LIBER QUARTERLY, ISSN 1435-5205

Towards a Preservation Policy for European Research Libraries

by MIRJAM M. FOOT

At the LIBER Annual Conference in Berne in 1997 Professor John Feather presented the results of a survey of preservation policies in European Research Libraries. Following this, those libraries that indicated in the survey that they had a written preservation policy were approached with the request to send a copy of their policy. Of the twenty-two libraries with a written policy, five national libraries[1] and seven university libraries[2] sent their documents, while a number of libraries replied that their policy was purely for internal use and not for general circulation. The policies that were received were translated into English (where necessary) and were analysed[3] in order to determine whether a common trend could be found and whether a model could be developed on which to base a preservation policy for European research libraries.

Preservation policies ranged in length from comprehensive documents of over ninety pages long (NLS) to a simple sentence (Göteborg); they also varied from purely strategic statements to practical guides. Most were of fairly recent date (1990-98), but 2 dated from the late 1980s. Several covered both strategy and practice and it was clear that a number did not stand alone, but formed part of a wider range of collection management or general library policies (e.g. BL). It was therefore very difficult to make useful comparisons and no clear common model emerged.

An attempt was made to use the Guidelines on Preservation and Conservation Policies in Libraries and Archives, published by UNESCO in 1990, as a benchmark, but it became clear that few of the policies received had followed these guidelines and, moreover, although they are meant to be „guidelines for the preparation and implementation of a preservation policy" (2, para. 1.3), several of the topics listed[4] as those that should be covered in a preservation policy, are in fact topics for which many libraries have separate policies, such as security, disposal, reprography and exhibitions. Some refer to specific programmes and should arguably not be part of a policy. Moreover, the

UNESCO guidelines do not by any means list all the necessary elements. The comparison of the policies received with the UNESCO guidelines made it clear that there were considerable differences between them.

For example, the policy of the National Library of Italy does not cover any of the topics listed in these guidelines, while the National Library of Ireland, the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Wales and the University Library of Fribourg encompass all but one. The British Library covers four of the 10 topics, and has separate policies for five more; the University of Göteborg only covers one of the ten issues; and so on. The depth in which the various issues are treated also varies a great deal. For example, the NL Wales spends 140 lines on staff training, while the NL Ireland deals with this subject in one broad sentence; the University of Marburg has four lines on reprography, while Helsinki University Library devotes 225 lines to this. Some documents are clearly meant to give practical instruction to the institution's conservators (such as the University of Marburg whose policy document suggests particular materials and techniques and even lists specific products and suppliers), while others are aimed at the governing body of the institution or - in some cases - at the government of the country concerned. Just over half the policies refer to published books or articles, or to other internal documents on preservation.

This diversity is of course not surprising. Preservation policies are written for a number of different reasons and are governed by a variety of local circumstances. In some cases the policies are written in order to establish priorities and thus to formulate preservation programmes; in some cases they form an argument for funding, being part of the regular cycle of budgeting and bidding. In some cases they form part of the library's mission statement, in others they are the basis for inter-library cooperation, while others still concentrate on one particular aspect of preservation, e.g. on surrogating, with the intention to underpin services, but also to achieve a balance between unlimited service access now and a responsibility for access in the future.

The best preservation policies are firmly linked to collection development and retention policies. They either encompass or refer to policies on collection security; to storage and environmental policies; and give guidelines for proper handling of the collections, be it for on-site or remote use, for reprographic or surrogating processes, or for exhibitions and loans. They are based on an assessment of the preservation needs of the collection, taking into account both the intrinsic value and rarity of the material, the amount of use it gets, the way in which it is stored, and its physical condition. But they also consider the risks the material may be exposed to, both in its ordinary life-cycle of selection, acquisition, storage, use, travel, exposure, moves, chemical

and mechanical deterioration; and under extreme conditions, such as terrorist or enemy attack, fire, floods, building collapse, or biological infestation (be it insects or fungus). The most comprehensive policy received (NLS) is a mixture of strategic statements and practical guidelines.

It will by now be clear that the existing policies are too diverse in the subjects they cover and too varied in the depth and detail of their coverage, either to form the building blocks for a more general preservation policy for European research libraries, or to be usable as a model for such a policy.

However, when one puts them all together and when one also looks at a few comprehensive policies that have been produced outside Europe, e.g. in places like Australia and Canada, some useful pointers emerge and I would like at least to circulate - for discussion - a list of headings that a preservation policy should contain. This list consists of two parts: ten general, strategic headings that would be applicable to any institution and that could be used for wider, external dissemination, and eight headings that would apply more specifically internally and that some institutions might prefer not to circulate more widely.

There may well be elements that should be added and it would be most valuable if these could be brought out in our discussion. There may also be a need for further elaboration under the various headings.

If LIBER is to try and develop a preservation strategy for European Research Libraries, with the intention to make cooperation between libraries a more realistic and practical proposition, wider dissemination of all statements, both the more general and the more specific, would be essential.

I hope that the Preservation Division has made a useful start to achieve such cooperation and I would very much welcome your comments.

REFERENCES

1 BL London; N.L. Ireland; N.L. Italy, Milan; NLS; NLW.

2 Fribourg and Lausanne (Switzerland); Göteborg (Sweden); Helsinki (Finland); Univ. London; Marburg (Germany); Trondheim (Norway).

3 Tracy Hopkins of Loughborough University.

4 Preventive measures; housekeeping routines; staff and user training; security; protective measures; a substitution programme; conservation treatment; disposal programmes; reprography policies; exhibition policies.

Dr. Mirjam M. Foot
British Library
Collections and Preservation
96 Euston Road
NW1 2DB London, England
mirjam.foot@bl.uk