

Distributed National Collections: Concept and Reality in Two Countries

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the British Library (BL) has conducted a systematic and ongoing review of its collecting policies. This has resulted in new strategies being developed in order to counter the effect of the library's declining capacity to collect as comprehensively as it had previously done. Central to these emerging strategies is the concept of a 'distributed national collection', which the library describes in its current planning document as a future in which UK research collections would be managed by 'formal arrangements among the higher education sector, the national libraries and other nationally important collections. These partnerships will implement the development and management of a distributed national collection of research resources, with new agreements to facilitate access.' (British Library, 2001).

The distributed national collection is therefore a scheme under which the British Library envisages completing agreements with other libraries to facilitate the development of specialized subject-based research collections. The concept forms the foundation of the library's future collection-building strategies, and it is currently working to put in place the infrastructure and funding which would allow such 'formal arrangements' to be completed and implemented.

The concept of a formalized approach to building collections on a national scale is not new. A similar strategy was the subject of extensive debate amongst the Australian library community during the 1980s and 1990s, and an attempt was made to formulate and manage a national collecting programme, the Distributed National Collection (DNC).

THE DNC IN AUSTRALIA: THE CONCEPT

The mid-1980s saw an international surge of interest in cooperative collection development. This was largely the result of changes in the nature of scholarly publishing, which were beginning to affect the ability of even the largest libraries to make any claim to autonomy. These changes included:

- the ever increasing volume of published material,
- the high inflation rates of most forms of publishing but the scholarly journal in particular,
- the emergence of new forms of information technology which enabled faster, cheaper and higher quality transmission of documents and images.

There were also, however, a number of more local reasons why Australia in the 1980s was fertile ground for the development of a broad scale cooperative collecting agenda.

Australia already had a history of library cooperation, often on a national scale. This was in part the result of necessity. The small population, the relative slowness in developing an extensive network of research universities, and the lack of a tradition of private benefaction, all hindered the development of the research library sector. The consequently small number of research collections in Australia, coupled with their (by international standards) comparatively modest holdings, made cooperation

imperative. Although even the largest research libraries have had to concede that complete independence with regard to satisfying information needs is now impossible, it has never been a realistic goal in Australia. Australian libraries have long recognized that they must cooperate in order to optimize their services to researchers, and they have needed to go beyond the forms of regional cooperation that have sufficed elsewhere.

Traditionally this has been achieved through interlibrary loans. Australia has a long record of providing interlibrary lending or copying through a variety of formal and informal networks, and Australian libraries were early and prolific adopters of technologies designed to provide for the rapid transfer of information. They have also been keen, however, to explore cooperation in collection development as a means of providing improved services.

When it came to developing a national system of cooperative collecting, the relatively small number and size of its research libraries provided Australia with an advantage. Firstly, it made the task of reaching agreement on matters to do with broad-based cooperation somewhat easier, and secondly, the nation was well placed to develop the bibliographic infrastructure which made the development of cooperative collecting possible. Of particular importance was the early development of effective national union catalogues. The *National Union Catalogue of Serials* (NUCOS), covering the holdings of most of the country's research collections, had been first published in 1963 (formerly as *Scientific Serials in Australian Libraries* and *Serials in Australian Libraries: Social Sciences and Humanities*), and a companion publication, the *National Union Catalogue of Monographs*, had been available on microfilm since 1976. These union catalogues fostered not only a culture of resource sharing, but also a considered and 'distributed' approach to selection prior to the attempted implementation of a more formal scheme.

The existing union catalogues also provided the foundation for the early development of an electronic database of the holdings of the nation's major collections. Commencing in 1981, the Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN) was operated by the National Library of Australia (NLA) with a management committee representing a wide range of Australian libraries. It received cataloguing records and holdings information not only from the National, state and academic libraries, but also from many special and even public libraries. It also included records loaded from national bibliographic agencies such as those in the BL and the Library of Congress. The result was that although ABN was conceived primarily as a shared cataloguing resource, it developed into a *de facto* – but nonetheless impressive – national bibliographic database. It was therefore a potentially powerful tool as a foundation for cooperative collecting activity.

