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The Library in the Academic Environment of Today

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THE LIBRARY IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT OF TODAY

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Rectors, vice-chancellors and general administrators are supposed to know all aspects and details of their academic institutions in particular, and academe in general.

Well, in all humility, if that virtue still has a place in an institution of higher learning, let us admit that we do not. We are not omniscient in university affairs, and not surprisingly, very many of the top responsible people in universities today know little about university libraries, the way they function, their economics, their changing roles in the rapidly changing academic environment of today. I belong, let there be no doubt about it, to this undistinguished category of university administrators. This is what I found out this week, as I reflected on my experience with the Leuven situation and tried to order my thoughts with the purpose of distilling some meaningful, albeit provisional, generalizations.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to ask if we are still bent on discovering trends in a stream of facts, what has happened to rectors, vice-chancellors, and general administrators of universities and what has happened to academic libraries.

Let us consider the top administrators of the university first. The top responsible people of our universities have been swamped this last quarter of a century by rapidly increasing numbers of students and staff, by vastly expanded financial and material resources, by overwhelmingly complex government regulations concerning their educational and research organisations. Attention, which in a more stable and bucolic period was directed to patiently and lovingly building up priceless collections of books, has become diverted to administrative chores, to the affairs of vast academic hospitals, to endless negotiations with officialdom and trade unions, to the complexities of computers and audiovisual learning aids, to adapting to astonishingly inefficient systems of participation of all members of the university community in the day to day life of the institution. Many universities have in the matter of twenty-five years become vast and complex organizations; attention to library development has consequently tended to suffer.

Let us now look at the university library itself. When we look around universities, we discover that the library is no longer the heart of the institution as it mostly was until 25 years ago. From a central place, many university libraries have moved to the periphery of the institution, and this process has in many instances been accelerated by a movement to split central library services into departmental and faculty facilities. Leuven is a clear example of this tendency. We built a vast library with a capacity of 600.000 books for our faculty of arts in the immediate vicinity of our rightly famous central university library. We continued this policy by building a new library with a capacity of 400.000 books for our faculty of theology. Both buildings, which were planned in the sixties and defended to the hilt by those responsible, are symbolic of the decentralized library, the peripheral library, the smaller but specialized library, within easy reach of the researcher. Why, this trend, against all apparent rules of rational and efficient organization of library resources? The increase in numbers and of financial resources since the Second World War has in my opinion had a double effect: first, more than proportionate new demands for additional facilities, equipment, running expenses for every type of research, and hence keen competition for the additional funds, very often to the detriment of books; and second a phenomenal growth of staff doing research and wading through an avalanche of publications which, given the newly discovered rights of participation, are wanted nearby and instantly and not in a large central institution. Provided that acquisitions of books, cataloguing, classification, interlibrary exchange,

computer-based systems, and removal of obsolete material remain centralized, I see no harm in this, and I would call this a rational evolution in the present day university.

Too often, however, the theoretical efficiency of centralization is made a victim of personal convenience and idiosyncracy, at the expense of the particular faculty and the university as a whole. I will come back to this later.

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The ideal library would be an instant library, with 6 % of the university budget at its disposal if we follow the recommendations of the Parry Report(1) in inflation proof money, and with no personnel except of course you, the chief librarians.

But actual libraries are a far cry from being ideal. To begin with, inflation seems to affect library budgets much more than most other expenditure items of the university budget. Book prices have risen sharply since the sixties, prices of periodicals even more, and there is no end in sight to their continuing increase. Therfore, inflation surely is a factor we cannot omit when we try to understand the academic environment of today, and its significance for university libraries. Next to government interference in the day to day affairs of the institution, continuous and rampant inflation of the kind which we have experienced for almost ten years now must be singled out as the greatest threat to university life.

Second, library budgets do not exclusively cover expenditure for the acquisition of new reading material, but also expenditure for the maintenance of existing stocks and for library personnel.

