

Presentation given to the CURL Subject Librarian's conference, June 20th 1997

I'd like to start by giving a brief history of my experience at Glasgow University Library. All my experience as an academic librarian has been there - I started as Head of Circulation then, as subject librarians left to take up new jobs or early retirement and their posts weren't replaced, I took on subject responsibilities first for the engineering faculty, then I became a full-time subject librarian last October, adding chemistry, physics, mathematics, astronomy and forensic science to my portfolio. It can be easily concluded, therefore, that I cannot be called a subject specialist. I have no depth of subject knowledge (I have an arts degree). I'm probably less likely to gain in-depth knowledge of my subject in the way subject librarians have in the past, as I don't have as much time for detailed collection management and I have never done and will never do cataloguing or classification. The job I do and the place I make for myself within the academic community has to be based on the skills I have as a specialist in information and through the skills I have acquired from my training and experience, such as communication and interpersonal skills, which I think have always been a strength of our profession, although perhaps not always recognised as such. I'd like to try and illustrate this now through a discussion of my work.

Subject librarians work in an environment informed by the same national agendas and pressures that are affecting and changing the nature of work in universities as a whole.

Quality assessment, increases in student numbers, changing teaching methodologies to, for example, project based learning, allied to the proliferation of electronic resources aimed at end users, are creating an ever increasing demand for the teaching of information retrieval skills at all levels. For example, the last round of quality assessment in engineering at Glasgow pointed out a deficit in the teaching of transferable skills, and articles in the engineering professional press about the information illiteracy of engineering students pointed out a gap which the faculty has looked to the library to fill. More and more of the teaching I'm doing is integrated into courses run by academic staff - it is not stand alone reader instruction - and it sometimes requires the setting and marking of coursework. There is also demand for the teaching of information retrieval skills at a high level. At Glasgow University all new postgraduate students in science and engineering are required by faculty research committees to undertake a research training course into which the library has a substantial input. We have also been involved in discussion about MRes courses. There are requests for internet training for academic staff. There is a large demand for teaching of generic information handling skills which is very time consuming, especially as much of it is now lab based and requires a lot of preparation.

We have to balance this demand for teaching against the research support we offer. Glasgow University Library has a formal liaison programme which has been in place for several years. Subject librarians regularly contact academic staff and research groups to identify their research needs and create services to support them, such as current awareness services, current contents services, and on-line search services. Subject librarians are 'selling' such services to academic staff. We are finding more innovative ways to market what we offer - for example 'electronic parties' where the offer of free wine is an inducement to academic staff to come and view electronic journals etc. Research support has been sharply focused by the research assessment exercise and raises questions for subject librarians such as how will the university's research strategy affect the work we do, do we support departments selectively and face the consequences of those decisions. The research strategy at Glasgow University is currently being worked out around the concept of the well supported academic and we will have to see where we fit into this picture. The pressures that are being brought to bear on academic staff

filter down to us. Pressures to publish - many academic staff are seeking more citation data etc. Pressures to collaborate, perhaps with industry - I am seeing an increasing demand for specialised information such as patent information.

Subject librarians must be able to negotiate and persuade senior academics (heads of department/planning units) about library provision, which now at Glasgow University has direct budgetary implications for individual planning units. Glasgow University Library is devolving its 'research' budget from this year and planning unit library committees suddenly have real financial clout. We are negotiating the arrangements for this through developing detailed research agreements which have written into them the research requirements of the planning unit and how these will be supported by the library via collection development, subject librarian support and other services. These agreements could be seen as contracts - making the job of a subject librarian more accountable? If so, then certainly more demanding and perhaps more of a professional partnership.

I'd like to look now at some of the difficulties, or perhaps I should say opportunities, I have identified. It is very stressful dealing for demands for information in a subject where you have only a small amount of knowledge - two weeks after I took over as chemistry librarian I was presented with a structure search, which cost me some sleep. Perhaps CURL could think about enabling us to tap into the expertise others have been able to acquire - set up networks for sharing knowledge?

There is a requirement for us to constantly update our technology based skills - traditional cataloguing and classification are being replaced by web navigation, control and authoring and therefore professional development is very important. Projects such as Edulib and Netskills are vital, institutions must make money available for commercial training, and we could also look to more informal fora for exchanges of information to support development.

Things are changing very quickly and we are under pressure to keep up with change and keep the academic staff with whom we work up-to-date. It seems to me that our roles are in flux, there are other people in universities doing not dissimilar work, so how do we find our place?

Collaboration, both within and across institutions, is crucial. Team working, trying to maximise the differing skills we have as subject librarians is important as staffing levels decrease, and it helps to ease what can, at times, be an isolated job (e.g. at Glasgow University Library subject librarians do not do much formal enquiry work - we have a system of duty librarians for the referral of enquiries) and where it is not always clear where you fit into the structure of the organisation.

We do seem to spend a lot of time, within and across institutions, duplicating work. How can we share expertise and materials such as web tutorials or guides to on-line services? I'm interested in such collaboration within the West of Scotland, and as SHEFC is very keen on collaborative projects, there may be money available to pursue collaborative ventures.

I hope I've given you an outline of the pressures and changes which I think are shaping my job - it can be difficult but the job is also challenging and full of potential.

Susan Ashworth
Subject Librarian, Glasgow University Library