Another factor that influenced the development of a national approach to collecting was that the Australian resource sharing system lacked a dominant provider such as the British Library Document Supply Centre. The Australian interlibrary supply network was (and is) truly distributed. The National Library has occasionally toyed with more ambitious plans, but has generally been a library of last, rather than first, resort. Indeed, given the gradual decline of its collecting capacity, the NLA is now just one more library in a network of providers.

There also persisted in Australia a belief that the nation should be as self-sufficient as possible with regard to its information needs. Many Australians remembered all too clearly the experience of World War II, when Australia had been very nearly isolated by enemy action, and even in the 1980s the transfer of information from international providers remained time consuming and expensive. There were therefore reasons relating to security and independence as to why Australia was concerned with information self-sufficiency.

The growing Australian interest in cooperative collection development during the 1980s was fed by the promotion of the Conspectus methodology as a means of evaluating, recording and comparing collections across broad subject categories. Conspectus data potentially provided information about the existence of collections, irrespective of whether they were catalogued or represented in union lists. As such it appealed as a further source of information which could fulfil the preconditions necessary for cooperative collecting on a national scale.

The DNC defined

The watershed year for the DNC in Australia was 1988, during which two key meetings were held that created the basis for a more formalized approach to national collecting. The first of these was the RLG Conspectus and Collection Evaluation Seminar, held in Sydney in August, and the second was the Australian Libraries Summit, held in Canberra in October.

At these meetings the NLA emerged as a strong advocate of the use of Conspectus as the foundation for the 'national co-ordination of collection development' (Wainwright, 1989, p.17). At the time, the NLA had a particular reason to be interested in the development of a national collecting agenda. It was then midway through the process of restructuring its collection development plan, and it was be-

coming increasingly apparent that it would no longer be able to support its previous levels of collecting, particularly with regard to non-Australian material. The implementation of a national approach to collecting therefore offered a means whereby this responsibility could potentially be shared among the nation's research libraries.

It was at the Australian Libraries Summit that the term 'distributed national collection' (albeit initially without the capitals) began to be used, and the resolutions emerging from the summit made a first attempt to define what soon became the DNC. Resolution AA1 recommended 'That the following principles of a national collection be accepted:

- 'a. aggregation of all library collections in Australia whether in the public or private sector,
 - 'b. comprehensive in relation to Australia,
 - 'c. selective in relation to the rest of the world as present and future needs require,
 - 'd. adequately recorded and readily accessible.'
- (Australian Libraries Summit, 1988, p.11)

Although this definition was later refined, the core elements remained fundamentally unaltered. That is, the nation's libraries were to be viewed as holding one, national collection, which could be developed in the interests of all library users. Ideally, it would be a collection that could be subject to the usual disciplines of planning, development and management that apply to the collection of a single library.

Conspectus

It was envisaged that the DNC would be underpinned not only by ABN, but also by the development of a stand-alone database to record Conspectus data from at least the country's research libraries. In its most developed form the DNC would potentially require libraries to enter into formal agreements to maintain prescribed levels of support for particular subject areas, and the transfer of existing collections between libraries to consolidate national collections of excellence.

From the beginning there was dispute as to how adaptable Conspectus would be to the Australian situation. The arguments by the opponents to Conspectus were of two types. Some argued that it was of much more value in the USA, with its far more developed network of research libraries, and that Australia should put energy and resources into further development of the national bibliographic database. Others believed that it was 'too American' in its description of some subjects, and that it would need substantial revision for those subject areas to be usable in Australia.