In many universities, more than 60 % of the annual library budget is earmarked to pay the salaries of specialized and supporting staff. Each book bought costs two, three, and sometimes four times its price before it reaches the researcher or the shelf. There are two reasons for this ominous phenomenon.

Libraries, like most other university departments and activities, are labour-intensive, and therefore eminently prone to the effects of inflation.

This is especially true in countries like Belgium, where wages are automatically linked to the index of consumer prices. Wage increases of 15 % a year have not been unusual, but the government subsidies put at the disposal of the universities have not followed the real expenditure for salaries of non-academic personnel. The effects of inflation on libraries are compounded by their cost structure, for books and periodicals must be purchased with an ever shrinking portion of their budgets because of these wage increases and, as I have mentioned, the costs of books and periodicals are spiralling even faster than wages. So the increasing cost of personnel along with a declining growth rate in volumes added per year over the last decade could well lead to an astonishingly high cost per book acquired. If we applied the methods of Baumol and Marcus used in their "Economics of Academic Libraries" to the Belgian scene, we might well be appalled by the sombre perspectives.

Statistical material on University Library expenditure for the United Kingdom seems to corroborate this view. It goes without saying that the tendency to replace the central library by departmental libraries, which add to staff requirements and often duplicate work, aggravate this adverse evolution of cost effectiveness.

To continue our comparison of the ideal picture of the University Library with reality, most Universities do not allow libraries to spend 6 % of the total annual budget. They simply cannot afford to do so in the face of growing and new demands for limited funds (2). In our university, we try to limit the slice of the annual budget for the libraries to 4,5%. In spite of the growing numbers of students and staff, personnel has been kept stable for almost five years now, but as a result of this restrictive policy there are ever

stronger temptations to pull staff from the main library to the peripheral libraries, or to replace vacancies in the main library by new personnel in the departments. The temptations are quite understandable. They point to the need for better services for an understanding of the role of the library in a university "instant library" (going together with instant coffee) in the faculties, but could in the end have crippling effects on the necessary central services, for lack of understanding of the role of the library system in a university. Feeding on itself if not corrected by a long-term library policy, this tendency could well lead to dispersed libraries, with insufficient personnel in each of them, and practically no resources left to add to the existing but rapidly being outdated stocks of printed information.

And yet, "instant libraries" is what modern universities need. By instant library, I mean a system whereby the maximum amount of up-to-date information is at hand for all purposes of learning and advancing knowledge, without queueing or other loss of time. The ideal is unattainable. However, the computer is entering the scene and all the different adverse influences of the academic environment on the development of university libraries already mentioned will accelerate its use. The computer, with its vast capacities to store, process, and retrieve information, will be, I believe, the core of the university library of tomorrow. These electronic contraptions come to the rescue of the desperate chief librarian in a number of ways. Costs of computer operations have been falling dramatically, and the end of this reduction is not yet in sight. Distributed computer power should come in handy to combine necessary centralised library services with obvious decentralised information needs.

The corollary developments of telecommunications technology will enlarge tremendously the possibilities of already existing interlibrary cooperation, nationally and internationally. By combining university library resources through computer networks, we should be able to take further steps towards specialization and interinstitutional cooperation, thereby avoiding unnecessary duplication while stretching the scarce resources of our institutions.

But let us be realistic. Implementation of computerized library systems, involving the whole process from acquisition through cataloguing to retrieval and sundry management and accounting routines, is very expensive. Universities will have to cooperate in consortia if we are to move rapidly from potency to reality.

Leuven is quite happy to have joined forces with Dortmund, in preparing for the age of the computer-centred library, by creating a system called Dobis, or Dolobis. I presume that Mr. Dehennin has already explained to you what we expect it to perform. We were also fortunate to be able to have our specialists of the university computer center join forces with the knowledgeable people from the library, which proves that common objectives can bring about a task force of specialists from within the university, who up to then had never met. May I use this opportunity to warmly recommend that those of you who have been thinking of using the computer in your libraries enquire about the Dobis system.

