

An Awfully Big Adventure: Strathclyde's Digital Library Plan

[Derek Law](#) describes how the University of Strathclyde is choosing to give priority to e-content and services instead of a new building.

Introduction

By Scottish standards, Strathclyde is a new university, being a mere two hundred years old. It is a large university with 20,000 students, some forty departments covering most disciplines other than medicine and a huge programme of continuing professional development (CPD). Set up as 'a place of useful learning' it has always specialised in the applied disciplines – business, engineering, professional training (teachers, lawyers and social workers) and has set out to be quite different from its better-known competitors. But in a world ruled by league tables, where it typically finishes fourth or fifth amongst the Scottish universities (with spikes of excellence!) it was determined that in the current strategic plan [1] we should find ways of attempting to move all our activities into the top three. It was made quite clear that where excellence and methods of achieving could be identified, investment would be forthcoming. By extension, disinvestment would take place in underperforming areas. The strategic plan also quite specifically proposed 'A revitalised and contemporary approach to the provision of library services and information resources.'

Coupled with all of this was a recognition that our estate was too large and should be reduced, one element of this being the closure of our one remote campus and its consolidation into the main city centre site.

The Library mirrors this general position. It has a collection of over a million volumes, dating almost entirely from post-1960. Its excellence is built on scale for there has been no great tradition of building archives or special collections. Growth runs at over a kilometre of shelving a year and the main building is a tired 1960s conversion of a publisher's warehouse on the edge of the campus. On most measures it comes out in fourth or fifth place in Scotland. The one notable exception is service. The National Student Survey [2] figures show that users place Strathclyde well above the national average on service, reflecting a real attempt by the Library to be excellent where it can. This is further reflected in the standing of the Library within the University, where it is seen as a positive contributor to the institution and is treated sympathetically.

As part of the strategic planning process, all departments of the University were asked to reflect and report on how excellence would be identified and achieved in their area. In the Library this meant reflecting on the external environment. The vast majority of current journals are already available electronically; Google is digitising books by the million and has recently reached a deal with American publishers which ensures a way forward for this programme [3]; the new CIBER report [4] sees electronic books at last making headway. Indeed we must be close to the point where a cash-strapped Vice-Chancellor will wonder why a Library is needed at all. Paradoxically then, the proposed campus closure and the transfer of the related branch library would fill the Library to the point of unworkability, unless we undertook major building works.

The final strand in this developing story is that Strathclyde has a converged management structure for Library, IT and Learning Services. It has pioneered the use of laptops in teaching and has substantial collections of e-material, as well as its own digitisation unit. So the Library has a lot of experience of

changing user behaviour and expectations.

Defining Excellence

The first and most obvious starting point was the tired fabric of the Library. So we looked around. The first curiosity to strike home was that all of our major competitors had spent or planned to spend literally tens of millions on new buildings or extensions – indeed the sector as a whole in Scotland appeared to have committed some quarter of a billion pounds to library buildings, apparently as an act of faith, rather than with any obvious rationale. It became very quickly clear that, were Strathclyde to spend say fifty million pounds on refurbishing its library, it would be no better off relatively in any league table. While some expenditure on library fabric was unavoidable, this seemed a poor way of achieving the University's overarching goal. It seemed a perfect time to adopt the classic approach of reframing the question. One of the key aims of the strategic plan revolves not just around excellent teaching, something to which every university would no doubt aspire, but also to be innovative in teaching. This implies a strong focus on technology and by extension on e-content. Again the Library was seen as central to this.

Unique Selling Points

A great deal of effort went into workshops with users and senior managers - those of the students' union being notably helpful. The innocent question from the President of the Students' Association, namely 'What's a card catalogue?', which arose in response to a curmudgeonly defence of the past, proved a real turning point in the debate. Prensky's well-known writings [5] both on digital natives and on legacy content were particularly influential. Views on future needs were gathered and the question was posed as to what would justify spending millions each year on a library building, the vast majority of whose collections were – or soon would be – available at the desktop. It was relatively easy to identify the born digital material created by the institution as a starting point. It was seen as a primary responsibility, beginning with the institutional repository (already one of the largest in the UK) and running through a gamut of Web sites, research data, wikis, blogs and e-theses. It should be admitted that most of this material has been identified rather than 'captured' at this stage. Second would come the digitisation of archive and special collection material. Much work has been done in this area by the Centre for Digital Library Research and a recently appointed University Archivist had begun the slow task of building an archive of material which did not compete with other universities from scratch. So we focus on miscarriages of justice (asbestosis, BCCI, Paddy Meehan, etc) or modern Scottish artists, or town and country planning; we look to digitise the collections which are uniquely ours. A few older collections such as one on alchemy would be built up and digitised in collaboration with the relevant academic departments. In other words, our USP would be precisely those collections unique to us. In particular, our key collection objective was to be the digital asset management of the intellectual output of the organisation. And thirdly we would buy and subscribe to a range of materials which ensured our place in league tables based on per capita spend.