Nevertheless the Australian Libraries Summit in 1988 passed a resolution calling for a 'national working party ... to determine an Australian version of conspectus by September 1989 and to conduct a pilot test of the method determined and to recommend priorities for application.' (Australian Libraries Summit, 1988, p.12). As a result of this recommendation a National Task Force on Conspectus was created. When the Taskforce finally reported in late 1989, it included recommendations that:

- Australia should adopt the form of Conspectus developed overseas rather than develop a new method. The Dewey-based Pacific North-Western (PNW) version was chosen as being more suitable for use in Australia than the Library of Congress-based RLG version.
- Some small alterations to this method would be necessary to make it useable in Australia, but these alterations should be kept to a minimum.
- An online Conspectus database be established, to be jointly supported by the National Library of Australia and the Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services.

Thereafter things moved quickly – for a while at least. In 1990 a National Conspectus Officer was appointed to the staff of the NLA. In February 1991 a draft version of the Australian Conspectus Manual was published, and later that year the National Conspectus Database was established at the NLA. In August 1992 the final version of the *Australian Conspectus manual* was published.

Another watershed meeting in the development of the DNC was a national colloquium that took place in 1993, at which the responsibility for overseeing its development was handed to the NLA. The library soon after created the DNC Office to manage the scheme. In order to implement it, a series of objectives was created, under five headings: collecting, bibliographic control, preservation, access, and national coordination.

With an office operating from the NLA to manage the implementation, which was in turn guided by the broad goal of implementing a national collection and the objectives specified under the five activity areas, there was widespread optimism surrounding the DNC following the 1993 Colloquium.

THE DNC IN AUSTRALIA: THE REALITY

Despite this early optimism and some ongoing activity in the following years, by the end of the decade the DNC was widely perceived to have 'failed'. The reasons for this have been examined at greater length elsewhere (Byrne, 1997; Genoni, 2001), but some are worth revisiting briefly.

Firstly, it soon became apparent that the *Conspectus* database would never materialize – at least with the completeness that was necessary. A number of research and other libraries did complete *Conspectus* evaluations and descriptions of their collections, but managers of some of the larger university and state libraries refused to commit themselves to the task. In a situation where the value of this approach was already under question, the failure of some research libraries to produce *Conspectus* data was a severe setback to the prospect for national cooperation. When it became clear that the *Conspectus* database would not achieve the degree of coverage that was needed, the commitment of participating libraries also began to falter, and by the late 1990s *Conspectus* activity had virtually ceased.

The National Library of Australia

Secondly, the transfer of responsibility for the management of the DNC to the NLA was an unfortunate piece of timing. At a time when the NLA was supposedly providing leadership to the national collecting activity it found itself dealing with severe internal problems. Some of these related to further reductions in purchasing capacity, which forced the library to continually review its own collecting priorities, but perhaps more important was a troubled attempt to redevelop the aging ABN. Progress towards the development of a new system proceeded through the mid-1990s, engaging the library in a substantial outlay of time and money. The initial redevelopment attempt collapsed, and the NLA was under considerable financial and political strain as the process was restarted. The redevelopment has since been completed on a more modest scale than proposed originally, and ABN has now been reborn as *Kinetica*. There is no doubt, however, that the problems with the redevelopment were a major distraction for the NLA during a period when energetic leadership was important to the success of the DNC.

Also detrimental to the development of the DNC was the renewed focus on local collection priorities that resulted from the continuing decline in the purchasing capacity of Australian research libraries. This was partly the result of the ongoing price escalation of scholarly journals which has affected libraries everywhere, but the impact of these price rises was felt more keenly in Australia than in most countries, because of the ongoing devaluation of the Australian dollar (\$) against the major currencies which were used for the pricing of most academic literature. At December 1983, when the \$A was 'floated' against international currencies, it had a value of 95 US cents. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s the value trend for the \$A was consistently downward. For most of 2001 it hovered just over the 50 US cent mark, slipping at times to below 49 cents.

Australian research libraries have responded by severely culling periodical collections over the last decade. According to one estimate, in the five years up to 1998, the total number of journals acquired by Australian universities declined from 200,666 to 112,974 (Steele, 2000a, p.99). Many libraries have made additional cancellations since then.

