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# With a little HELP from my friends: developments in Welsh academic library collaboration



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## **BACKGROUND**

Although Wales is a small country in which transport and communication are not always straightforward, a strong tradition of collaborative activity and mutual support in the management and provision of higher education library and information services has been built up over the last decade. This has been due in part to the fact that most institutions are constituent parts of the federal University of Wales, but the main driver for collaboration in recent years has come from the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELP). This group consists of the Librarian of the National Library of Wales and the directors and heads of library and information services of all higher education institutions in Wales. These colleagues have worked closely together to exchange ideas, share expertise and develop collaborative activities. Successes over recent years have included pioneering access schemes (WALIA for researchers and CROESO for students), successful project bids (RSLP and others) and a very active staff development and training group (WHISD).

In 2002, WHELP felt the time was right for a major initiative to build on its already impressive

record of achievement, by adopting a much more active strategic leadership role within the sector. The launch of a new strategy for higher education by the Welsh Assembly Government<sup>1</sup> in March 2002, with its strong emphasis on re-configuration and collaboration, followed in April 2002 by a consultation paper on the creation of a new policy division to foster collaboration between all libraries, archives and museums in Wales (which eventually led to the creation of CyMAL<sup>2</sup> in April 2004), provided the initial impetus for WHELP's new approach. A successful funding bid was made to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) for the HELP (Higher Education Libraries in Partnership) project, and work began in February 2003.

A project steering group made up of WHELP representatives from the University of Wales Aberystwyth (acting as lead role), the University of Glamorgan, the University of Wales Swansea and the University of Wales Institute Cardiff was set up.

The twelve-month project had a number of distinct phases, each of which led to a practical outcome, whilst at the same time informing the subsequent phases of the project and contributing to its final outcome:

- collaboration review
- e-learning feasibility study
- journals case study
- blueprint and action plan.

#### **COLLABORATION REVIEW**

WHELP produced a summary document in 2002 which outlined a long list of recent cooperative arrangements and initiatives between the thirteen higher education libraries and the National Library within Wales. The HELP project's collaboration review gathered evidence of the strong history of valuable cooperation between libraries in Wales, not only in the higher education sector but also within and between other library sectors. The value of identifying current and recent cooperative activity to inform progress in this area was highlighted in a national study undertaken on behalf of the British Library in 2002<sup>3</sup>. The resulting report, which mapped major cooperative activity in the UK, was used to develop and structure the resulting Co-operation and Partnership Programme at the British Library. With a similar aim, the HELP project's collaboration review aimed to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of existing and potential collaborative activity within all Welsh library and information services sec-

tors to determine and structure the project's final action plan. Through focus group meetings with representatives from each WHELP institution and with key staff from other library sectors within Wales, the review provided a comprehensive picture of what is of relevance and value in terms of increased collaborative and cooperative activity in Wales between libraries.

The review identified 18 activities in which successful cooperative action was taking place or in which there was perceived potential for collaborative activity. Reciprocal access / borrowing schemes and resource discovery are two significant areas of growing cooperation between Welsh libraries. These comprise informal arrangements which have worked well for a long time, other newer and more formal regional library sector partnerships such as those in North West Wales (Linc-y-Gogledd) and Swansea Bay (ATLIS), as well as Wales-wide services such as CROESO (reciprocal access for students throughout Wales to any higher education library) and WALIA (reciprocal access and borrowing scheme for academic staff and research postgraduates throughout Wales). Other areas of potential value for increased cooperation identified by library staff through the review include collaborative purchasing, shared storage, staff development and information skills. While Wales is its prime focus, the review was informed by developments in collaborative activity in the UK and internationally. Key to developing and supporting an effective collaborative strategy in Wales will be the ability to learn from successful case studies elsewhere, for example, resource discovery in Scotland<sup>4</sup>, collaborative purchasing and electronic content licensing in the United States<sup>5</sup> and the large shared store of research and archive material in Australia<sup>6</sup>. The collaboration review document will be maintained and updated on the WHELP website (<http://whelf.ac.uk>) as a tool to support and promote collaborative activity throughout Wales' library and information sectors.

