
NoWAL's fifth – a symphony of success



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INTRODUCTION

NoWAL is a consortium of all the higher education libraries in the North West of England – from Carlisle to Crewe, and from the Irish Sea to the Pennines. NoWAL celebrated its fifth birthday as the lead body for higher education co-operation in the region in 2007/08, and here we look back over the consortium's achievements during the last five years.

HISTORY

North West Academic Libraries (NoWAL) became the lead body for higher education library co-operation in the North West of England with effect from the 2002/03 academic year. NoWAL had been formed some two years previously as a shadow organisation to the Consortium of Academic Libraries in Manchester (CALIM).

CALIM had, since its foundation in 1992, established a solid reputation for inter-library co-operation based on the delivery of high-quality staff training and development, reciprocal access and borrowing policies, engagement with diversity issues, consortial purchasing and policy co-ordination. Mindful of the growing importance of the regional agenda in public policy, CALIM council (the governing body of CALIM) founded NoWAL in spring 2000. Its membership comprised the libraries of the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University, Lancaster and Central Lancashire Universities and all the CALIM libraries, and its objectives were to improve library services to the North West University Association community through co-operation and collaboration. Furthermore, it was agreed that from October 2001 the CALIM staff training and development programme would be opened to NoWAL

members, and that they would also be able to participate in CALIM's procurement activities.

In 2002 both CALIM and NoWAL began to consider the advantages of enabling NoWAL to subsume CALIM and thus to become the lead regional body. It was strongly urged that the establishment of a truly pan-regional lead body for the North West would enable NoWAL to feed into the cross-domain and regional agendas with a stronger and more unified academic voice than had previously been the case. Accordingly, almost all the former CALIM activities were made over to NoWAL with effect from August 2002, and the CALIM secretariat (secretary, support officer, support assistant) became the NoWAL secretariat.

The months preceding August 2002 had seen 100% change in the staffing of the secretariat. The support assistant's and support officer's positions had been filled with new postholders in the spring. Of these, the latter, Gil Young, remains in post at the time of writing (December 2008). I had been appointed NoWAL secretary (subsequently executive secretary) in July, and took up this post, which I still hold, at the end of October.

The executive secretary's first major task in 2003 was to prepare for the admission into membership of the seven remaining North West higher education institutions. During the previous year, NoWAL had resolved to invite the non-university higher education institutions to join as soon as was practicable, in order to strengthen still further NoWAL's position in terms of regional representation. At NoWAL's board meeting in January it was agreed that the librarians of the seven higher education institutions, who had previously indicated their willingness to do so, should join the NoWAL board with effect from the start of the 2003/04 academic year. At that point, NoWAL thus comprised the former CALIM (and subsequently NoWAL) members:

- Liverpool John Moores University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST)
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Lancaster
- University of Liverpool
- Victoria University of Manchester
- University of Salford

and new members from the seven remaining HEIs:

- Bolton Institute of Higher Education
- Chester College of Higher Education
- Cumbria Institute of the Arts
- Edge Hill College of Higher Education
- Liverpool Hope University College
- Royal Northern College of Music
- St Martin's College.

All the above institutions remain represented in NoWAL's current constituency, although there have been changes brought about by mergers and the attainment of university status. The Victoria University of Manchester and UMIST merged to become the University of Manchester, and St Martin's and the Cumbria Institute merged to form the University of Cumbria. Furthermore, all but one of the HEIs now have university status, the exception being the RNCM, NoWAL's only conservatoire member.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

One of the consortium's most successful long-term projects has been the further development of CALIM's groundwork in respect of staff development and training. NoWAL has seen the implementation of a staff development and training strategy which includes accredited training, a general programme of short courses and a number of other activities such as job shadowing, exchange of experience events and a programme of summer visits.

For 2006 a programme specifically aimed at middle managers and above was added to the range of activities offered. The consortium also provides support to graduate trainees and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' (CILIP) chartership candidates by offering programmes of training specially designed to support their professional development.

Since August 2003 around 2,500 library and information staff from the North West and beyond have attended general-programme courses. NoWAL training courses are not restricted to staff from member libraries, and frequently attract registrations from sectors beyond HE, such as further education colleges, school libraries, public libraries, health and the law. When all other events are included, NoWAL has provided training for well over 3,000 staff working in these sectors over the last five years.