In this environment, which one might at a first glance assume would lead to increased cooperation in order to combat the dwindling supply of journals, many libraries have reacted by becoming increasingly defensive about their local collecting agendas. National priorities became a luxury at a time of unprecedented pressure in meeting the needs of primary users, and as a result very few of the envisaged formal collecting agreements were actually finalized. In many cases what had seemed to be achievable in the abstract, proved to be unachievable in reality.

In this regard the DNC faced a problem common to other broad-based cooperative programmes. That is, although they are often instituted as a means of countering declining purchasing power by sharing the responsibility to collect peripheral material, in hard times libraries are forced to focus on core materials designed to meet local needs. The basis of the intended cooperation – developing complementary collections of little used research material – is therefore lost.

In giving priority to collections of core material and shifting to access rather than ownership for less used research material, Australian librarians were enticed by the promise of the emerging technological solutions, in particular those technologies that promised supply from international commercial document supply services at competitive prices, and with response times which outperformed those offered by traditional library sources. This led many Australian librarians to question the wisdom of having national collection policies at a time when information supply was becoming increasingly 'internationalized'.

A related reason that is sometimes given for the failure of the DNC is that the concept was designed for print-based collections, and yet its introduction coincided with the increased acquisition of digital material. As early as the 1993 DNC Colloquium warning had been given of the need to develop an 'electronic DNC' (Crook, 1993, p.7). The concept of the DNC remained, however, firmly enmeshed with ownership of the physical object. While other forms of library cooperation, in particular those involving access to bibliographic data and to non-returnable copy, were transformed by digital

technology, little headway was made in bringing about similar transformations in the forms of collaboration needed to reinvent the DNC.

The end of the DNC

Although there was no point of decision by the Australian library community to end its commitment to the DNC, it seems to have been slowly eroded by the shortage of resources and a growing frustration at the lack of progress. By 1997 the NLA had disbanded the DNC Office, and its reduced functions had been subsumed elsewhere within the organization. In the same year the National Scholarly Communications Forum hosted a Round Table meeting on the DNC. The then President of the Council of Australian University Librarians, Alex Byrne, gave a keynote address, pointedly titled 'After the DNC', in which he declared that its achievements to date had been 'precious few' (Byrne, 1997).

That meeting in 1997 indirectly marked the end of the DNC, although the notion of cooperative collecting lingers as an ideal in Australia. The late 1990s saw some activity around a proposal referred to as JANUS, largely driven by the academic library sector, which was an attempt to revamp the notion of national collecting by focussing on hybrid collections of subject excellence. The JANUS proposal failed to proceed beyond the concept stage. Further national information infrastructure initiatives are being pursued in areas relating to document delivery and shared storage, but it is electronic rather than print sources which attract most attention and resources. The Council of Australian University Librarians has largely separated its interests from those of the NLA, and the concept of a national collecting plan for print-based material has, for the time being at least, slipped from the agenda.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

As interest in the DNC waned in Australia during the second half of the 1990s, other national initiatives emerged both in Australia and in other countries. Many of these focused on shared access to electronic sources. As libraries developed various models of consortia-based acquisitions, it was a natural to move towards consortia operating at the national level. At their most ambitious these plans included the agreement of 'national site licences' for the distribution of electronic products.

For the most part national site licensing initiatives have been led by the higher education sector, sometimes in conjunction with relevant government agencies. Given the advantages of already established networks with shared interests, a more homogeneous user group, and a narrower range of collecting priorities, academic libraries have generally been quicker than their national library counterparts to seize the opportunities offered for licensing projects on a national scale.

Collaborative projects with regard to print-based material have continued. Many of these are limited to particular formats (e.g. newspapers), operate on a regional basis, or are confined to area studies, perhaps the subject field that is most amenable to cooperation. Generally research libraries seem content to proceed with their collection development in the knowledge of associated activity in related libraries, but they demonstrate little enthusiasm for wide-ranging or formal cooperative programmes. Details of current and recent forms of cooperation in a number of countries can be found in the report prepared by the Higher Education Consultancy Group (2002), *Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries*.