The Library Building

This still left the issue of the Library Building itself, shared with academic departments, many of whom were moving to new space and adjacent to a new sports centre planned for completion in 2012. At over 13,000 square metres the Library is large, but not large enough to squeeze in the collections from our branch library. At the time this discussion was taking place, there was huge concern over the spiralling cost of utility bills. As with most universities, these costs are top-sliced and there is no real understanding of the cost of heating and lighting the library for example. Calculations by our Estates Department showed that the cost of utilities for the Library is in excess of half a million pounds a year.

Staff and Staff Skills

Strathclyde's greatest strength is its staff and this is recognised by users. However many of the academic-related staff were appointed in the 1970s and are in the final stages of their career. Operating in a converged service has allowed the library access to different skill sets and a growing number of blended professionals have appeared within the Information Resources Directorate which oversees this converged area. One of the key challenges will then be to identify the relevant skill sets and then the structures which will support this kind of development. Work such as Sheila Corrall's on Infostructure [6] provides an attractive and fresh view of the classic technical services/reader services structure, but there will have to be a good deal of heart-searching and perhaps false starts before an optimal model is reached. How far the Library will 'own' the information space and staff of the University is one of the interesting questions-cum-challenges.

The Proposition

Taking all of these elements together, a plan quickly emerged. It remains mercifully free of detail in many areas, but the outline is clear and has been adopted enthusiastically by the University. It is regarded as being in keeping both with the excellence agenda and with seeking a reputation for being innovative. Moreover, the plan will help the University to address collegially some of its academic and estates issues. A

substantial capital budget of £2.5 million has been authorised for the purchase or creation of digital material and a recurrent increase of £800,000 agreed for e-journal and e-book purchase. In return the Library has agreed to clear the equivalent of half the space on each of its six floors. This space will be re-used principally as teaching space. This in turn will allow consolidation of the Law, Arts and Social Sciences Faculty in a separate building and the removal of teaching space elsewhere, so reducing the size of the estate, and by extension utilities and other costs. The library collections will be digitised where possible, consolidated into rolling stack where usage merits it and disposed of where there is no real merit in retaining back runs of journals readily available locally. The Library is not and never has been a library of record for commercially published material and will focus on access rather than possession. Somewhat cautiously (there are no real benchmarks for this) we anticipate beginning this change by removing completely or to store, one quarter of the collection within three years, while no longer adding new metres of paper each and every year. A more ambitious view is that as the grip of Google continues to bite we can probably accelerate this programme. The pace of change will be dictated as much by the practicalities of the availability of content and the time involved in de-accessioning monographs as by philosophy or finance. An intellectual Rubicon has been crossed. At the same time we shall have to spend quite a few millions on upgrading the tired fabric of the Library to make it acceptable – but it will be a much smaller library.

The Investment

The recurrent funding is to be spent principally on new subscriptions to e-journals. To some extent this will be dictated by availability, but the key determinant will be supporting academic excellence. One element of this will no doubt be the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) results of December 2008, balanced by some notion of equity between the Faculties. As far as the £2.5 million is concerned, an entirely arbitrary distribution has been agreed between the Library, the Library Committee and the Senior Management Team of the University. Here inequity will operate since availability of e-versions will be a much more significant factor. The priority will be back runs of journals to replace paper collections, since this provides maximum return for minimum effort in terms of removing the paper stock. To a lesser extent this will apply to monographs but it is not expected that there will be a significant space saving here as the number of commercially available e-books to replace 30-year old publications is limited. Access to material on Google Books is as likely to produce good results here. Some £1.7 million has been notionally allocated to this aspect. A further £300,000 has been allocated for digitisation of non-copyright material and special collections, much of which is expected to be undertaken by our in-house digitisation unit. An initial focus will be on the branch library due to move to the main campus in 2010-11, to see how far the need to move material can be reduced. The final £500,000 is both a contingency fund and will also meet some staff and software costs associated with managing and moving the stock.

Conclusion

Arguably nothing proposed for Strathclyde is new or original, except perhaps the scale of the challenge. Nor would we claim it to be so. However, we do feel that we have been given an opportunity to redefine what the library represents and will represent to its users. We shall continue to place an emphasis on service as well as collections, since users clearly value this. We shall develop the meaning of the new library mantra, whether for academics at home or students pursuing innovative learning on the move: 'Don't just go to the library – take it with you'. We will make the Library a compelling and progressive part of an excellent and innovative university. At least, that's the plan.

References

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