Briefing for SCONUL members and other university leaders: a national digital library for UK HE

This paper provides members of the Society of College, National and University Libraries and their colleagues with background information on our proposal for a national digital library for UK HE.

What is SCONUL proposing?

SCONUL is proposing that the UK would benefit from the development of a national digital library to serve the interests of UK universities and other research institutions and providers of higher education. Such a shared service would provide access to a core collection of digital resources, including commercial and open access monographs and journals, for all students, researchers and academics. These would be accessed through a single catalogue incorporating common discovery tools.

Many of the constituent elements for such a service already exist or are being developed, and plans for national digital libraries are being taken forward in a number of countries, including the US. However, significant barriers would need to be overcome to make such as a service a reality for the UK, including the negotiation of a national licence agreement providing extensive access at a reasonable cost.

Why is SCONUL proposing such a service?

A national digital library would allow university libraries to share between them the administrative costs of acquiring, accessing and managing electronic resources, both in terms of staff and systems, enabling us to deliver better services at a lower cost. This would free resources for libraries to use to improve their other functions, including the development of special collections; providing high quality study spaces and services for students such as information literacy training. These elements of the service provided by libraries will become increasingly important in a high-fee, competitive environment, particularly given that usage of libraries is rising rather than falling despite the move to digital resources.

A UK HE digital library would help improve the student experience, since it would allow access for registered users from anywhere in the UK via a common catalogue and under standard licence terms. This would help address some sources of dissatisfaction for students with the current experience of accessing electronic resources because of the limitations placed by publishers on printing, downloading and accessing e-books and journals.

This would give UK universities and colleges an advantage in the market for international students and reinforce and sustain the position of the UK as a world leader in higher education. Unless we do take action to capitalise on the new opportunities arising from technological developments, we risk being overtaken by other nations in this area.

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Actively pursuing such a shared service would provide a clear illustration of the commitment of the library community to delivering high quality services in the most efficient way possible. It would also support the government's objective of facilitating new entrants to the HE sector since they would be able to gain access to the national digital library - although they would of course have to bear their share of the cost of providing the service.

How would a national digital library work?

The development of cloud computing, advanced discovery tools, improved usage statistics and initiatives to improve the quality of metadata all mean that the practical barriers to the creation of a national digital library are much reduced. The next generation of library systems now being developed with commercial partners and on open source models are being used across the world to develop digital libraries which operate across institutional, sectoral and national boundaries.

In fact the main barriers are not technological, political or even economic, given the scope for a shared service to cut administrative costs for individual institutions. They arise from the complexities of licensing and digital rights management. This will be the main challenge in development a national digital library for UK HE.

Of course any national licensing agreement would need to deliver sustainable business models for the publishers but it must also remove unnecessary limitations on the access to, and use of, the content produced by UK universities.

What is happening in other countries?

A number of other countries have begun the development of a national digital library (NDL), adopting a wide range of models. Some, such as Pakistan, has adopted such an approach as the best route to improving research outputs because individual institutions could only provide access to a limited range of resources. See http://www.digitallibrary.edu.pk/ for information.

A range of models are being developed across Europe. For example, Finland is developing an NDL which includes born-digital and digitised content from national museums and archives as well as libraries. It is being developed from existing library systems and the Finnish government plans to extend access to the general public and is allowing access to all content through Europeana.
http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2011/liitteet/OKM26.pdf?lang=en

Perhaps of most interest are proposals for a NDL for the US. As in Finland, this is envisaged as a service for the general public as well as higher education with the focus on US generated content. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/oct/28/can-we-create-national-digital-library/

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What happens next?

SCONUL will work with partner organisations to promote the idea of a national digital library for UK HE to funders, government, politicians and regulators. While being clear that this is a long-term aspiration, we will stress the benefits which would flow to individual institutions and to the HE sector as a whole. We will use this opportunity to discuss the contribution that libraries and their staff make to research excellence and student satisfaction and outcomes, and to highlight some of the challenges we face, such as the rising cost of content.

About SCONUL: we promotes awareness of the role of academic libraries in supporting research excellence and student achievement and employability, and represents their views and interests to governments and regulators. For further information, please contact Ann Rossiter, Executive Director, SCONUL at ann.rossiter@sconul.ac.uk or on 020 7387 0317.