
WHELF: wherefore, whereto?



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In keeping with its collectivist traditions, Wales has for many years taken a cooperative approach to the management and provision of higher education, and national library and information services.

The main driver for collaboration between libraries in the higher education and national library sector in Wales today is the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF)¹. WHELF began in 1993 as an informal group to exchange ideas and offer mutual support. It has since developed into a professional and action-centred body intent on devising and carrying out new initiatives in library and information service provision. This transition has been achieved without losing the friendliness and social cohesion often remarked on by guests at our meetings. We normally meet at Gregynog, the loveliest piece of real estate owned by any UK university. Gregynog's famous cellar bar serves to lubricate WHELF's social bonds (and other organs).

WHELF includes the directors of library and information services of all higher education institutions in Wales – most are converged services – and the Librarian of the National Library of Wales (NLW). It has been particularly active in the past five years in pioneering cooperative access schemes for researchers and students in Welsh academic libraries, leading successful joint project bids², developing a very active staff development and training group³, and managing the recent HELP (Higher Education Libraries in Partnership) Project⁴. More recently WHELF has appointed a part-time development officer, and established a

development group to prepare business for the full membership.

The 18-month HELP project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), investigated and proposed future initiatives for an increased collaborative approach to library and information service provision in Wales. The resulting action plan has developed into the Virtual Academic Library for Wales (VALW) programme, which has prioritised activity in the following areas:

- Developing a cooperative library network in Wales
- Implementing collaborative services and developments
- Promoting shared access to e-services and e-resources
- Providing mutual support and opportunities for sharing good practice
- Staff development and training opportunities
- Marketing Welsh academic and national library services

The collaborative agenda for Welsh libraries has been further boosted in the past year by the establishment of a new division of the Welsh Assembly Government – CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales. In the few months since its creation, CyMAL has already established an ambitious agenda to develop collaborative partnerships within and between domains and its programme complements many of WHELP's aims.

Initial stages of the VALW programme include:

Consortial purchase of e-resources

In the context of work by CyMAL looking into central procurement for online reference resources for the libraries of Wales, WHELP is currently examining the potential for a consortial purchasing deal for e-books and other e-resources for higher education libraries. The feasibility of a Wales-wide approach to licensing seems favourable, with the NLW taking a lead role. WHELP is drawing upon the experience of successful working national licensing models in, amongst others, Nordic countries and New Zealand.

Widening access to collections

WHELP is investigating how to better promote academic and national library services to users in Wales. As a first step, it is investigating how to make the NLW's resources and services more accessible to its academic users through a usage survey, through seminars to academic librarians, and by promoting awareness and use of the

Library's online resources to existing and new users.

Eprint repositories research

With an objective to promote shared access to e-services and e-resources in Wales, WHELP is preparing a feasibility report on e-print repositories in Wales. It will draw upon the experiences of a consortium group of NLW, the University of Wales Aberystwyth and the University of Wales Swansea, who have recently received JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) funding to investigate linking Welsh university digital repositories with a regional repository held at the NLW; this project will look at the interaction between two different digital asset management systems, DSpace and Fedora.

Reviewing need for a shared research store in Wales

Monitoring current work, especially research by the M25 consortium of academic libraries into a shared research store for London, and the experiences of the pilot collaborative academic store for Scotland (CASS) launched in early 2004, WHELP is currently reviewing the need for a shared store of lesser-used materials for Wales.

WHELP organisational changes

WHELP's recently established development group is to implement specific programmes and activities, monitor funding opportunities and manage the WHELP development fund. It has also appointed this year a part-time development officer, Elizabeth Kensler, to undertake specific research and activities.

Dissemination of cooperative initiatives in Wales

As part of the HELP programme WHELP gathered details of existing cooperative initiatives and services in Welsh libraries. It is keeping this data updated and available via the WHELP website to inform future activities and to enable libraries to easily call upon good practice in service delivery. WHELP is promoting knowledge and use of the various extended access and borrowing schemes throughout the regions of Wales, plus examining how the cross-sectoral reciprocal borrowing scheme in north-west Wales, Linc y Gogledd, could be extended to all regions.

We hope this brief summary of current activities will be enough to show how a not particularly large collection of libraries is able to develop an action-oriented approach to collaboration, largely

on the basis of a coherent group of people sharing a common vision of the way ahead.

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REFERENCES

- 1 <http://whelf.ac.uk/>
- 2 An example is the 'Wales on the Web' directory of Welsh websites (<http://www.walesontheweb.org/>), which now also includes 'Collections Wales', a directory of printed collections in Welsh libraries, itself a WHELF initiative (<http://www.walesontheweb.org/cayw/guides/en/110>)
- 3 Namely, WHISD, a joint committee with HEWIT, WHELF's sister body for IT managers. WHISD organises an annual week-long Colloquium at Gregynog for library and ICT staffs in Welsh higher education institutions.
- 4 See <http://whelf.ac.uk/initiatives.htm> for copies of the HELP reports. The results were reported at a UK conference held in Cardiff in September 2004 (<http://www.glam.ac.uk/lrc/whelf/collaboration.php>)