The Current Library and Information Practice (CLIP) programme of training (originally devel-

oped by CALIM and now managed by NoWAL) is accredited by the Open College Network North West Region. Some 250 members of staff from institutions across the North West have undertaken CLIP units and have achieved over 2,082 credits; 38 members of staff have obtained the full certificate and a number of these have gone on to further study at degree level. The CLIP programme covers a range of library- and information-related topics including customer service, information skills and training and learning skills. Learners use the CLIP programme in a variety of ways. Some of the registered learners are proposing to obtain the full certificate and go on to study librarianship at degree level. Other learners only intend to register for one unit in order to improve their skills in that area.

In April 2007 the NoWAL training programmes were awarded the CILIP seal of recognition for continuing professional development.

NoWAL AND NetLIBRARY – BIGGEST CONSORTIAL E-BOOK DEAL IN EUROPE¹

As early as 2001, members of the NoWAL board had begun to explore the possibility of offering users access to a large shared e-books collection. At that time, the supplier NetLibrary (in existence since 1998; subsequently a subsidiary of OCLC) had achieved some early penetration in the USA, although its market share elsewhere remained limited. It also seemed to offer the best range of content then available. NoWAL board members noted that, as there were no initiatives (from JISC or any other appropriate forum) to negotiate a national e-books agreement for UK HE, there might be an opportunity for considerable progress in a NoWAL/NetLibrary deal. Their thinking was that NoWAL could possibly use its substantial joint purchasing power to forge a good-value agreement on a larger corpus of e-books than had ever been put before UK HE users, and a contract of this size would be a UK landmark for NetLibrary, which would give the company an excellent foothold in HE.

After lengthy negotiations, an agreement was concluded in early 2004. The main features of the contract were:

- access to 12,000 copyright titles
- access to c. 3,400 public domain titles
- up to three simultaneous users of any one title
- 30 months' duration from February 2004

- NoWAL to 'own' an agreed percentage of the content
- access to owned content for up to five years after contract
- opportunity to 'refresh' (i.e. replace) a percentage of the content each year.

At the time, this was the largest European e-books contract in existence. After launch in February 2004, use of the service increased rapidly, and it continued to be heavily used throughout the term of the contract.

As the contract neared its end in 2006, the NoWAL board opted to retain access to the 'owned' content for a period, rather than to take out a fresh subscription with NetLibrary. It was evident that progress had been made in the way aggregators were able to offer content in the years since the NoWAL/NetLibrary deal was signed, and members indicated a clear preference for a model in which content could be purchased title by title by individual libraries, rather than for another large shared collection. After the reduction of the NoWAL corpus to the 'owned' content, access statistics suffered little, if at all, and this was widely held to be ample vindication of the titles selected for retention. As the statistics continued to remain healthy, the board opted to retain access in summer 2007, and again a year later.

During the second half of 2007, a small working group was convened by the board to explore whether or not consortial terms might be available to NoWAL from e-book aggregators that had started to offer services since the signing of the NetLibrary contract. The culmination of this process came in February 2008 when both Dawsons and Coutts, following demonstrations of both Dawsonera and MyiLibrary, graciously offered unconditional and non-exclusive preferential terms to NoWAL members.¹

RECIPROCAL ACCESS AND BORROWING SCHEME – NoWAL ANTICIPATES UK LIBRARIES PLUS

Ever since its inception, and building on the work of CALIM, NoWAL has always attached much importance to the articulation and implementation of shared policies, particularly in the field of reciprocal access for users to members' services. During 2003, the NoWAL board noted that the then new SCONUL Research Extra (SRX) scheme enabled academic staff and research postgraduates to use, and (within limits) to borrow printed materials from, the libraries of all participating universities and colleges of higher education.

Wishing to add value to the level of service offered under SRX, the board voted to introduce a separate and additional NoWAL reciprocal access and borrowing scheme aimed at taught postgraduates, a group not covered for loans under SRX. This offered reciprocal borrowing rights to taught postgraduates in keeping with the entitlement offered by the loaning library to other external borrowers. This pioneering scheme was operated very successfully from autumn 2003 until summer 2006, when it was overtaken by the decision of the new national agreement, UK Libraries Plus (UKLP), permanently to provide borrowing rights to postgraduate students.

CONSORTIAL PURCHASING – PERIODICALS 2004/05 AND ONWARDS

During the 1990s CALIM established a reputation for excellence in consortial procurement of library materials, particularly serials and monographs. NoWAL made it an early priority to retain and build on this reputation, and the first opportunity to do so presented itself in late 2004, as the existing CALIM and partners' contract for the supply of periodicals was scheduled to terminate at the end of the academic year 2004/05.