Given the shift of emphasis to broad-based licensing projects, often on a national scale, and the lessons seemingly implied by the demise of the DNC in Australia, the recent emergence of a new push for a distributed national collecting agenda for print based material runs somewhat against the grain. This is, however, the situation in the UK, where momentum for the implementation of a 'distributed national collection', very similar in conception to the Australian model, has been building for several years.

THE DNC IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE CONCEPT

The UK has been similar to other nations during the 1990s, in that there has been substantial activity around the development of models of shared access to digital material. This, and other issues related to library services for the UK higher education sector, received substantial attention in the wake of the report by the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group (1993), the so-called Follett Report. It included recommendations aimed at improving cooperation among higher education libraries, and in particular at using emerging information technologies to support the transfer of research information between libraries and universities. One outcome was the emergence of the Higher Education Funding Councils' Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) as an important influence in the development of library services for research communities in the UK.

From the work of JISC came the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER), created with a view to developing a large-scale collecting and access programme for digital material. As JISC's Chris Rusbridge has noted, the concept was based at least in part on the Australian experience with the DNC.

JISC... borrowed from and adapted another Australian idea: the Distributed National Collection. This became for us the Distributed National Electronic Resource. Initially this expressed two simple ideas. First was the notion that the provision of digital resources should be physically distributed for redundancy and avoidance of single-point-of-failure reasons. Second was the belief that the collections offered should fit within a national framework: the JISC Collections Policy. (Rusbridge, 2000, 12)

Where the DNER offered a significant departure from the Australian DNC was in its emphasis on electronic materials. Whereas the DNC had in part begun to appear redundant because of its failure to incorporate electronic material into its concept of 'collections', the DNER bypassed the issue of printed materials in favour of an approach that concentrated on portal access to electronic sources.

JISC has also been responsible for national site licensing in the UK, through the offices of the National Electronic Site Licensing Initiative (NESLI). NESLI was established in 1998, after several years conducting trials sponsored by the four UK higher education funding bodies, in order to manage a rapid transition to electronic sources for a range of academic/research material.

The British Library

It was not only the higher education sector which was looking to modify its collecting practices during this period; changes were also under way at the BL. These would see a shift in the library's priorities and the emergence of a UK version of a distributed national collection for print material. The changes commenced in earnest in 1998, when the BL conducted a major strategic review. As an outcome of this review process the library arrived at a similar position with regard to its ability to collect comprehensively as the NLA had reached a decade earlier. When released in 1999, the BL's strategic plan for 1999-2002 announced that 'It should be recognized formally that collecting in all subjects, all languages, and from all nations cannot be sustained', and that 'The library should seek to develop partnership arrangements with other institutions which would enable a more distributed approach to collection development.' (British Library, 1999)

The strategic plan also announced the creation of a Cooperation and Partnership Programme, under which the BL would seek to enter into cooperative arrangements with libraries from all sectors with a view to distributing the load of providing the nation with a comprehensive research collection.

One of the first outcomes of this strategy was that during 1999 the British Library moved to create a body with responsibility for examining ways in which cooperation between it and the higher education sector could be enhanced. This body, the Higher Education/British Library Taskforce took as one of its tasks the rationalization of collecting practices. This resulted in the preparation of a report, *Co-ordinating the distributed national collection of research resources*, which recommended the creation of a distributed national collection of print material for the UK (Higher Education/British Library Taskforce, 2001)

The justification given for the creation of a distributed national collection echoed in almost every respect the arguments presented in Australia a decade earlier. The report announced that UK researchers were 'already reliant on a *de facto* distributed national collection' and pointed to the usual factors, including the increased output of scholarly publishing and the rising cost of acquiring scholarly publishing as the driving force behind the recommendations. The report concluded that:

The aims of a co-ordinated distributed national collection (DNC) of research resources would be, through cooperation, formal partnership arrangements and appropriate governance mechanisms, to ensure that UK researchers, inside and outside of HE, have available to them, within their own institutions and in the collections of others, the full range and extent of printed research material they require. (Higher Education/ British Library Taskforce, 2001)

The key recommendations of the report included:

- the creation of an independent 'office for the distributed national collection' to act as 'a facilitator and broker, be an advocate for DNC-type activity, and also function as a hub for dissemination',
- that the distributed national collection would be restricted to print material, but it should interface 'seamlessly with the Distributed National Electronic Resource',
- that activity would extend beyond the HE sector and incorporate all research collections irrespective of the library in which they were held,
- that future work should take place in four key areas of collaboration:
 - i. building the national map of research collections
 - ii. developing an enabling infrastructure

- iii. establishing discipline-based agreements of co-operation and disclosure of research resources,
- iv. 'access funding', to support access to collections which do not currently have a 'mission to serve the general public'.

In concept the proposal is very similar to the Australian DNC. Indeed it is surprising that the report makes no reference to the Australian experience, although one may read into the recommendations made with regard to funding that some lessons have been taken from the problems encountered in Australia. The report included an estimate that the DNC would cost approximately £9 million a year to administer in the first three years. This did not include any allocation for acquisitions, and was intended only to fund the establishing of the office plus work in the four key areas of collaborative work.

In the wake of the HE/BL report the BL has continued to promote the concept of a distributed national collection for the UK. It issued a revamped strategic plan in 2001, *New strategic directions*, which made it clear that distributed collecting responsibilities based on formal agreements would be the cornerstone of its future collection development activity. The library concluded that 'The distributed approach to collecting and access has the potential to lead to very considerable benefits to users and institutions' (British Library, 2001).

Research Support Libraries Programme

The other major strands of recent activity have been those conducted by the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) and the Research Libraries Support Group (RLSG). The RSLP was commenced in 1998, jointly funded by the higher education funding bodies for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was instituted with the goal of optimizing the conditions for research support in UK libraries. Its work to date includes conducting a feasibility study (in conjunction with JISC and the British Library) which examines the prospects of establishing a national union catalogue for the UK, and commissioning a major report, *Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries*. (Higher Education Consultancy Group, 2002)

The RSLG was formed in 2001, bringing together senior members of the library and research communities with the responsibility of advising the HE Funding Councils, the British Library and the national libraries of Scotland and Wales on 'a national strategic framework and mechanisms for promoting collaboration in, and integration of the development and provision of library collections, their long-term management, and services to support research.' (Research Support Libraries Group, 2001)

The RSLG has indicated it will issue a report in mid-2002 which will make proposals for a national strategy for library services to research communities. The final shape of the distributed national collection as it is implemented in the UK will in all likelihood be determined by the contents of this report.

THE DNC IN THE UK: THE REALITY?

Supporters of a distributed national collection for the UK can take heart from the fact that the proposal as it has currently been presented in the HE/BL report has some advantages over its Australian predecessor. Some of the problems that undermined the DNC in Australia were, as described above, due to local 'political' or economic circumstances and therefore will not be replicated in the UK. Other problems may well be reduced by systemic differences in the research library sectors in Australia and the UK, and there are others still that can be addressed by providing improved infrastructure, financial or management support.

UK advantages

One important recommendation from the HE/BL taskforce with regard to management of the UK distributed national collection was that the responsible office should 'be independent of all the main players' - an independence which will of course be achieved only if the office is supported by an appropriate funding source. Such independence is necessary in order that the office be seen to be operating in the interests of all stakeholders, and to ensure that it does not become distracted or subverted by other - perhaps competing - agendas within a parent organization. Given the lack of other organizations with the authority or resources to accept the task, it was necessary that the NLA was given direct responsibility for the DNC in Australia. In hindsight, however, this would seem to have been an inadequate solution at a time when the NLA was increasingly distracted by other priorities.