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Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to conclude with some practical recommendations that follow from my short analysis of the academic environment of to-day and its influence on the place and role of the university library:

1. Given the growing scarcity of resources for libraries, we should try by all means to have the students buy more books, to alleviate pressures on libraries from undergraduate and graduate users.

2. Perhaps we should, if possible, better separate library facilities for students from those for researchers and staff, and realize the "instant library" for students by putting several copies of recommended reading material on open shelves.

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3. The departmental or faculty library may well improve the quality of life of staff and researchers, but it is a false solution if service functions that can be centralized are neglected.

4. Computer assistance opens new vistas for combining centralization with decentralization, for controlling the cost explosion, for specialization and for new forms of interlibrary cooperation.

5. Budgets of large-scale libraries should not be allowed to descend below 4 % of the university budget, and should perhaps be a little bit higher. It is of the utmost importance that, of this budget, more should be spent on books and periodicals, and that the progressive encroachment of salaries should be halted.

6. In order to introduce electronic hardware in the libraries, a temporary injection of additional money seems necessary. Inter-university cooperation can substantially reduce this investment, as our computerization problems are basically the same.

7. More than ever, interlibrary cooperation should be actively pursued by linking computerized libraries into regional networks. In doing so, specialization in library development becomes truly possible, and complementarity between universities can be thoroughly exploited.

I would like to add that known and anticipated changes in the academic environment without question have already had and will continue to have a dramatic influence on the role of the university library. The university library is no longer an impressive building, housing a large store of books, but a library system. Consequently the chief librarian is no longer, or will no longer be, the administrative head of a sizable group of professional, and ancillary library staff; he will rapidly become the chief manager of a complicated information system, serving the need for worldwide information for students, researchers, staff and also the public at large.

References

1. University Grants Committee : Report of the Committee on Libraries, London, HMSO, 1967, p. 151.

2. "....according to government statistics, for the 52 British university institutions listed, the average percentage of expenditure on libraries was only 3,9 per cent, and only 11 libraries received 6 per cent or more...."
   (The Times Higher Education Supplement, 5.5.1972, p. 3)

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DISCUSSION

Mr. P. Pinxter: I'm amazed to hear from you almost the same ideas given in the report made by Academische Raad of the Netherlands Doelstelling aan de universitaire bibliotheekwesen. However, I'm a little bit worried about your stressing the fact that libraries should not have too much personnel. I agree with you that we should reduce the number of personnel as much as possible, but saying that you would even like no personnel, this goes too far as far as I'm concerned.

Declercq: I completely agree with you. Of course I'm not a believer in a library without personnel. This would be impossible but the budgets of the library are limited. If, every year you see a growing encroachment of salaries on this limited budget, then there will be nothing left for books.

Prof. A.J. Evans: We've been discussing in my own university the actual process of cutting the cake that you mentioned. Those who have been involved in this, (limited to about six people who we've rudely called the Mafia) have been satisfied that it works. People want this spread wider with more people involved in the decision making. Do you feel the overall cutting of the university cake should be done by a fairly small group of people in this way? This could include their allocation to the library. More important than that is the point you made about staff vs. books: Where and at what level should the decision be made as to the balance between the requirement made between money spent on staff and the money spent on materials?

Declercq: To start with the second question, in my opinion, the decision should be made on the library level. We should give a portion of the budget to the library, for instance, 4% or 5%, then it should be the responsibility of the chief librarian and a library committee to make a choice between more personnel or more books. Regarding your first question, that of how many people should be responsible for cutting the cake of the university, that is, should it be a small group of people or a large "democratic" group of people, I think it should be something in between. I think a small group of people should come out with the working documents, but in a large university you can no longer make these decisions in a small committee. You have to pass through part of the participatory machinery, which is the academic council where you have student and staff, etc. present. It is a long sort of process our way of life now. It is not always effective from my experience.

Mr. J.D. Ross: Most universities now have two departments which are concerned with information as their prime function. One, a depository of information, the library, and the other, a processor of information, the computer department. Usually the library is just a user of the computer department, in Britain, usually the least important. Do you think that the computer department and the library should be seen as part of one information unit, or should they be completely separate?