A working party was convened to prepare a fresh invitation to tender, and to manage the process of selecting successful suppliers. As with the previous contract, it was decided to invite the participation of a small number of libraries outside the NoWAL membership. The working group was led by Gill Barry, then deputy librarian of MMU, an acknowledged authority on procurement within the consortium. Gill determined that the best composition for the group would be representation of three contrasting member libraries by their heads of serials, the NoWAL executive secretary and a purchasing professional from one of the represented libraries.

With this combination of expertise in place, the team made rapid progress. The group first met in October 2004 and had completed the tender specification by the end of January 2005. The contract was let to three successful suppliers at the end of May, in ample time for the start of the academic year 2005/06. The contract has been, and continues to be, subject to regular compliance monitoring by the NoWAL office throughout its duration.

A broadly similar narrative applies to NoWAL's experience with monograph procurement. With the pre-existing CALIM contract due to expire in July 2006, a working group was established to put in place its successor. The composition of the group was similar to that of its serials counterpart except, of course, that the three selected contrasting member libraries in this instance fielded their heads of acquisitions. The group was convened in November 2005, and had completed the tender specification by March 2006. The contract was let to five successful suppliers at the end of May that year, and will remain in place until 2010. As with serials, suppliers in the monographs contract undergo regular compliance monitoring by the NoWAL office.

At the time of writing, NoWAL is taking a very active role in the preparation of the multi-regional monographs tender proposed by the 'Procurement for Libraries' forum, and led by the Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium.

It should be understood that NoWAL's achievements in respect of consortial purchasing are on a numbers of levels. Firstly, the working groups naturally push suppliers or agents for consortial terms that are more favourable than would be available to a single library seeking to let a similar supply contract. However, of at least equal (and arguably greater) value to NoWAL members is the saving in staff time represented by the actions of the small working group on behalf of all the participating members of a large consortium.

CONSTITUTION REVISED 2006

In spring 2005 a review of governance was undertaken at the request of the board. It had been agreed that such a review was overdue following the admission of the seven new partners in 2003/04. At the same time, it was felt desirable to 'de-layer' the consortium's structure. Concern had been expressed among members of NoWAL fora in respect of the number of groups and working parties active within the consortium, and also about the number and frequency of NoWAL meetings that had become necessary. In particular, it was felt that the existence within NoWAL's structure of both a board (comprising service directors and tasked with development of strategy) and an operations group (comprising second-tier senior personnel and tasked with the implementation of

strategy) restricted the speed and flexibility with which NoWAL could respond to new initiatives.

The review was conducted by the executive secretary, who reported his findings to the board at the end of January 2006. The main findings were:

- The board should be retained.
- The operations group should be wound up.
- Standing committees should as far as possible be replaced by task and finish groups.

A revised constitution, incorporating these and other changes, was drawn up by the executive secretary and adopted by the board with effect from April 2006.

With two years' hindsight, it is clear that the new constitution has brought with it considerable benefits. The winding up of the operations group has accelerated communication between board and task groups, and has enabled the board to effect governance with a lighter touch. Task and finish groups (of which the periodicals and monographs tendering working groups are good examples) are more sharply focused than the standing committees which they replaced, and can be convened and dissolved quickly. Furthermore, the expertise of former operations group members is still available to the consortium by virtue of their inclusion in various task and finish initiatives.

NoWAL CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

In early 2006 it was resolved that NoWAL should hold a conference to discuss the issues contingent on the design of learning spaces within higher education. This proposal was led by St Martin's College (subsequently University of Cumbria) and Edge Hill University, both of which had recently completed and opened major new learning-space developments.

The 'Designing Spaces for Learning' conference took place on 8 September 2006 and was attended by 88 people from 48 institutions. The conference addressed four themes:

- the needs of future learners in the context of physical learning space
- how buildings could be conceptualised and designed for learner needs, including features and design principles
- the role of new and emergent technologies
- the implication for staff roles and professional development.

In the feedback received afterwards, delegates praised the high quality of the papers presented, the opportunities for professional debate, the chosen venue and the efficiency of the NoWAL administration team. It was subsequently decided, on the basis of the success of the first conference, that NoWAL should plan additional events in the future on significant professional issues as they arise. Consequently, the second NoWAL conference was held on 5 September 2008. 'Up Close and Personal: our changing roles in a digital learning age' took place at Edge Hill University and welcomed 72 delegates from HE and health-sector libraries throughout the UK.

