

“Books to the ceiling, Books to the sky, My pile of books is a mile high”¹:

What do we do with all the unused books in the modern Research Library?

The University of Manchester Library has been predicated on the traditional research library model of building collections, particularly print ones, which is familiar to us across RLUK. However changes in the environment in recent years have seen the “just in case” model challenged by factors such as:

- Move to electronic provision and the increasing reliance on the virtual library
- The move from a time of financial plenty to more austere times
- the concept of the Library as the jewel in the University crown has evolved to become more focused on the rare and unique rather than sheer volume
- Space as a service – the relationship between stock and service has changed as the pressure on space rises for student group work as well as for quiet study. The ever increasing book stock can leave our libraries looking more like a repository than attractive welcoming, functioning space.

The evidence for use of the physical library and its stock:

Some statistics from the University of Manchester Main Library (excluding special collections or stores):

- The physical Library continues to be well-used with over 1.5 million visits a year of which c100,000 (7%) are from academic staff. Approximately 64% of Library visits are to borrow or return a book and number of loans has remained constant at 700,000 p.a. for the last 5 years.
- There are 1.2 million books on the open shelves and of these 528,000 (44%) have not been borrowed in the last 10 years equating to 15,000 linear metres – almost nine miles worth of shelving. We continue to purchase c30,000 print books each year requiring an additional 1,000 metres of space.
- Using the Copac Collection Management Tool to analyse a significant section of our open shelf collections 30.3% are unique to the Manchester whereas 40.1% are also held in 8 or more COPAC libraries.

Some of the options:

- Why don't we move all our unused stock to stores? One of the predominant factors here is cost - the cost to weed 500,000 books to store has been estimated at £350k, and that excludes the cost of storage itself. Yet once in closed-access store usage figures are often low. Are we in danger of becoming a Bibliotaphos – a burier of books – rather than focussing on access to knowledge wherever it is held?

¹ Arnold Lobel

- Disposal – as can be seen from the figures above, much of our book stock is duplicated across other Copac libraries and this will be a common theme across research libraries. However there are a number of risks associated with uncoordinated disposal, particularly around our academic reputation and potential disposal of important material.

The emotive issues:

Academic staff often have a strong residual attachment to books but is this the triumph of carrier over content? As academic use of physical libraries declines so their view of libraries perhaps becomes preserved in aspic. Two recent articles on the subject in the THE have focused on nostalgia of book use and traditional methods of study – John Sutherland laments the move to digital and away from the traditional library environment² but on the other hand Gabriel Egan is forthright in saying “I strongly dislike the fetishism of the book some scholars go in for”³.

The intellectual issues:

Today’s unused book can become tomorrow’s special collection and so management of a storage/disposal policy is important. It gives confidence that we have the professional judgement as librarians to understand our collections. However there are a number of challenging factors:

- Considerably more time and intellectual effort can be required to establish if books are identical versions. For example, a book may exist in multiple editions but the metadata used to compare across libraries may not be of equal standard and matching algorithms may not work. Additionally in some contexts the actual physical copy is important (previous owners, special binding, intrinsic value, etc.).
- Does not allow for changes in teaching/research which mean that topics could come back into fashion where it will not be possible to obtain or access other copies.
- Data driven decisions do not take into account books which are just used within the library.
- Assessment of collections can be labour intensive and therefore expensive work. However the Copac Collection Management Tool has started to show how some of this can be automated, particularly by ensuring preservation of last copies.

The strength of service

We have the opportunity to link the unpalatable (storage/disposal) with a positive message of improved service. There are growing opportunities in this area which are discussed more fully in other papers including:

- Digitisation

² Times Higher Education, 28Jun-4Jul 2012, p.42

³ Times Higher Education, 14-20 Jun 2012, p.42

- e-books
- PDA
- Document supply
- Direct delivery
- Collaborative storage/disposal – a UKRR for monographs

The balancing game

There isn't a straightforward solution to the issue of unused books and in the end it comes down to balancing of the competing demands that libraries face:

Space **versus** access

Just in case **versus** just in time

Real concerns over access and preservation **versus** book nostalgia

Data driven stock control **versus** Intellectual collection development/management

Cost of weeding, storage and/or disposal **versus** many other uses for this money

Sandra Bracegirdle

Head of Collection Management, University of Manchester Library