there is even active consideration of changing the name of the organisation from the Research Libraries Network to something that will speak fully to the idea of purveying research support as such.

The RLN will have two key objectives, to establish where change needs to be made to the current research support infrastructure, and to maximise the join-up between the needs and wants of the research community, on the one hand, and information service funders and mediators, on the other. In order to achieve these two main objectives, there will be a concerted, integrated programme of action, which will include the following:

- Linking the digital and hard-copy worlds (including non-print material, e.g., museum objects)
- The need to accommodate different researchers, institutionally and also in terms of disciplines
- Joining together to improve access to resource discovery tools
- Capitalizing on Government recognition that current investment in increasing research output has not been matched with funding to increase research infrastructure
- Join up between the research councils and research information service providers – defining the research infrastructure needed to support a national research strategy
- Scholarly communications – critical for the RLN, insofar that this means all the issues surrounding the free production, sharing and dissemination of research output

The structure and financing of the RLN will be relatively modest. The structure incorporates four separate constituent elements. The Funders Group will be the

accountability mechanism solely. An additional Advisory Body will consist of 12 members initially, the majority being drawn from positions related directly to research, rather than information provision. Furthermore, the RLN will use consultation groups as a means of establishing, on an ongoing and developing basis, the needs of researchers. Finally, the executive office itself will comprise three staff: the RLN Director, the Deputy Director, and a personal assistant. The initial financial structure includes programme investment capital of 1.8 million per year for the first three years, and 1.1 million overall for setup and initial costs. The question already arises as to whether this set of resources will be great enough to make an appreciable impact in the first three years of the RLN.

Operationally speaking, the RLN will have a number of functions: bringing researchers and information providers together, focusing on the needs of professional researchers, wherever situated; building up partnerships with related and cognate bodies - the RLN will have no choice but to lever funding from other organisations, including CURL, and investing in direct support to researchers rather than in research institutions in the UK. An initial plan is due to be presented to the funders group in early June. The RLN is clearly on probation, and it must make a difference within three years. Since it cannot do everything, three or four areas of a 'long list' will provide its overall focus.

Questions for CURL to consider

- How do we ensure that the research community is effectively involved in decision-making?
- How do we lever more resource into the development of the information infrastructure? Will the shift to a full economic costs regime have a positive impact, or are other measures required?
- Have JISC, the BL and others already taken effective charge of all the key issues? How can the RLN maximise its own added value?
- What should the RLN aim to have achieved by 2008
 - for researchers
 - for libraries?

Points arising from discussion following the presentation:

- To ensure that the research community is effectively involved, it would be necessary from CURL's point of view to include all possible research-related groups, from pro-Vice Chancellors to postgraduates. It would also be advisable to use focus groups in the style of RSLP, as well as conduct analyses of needs and wants based on subject disciplines, and use survey techniques in the style of MORI. Importantly too, the information worker should not be left entirely out of the equation, since future national research needs may not be the concern of present academics and current researchers, whose interest in or knowledge of the research support infrastructure will not necessarily be great. There will be a need also to balance the views of 'representative' figures who occupy seats of high office in universities with the 'cutting edge' perspective of up-and-coming researchers and postgraduates, who may be more open to ideas and be more aware of the opportunities that new technology provides.
- In order to lever more resource into the development of the information infrastructure, and accommodate the shift to a full economic costs regime,

CURL would say that the critical success factor for the RLN in supporting research will depend on using vision and big idea tactics, exploiting commercial opportunities by playing to market forces, tapping into Trusts and Foundations, and effectively lobbying the research communities. It is CURL's view that the jury is still out on the Full Economic Costing model, however, and that it can already foresee tensions between national and local information infrastructures.

- In order for the RLN to maximise its own value and identify whether the BL or the JISC have already effectively taken charge of the key issues, CURL recommends the RLN ask itself the following questions: is the JISC sufficiently responsive to the needs of those who are trying to improve the research support infrastructure? Does the JISC do enough to engender permanent services? Have other groups effectively taken charge where the RLN sees its role being performed? The view was expressed also that to maximise its value, the RLN should avoid, despite modest funding, only taking on an evaluative role, or dissipating its energies in many small projects. The RLN should instead concentrate on making sure that the relationship between the JISC and BL becomes more effective, on having a strong role in helping partnership between the HE sector and the BL, and on countering the potential fragmentation of support for researchers. Finally, it must ask itself the question, what is its exit strategy, and should its co-ordinating mantle be taken over by the BL?
- CURL would hope that by 2008, the RLN will have achieved the following for researchers and libraries. For researchers it would hope that a substantial needs analysis will have been carried out, that a Stage 1 resource discovery module of a National Union Catalogue will have been completed, a UK J-STOR set up, and that there will have been substantial moves made towards Full Disclosure, prioritised by researchers. CURL would also hope that by that time, there will be major researcher ownership of the RLN. In terms of libraries themselves, CURL would, like to see by 2008 a fuller vision of where Google-type initiatives might fit in, a recognise stake for all libraries, the RLN becoming a source of advice for libraries' internal strategy planning in relation to national strategy, overall library buy-in of the RLN brand, and for the RLN to have achieved impact with influential bodies.