Declercq: I believe the computer department should be one unit in the university and that the library, although becoming a big user should remain a user of the big installation. It would be nonsense to give libraries, at least at this stage, their own completely independant computing center. All kinds of possibilities exist already of installing a small slave computer in your library linked with the big computer. Of course this does not mean that the people working on library problems with computers should be part of the computer center of the university, but they should have good contacts, exchange ideas, call on one another for special problems, be good friends.

Mr. G.A. Hamel: You stress the importance of regional, national, and international cooperation. This will of course mean that the autonomy of the university will be reduced in one way or another. Do universities in Belgium tend to cooperate? Is one huge system of computer apparatus being built up?

Declercq: There is a noticeable tendency already in Belgium, at least in the Flemish part, towards cooperation between universities on an informal level, but it will be formalized very soon. This is called the Vlamse Universitaire Raad, with the rectors of all the

Flemish universities. They try to find out what they can do together and how they can specialize. One of the subcommittees which has been suggested is library cooperation. There is also a study going on in Belgium between universities, requested by our Minister of Education, on the possibilities of linking our computers into one university network.

Mr. H. Meister: In German user studies there is a strong correlation between buying books and use of libraries. I think that one must be very cautious about your recommendation to alleviate pressure on libraries.

Declercq: My perspective is from the Flemish situation. In my opinion, students on the average, don't have enough books around them. Book prices in Belgium are high, as they are in many other countries. These students have to use the libraries in departments, in faculties. A practical suggestion is why couldn't we make students themselves buy more books so that they do not have to come for all their basic reading material to the library. I agree with you, that there's possibly a positive correlation between having books around you and using the library.

Mr. R.F. Eatwell: I sympathize with administrators who have got this big, expensive beast called a library to look after. I just wonder about centralization-decentralization. If you centralize libraries you save money because you have lower costs for duplication of materials, books and journals, and you need less money for staff, and you can keep your libraries open longer. I'm fortunate in that I come from a small campus where we have a central library and no departmental libraries at all. My staff costs are about 40% of my total budget. Yours are 60%. In British universities it is probably higher, 50-52% because of the inflation of salaries. My question to you really is, should we not be more tough on academic staff, so that they shouldn't expect everything immediately, because there's cost involved in this, and let them walk 300 yards to a library that serves 3 or 4 departments and not just their own?

Declercq: I believe that university administrators can no longer be tough on staff. What we perhaps should do is develop a marketing function of our libraries. Have we done enough to explain to all potential users, including staff, what the library does, can do, why it is there, and bring the services which are in fact hidden into the open? Perhaps we should make a film on this showing what stands behind the books, why certain things take time, develop a sort of marketing concept of our library to explain what we are doing.

Eatwell: I quite agree. Most academics, certainly at my university know now, but didn't know previously, that it costs me nearly £3 to borrow a book through interlibrary loan. Once this is explained to them, then I think they are reasonable.

Declercq: Yes, professors have difficulty accepting information about books from library personnel because they believe that only a professor knows what a book is. Behind the books is this intra-structure which is hidden and which they do not always understand and see. Try to solve it with marketing techniques.

Dr. V. Wehefritz: I come from a new university where we have many innovations and plans. Things are not so fixed and therefore the processes of decision making is very important. Can you give some recommendations about the process of decision making in a new university?

Declercq: Yes, in the ideal university if you are a new institution and are building up the process of decision making, then of course you have to go through a participation system. That's in now. That's what we are all doing. It is a positive development, but we should control it in the sense that we should not let everybody talk about everything. Then you have no decisions at all. I would say that 10% of your personnel should be involved in it - no more than 10%. I would recommend trying to fix your objectives first. That means global objectives, a hierarchy of objectives. This is where participation is useful. What should the institution do in this, what should the library do in this, what should this department do in this? Then divide your means according to your objectives. Evaluate every year to see if you have attained your objectives. And also critically evaluate your strategy every year.