#### **E-LEARNING FEASIBILITY STUDY**

The collaboration review highlighted the fact that library and information services are at the forefront of initiatives to develop the e-learning agenda in higher education and that potentially all institutions have to confront very similar challenges. The aim of the HELP e-learning feasibility study was to investigate the extent to which a collaborative approach could be effective in meeting the different institutional requirements and the information needs of staff and students in different institutions. The study involved two

institutions, University of Glamorgan and University of Wales Institute Cardiff, and focused on the development and evaluation of a shared subject portal to digital resources in the area of environmental sciences. The project team concluded that although local factors did play a significant part in determining the approach to e-learning, there was significant common ground to justify a collaborative approach with clear benefits for users arising from integrated access to a much broader range of digital resources.

The study recommended that WHELP should consider a collaborative approach to a number of areas of activity in support of e-learning including the joint procurement of digital resources, the preparation of value added support material and the development of an all-Wales approach to e-prints, digitisation and rights clearance. The study also concluded that there should be further work on the shared subject portal approach, particularly in academic areas where collaboration was being encouraged or required by the Funding Council.

#### **JOURNALS CASE STUDY**

Many libraries are concerned about maintaining subscriptions to increasingly costly periodicals. Within Welsh higher education libraries in 2001-02, average expenditure on journal subscriptions comprised 19% of their total library budgets and 47% of their information budgets. Furthermore, the expenditure on journal subscriptions by these same libraries has increased by an average of 40% over the last 6 years compared with a 16% average increase on their total library expenditure. The situation does not appear to be improving. The recent publication on serials prices by Swets shows an increase of 8.85% in serials prices in the UK in 2004 from 2003<sup>7</sup> To be able to continue to support the demand for journals from researchers and other users, Welsh higher education libraries need to find additional means of maintaining access to this essential and costly resource.

The journals case study examined the degree to which academic and National Library journal holdings can be better integrated and exploited to not only provide researchers with better access to research resources but also enable libraries to make more cost-effective use of scarce financial resources. Through the compilation of print and electronic journal titles and holdings from each Welsh higher education library and from the National Library of Wales, the study assessed the degree of overlap and duplication that currently exists. Collecting and comparing associated data, including journal subscriptions expenditure,

storage requirements and acquisitions, the study explored possible initiatives to enhance access to those journals available in Wales, through shared access, as well as collaborative acquisition and retention strategies. The main recommendations identified in the study's report include a collaborative approach to shared storage of low-use research material, consortial purchase of e-journal bundles and more effective resource discovery for journal holdings throughout Wales. In the future, there is little doubt that greater collaboration will be needed to support provision of periodicals, both print and electronic, in academic libraries.

#### **BLUEPRINT AND ACTION PLAN**

Following work on the collaboration review, e-learning feasibility study and journals case study, the final stage of the HELP project was to define a strategy and action plan for strengthening resource sharing between WHELP member libraries, the implementation of which would launch WHELP into a new phase of collaborative activity within the higher education library sector and with institutions and libraries in other sectors in Wales and elsewhere.

The draft plan WHELP has developed consists of a series of seven strategic objectives around which many of the collaborative activities identified during the different phases of the project could be grouped: i.e. maximising library collections; improving resource discovery; widening access to collections; connecting with the National Library; creating a virtual academic library; promoting the e-learning agenda; delivering a more efficient service.

In order to be able to deliver this ambitious agenda, there are a number of organisational issues (e.g. organisational structure, funding and working methods) that WHELP will need to address, and effective relationships will need to be forged with all relevant stakeholders: heads of higher education institutions; CyMAL; HEFCW; policy makers from other sectors.

The HELP project has produced a much clearer vision of the potential benefits that can be gained by developing academic library collaboration in Wales. Much has been achieved in terms of improving services and taking advantage of economies of scale, and the opportunity is there to achieve a lot more!

The full reports of all elements of the HELP project are available at: <http://whelf.ac.uk/initiatives.htm>

- 1 *Reaching higher: higher education and the learning country: a strategy for the higher education sector in Wales*. Welsh Assembly Government, 2002
- 2 *CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales: initial prospectus*. Welsh Assembly Government, 2004
- 3 *Mutual benefit: a map of the co-operative landscape*. A study undertaken for the British Library Co-operation and Partnership Programme by Education for Change Ltd and Acumen, July 2000 available from <http://www.bl.uk/about/cooperation/pdf/report04.pdf> (accessed 21 May 2003)
- 4 <http://scurl.ac.uk>
- 5 <http://www.ohiolink.edu/>
- 6 <http://www.caval.edu.au/pst/index.html>
- 7 Swets Information Services, 'Serial price increases 2004', *Library and information update*, 3(9), 2004, pp 42-43