The conference aimed to explore the following strands in the context of role change and working differently:

- innovative partnerships and relationships that are emerging to enhance e-learning support
- the changing way in which staff engage with their users, and the implications for practice
- new roles and skills emerging as a result of the implementation of technologies in the physical and/or virtual learning environment
- skills development of our users in a digital world, and the impact on our ways of working.

Delegate feedback from this event was once again very positive, and it is highly likely that NoWAL will organise further conferences.

HEFCE CIRCULAR 09/07 – SHARED SERVICES: INVITATION TO SUBMIT EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

In its circular letter 09/07 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) invited HEIs to submit proposals for feasibility studies of the types described in the earlier circular 20/06, 'Shared services: the benefits for higher education institutions'. In this earlier document HEFCE sought to encourage HEIs to move towards a culture of shared services to improve quality and cost-effectiveness. NoWAL's response to the call for proposals was to bid for funding for a shared digitisation brokerage service for the North West region.

There was plenty of evidence for the potential of a shared service to effect savings. A survey of NoWAL member libraries, undertaken in December 2006, had indicated that digitisation was a critical issue across the consortium and that

the majority of members had already invested heavily in this area, in respect of equipment and staff expertise. All had taken out the Copyright Licensing Agency HE trial licence, and all but two had undertaken some level of digitisation activity. One of NoWAL's key operating principles is that collaborative activity should add value to what can be achieved by institutions acting independently. In view of the level of interest and activity in digitisation across the consortium it was clear that real benefits could be found using members' combined strength in this area.

NoWAL was granted funding by HEFCE in June 2007 to undertake a feasibility study. NoWAL appointed a firm of consultants, Liz Hart Associates, to carry out this work, which began the following autumn. The feasibility study was completed in August 2008 and agreed by the NoWAL board in October. The study proposes a shared digitisation project, the main features of which will be:

- the joint procurement of high-quality single and volume digital reproduction services
- shared training and development
- a range of focussed knowledge and networking services, based around an enhanced website making extensive use of Web 2.0 tools.

The project will run for 12 months in the first instance, and will require the appointment of a project officer. Recruitment begins in early 2009. At the end of the first year, the project will be handed over to the NoWAL office for continuation.

CONCLUSION

As NoWAL enters its sixth year, budgetary pressures as well as other considerations increasingly render collaborative working a necessity rather than merely a virtue. The challenge for the consortium will be to support users effectively, given the much wider range of contexts and media in which and by which teaching and learning are delivered.

Students have, by and large, never heard of NoWAL and know nothing of the ways in which our activities have enhanced the services they receive. This is just how it should be. However, students now expect to be able to identify the information they require, irrespective of their physical location, and that it should be delivered to their desktops, in full text, 24x7. NoWAL's priorities must be to develop collaborative initiatives to meet those expectations as they continue to

evolve. It is clear, for example, that, driven principally by the relentless incursion of social networking services into all aspects of information-seeking behaviour, students are developing new modes of interaction with information: the distinction between study and leisure is becoming blurred.

Though students need no separate awareness of NoWAL, the consortium will retain and will act upon a vitally important advocacy agenda among other groups of stakeholders. NoWAL already has a reputation for excellence in collaboration among the management teams of its member universities, but this message would benefit from both wider dissemination and reinforcement. Furthermore, NoWAL will seek to strengthen its regional voice in respect of HE and learning services issues, both on behalf of its own constituents and in liaison with other regional and national bodies.

As NoWAL is a voluntary association of libraries which act consortially only on the basis of mutual self-interest, it often difficult to make progress on chosen initiatives. Members rightly retain their own priorities and can, in any event, only participate in NoWAL projects in the context of their own institution's strategic plan. This being so, as executive secretary I firmly believe that our achievements over the last five years are the more remarkable. I am quite certain that the learning that has accrued to all members in the process will prove an excellent preparation for the future.

REFERENCES

- 1 More detailed accounts of NoWAL's work with e-books have been published in two papers: Peter M. Wynne, 'The NoWAL netLibrary e-book collection: a case study of a consortial agreement', *New review of academic librarianship*, 11 (1), April 2005, pp 81-94, and Peter M. Wynne and Annette Coates, 'E-books and everything after: an update from the NoWAL experience', *SCONUL Focus*, 42, Winter 2007, 46-50