There is also reason to be optimistic about the prospects for distributed national collecting in the UK by identifying some of the differences in existing infrastructure. The more established network of research libraries in the UK, including a number outside the higher education/national library nexus, means that the task can be more widely and equitably distributed. Although this broader base of re-

search collections may introduce some problems in terms of the number of collecting and access agreements that need to be reached, it is feasible that a viable distributed national collection could be implemented without all potential participants being party to such agreements.

Issues of access are also more likely to be overcome in the UK. Australia was hampered in this regard by the distances involved. Although efforts were made to underpin the DNC by improvements to the document delivery systems, this does not prove effective for all types of research material. Researchers will inevitably require personal access to major collections, and this is more achievable given the much more geographically proximate nature of UK collections.

In one respect, however, access may be more of a problem in the UK. Research collections in Australia are for the most part held by publicly funded institutions which have reasonably liberal access conditions, particularly for *bone fide* researchers. Many substantial research collections in the UK are held in privately financed libraries which currently have much stricter access conditions. UK researchers will therefore be encouraged to see the priority which has been given to overcoming access problems in the discussions thus far.

The existing infrastructure for document delivery in the UK is also better equipped to underpin a distributed approach to collecting than was the case in Australia. That the British Library, through the services of its document supply and lending service at Boston Spa, will continue to serve the UK as a source of first or second resort means that there is an excellent foundation on which to establish a network of ownership and supply of specialized collections of little used research material. Individual libraries are less likely to feel threatened by the prospect of unsupportable demand for copying and external lending, and users will be comforted by the knowledge that the majority of their needs will continue to be met by a service with an established reputation for excellence. Although the distributed supply and lending system operating in Australia has served the country well, it would not be a first choice strategy when seeking to implement a model where a greater number of user needs must be met by access rather than local ownership.

A further departure from the Australian model of supporting a distributed national collection was heralded in the HE/BL taskforce report's rather surprising conclusion that 'There is no single, well-established, technique for describing research collections'. The report makes only one very brief mention of Conspectus, and seems to envisage the use of the Conspectus methodology for *assessing* collections, accompanied by the development of a new method for *describing* collections. This may well be justified. The Conspectus description levels have been subject to criticism for both their lack of precision and the difficulty in adapting them to suit hybrid or primarily electronic collections. In 1997 the NLA developed more 'user-friendly' collection level descriptions, but by that time Conspectus was already in decline in Australia. UK work on the development of a new method for collection description commenced in mid-2001 with the establishment of the Collection Description Focus, group jointly funded by RSLP, the BL and JISC. (Johnston and Robinson, 2002).

One might also note a difference between the Australian and UK versions of distributed national collecting in their attitude to self-sufficiency. As noted earlier, Australians have had a long held belief in the virtue of national self-sufficiency with regard to their information needs, despite acknowledging that even a coordinated national collection would not meet this goal. As John Shipp stated in a 1997 review of the DNC, 'There remains a fixation ... with self-sufficiency, if not within institutions, then certainly at a national level'. (Shipp, 1997). This 'fixation' may have helped give birth to the concept of the DNC, but it also served to undermine it as it became clear that even a fully realized DNC in Australia would fall well short of providing self-sufficiency. The proposal for the distributed national collection for the UK, however, seems to question whether 'categories of last resort 'just-in-case material' in particular disciplines or languages need to be held within the UK at all'. (Smith, 2000, p.259) It will certainly be easier to reach a clear-headed plan for a distributed national collection if the goal is to meet the needs of researchers through a carefully planned mix of national ownership and international access, rather than embarking on a futile attempt to collect everything that researchers might possibly require.

Significant challenges

Despite these advantages in the UK, the problems of implementing a distributed national collection remain significant. In *New strategic directions*, the British Library declared that 'Notwithstanding the potential benefits, we do not underestimate the challenges of the distributed approach to collecting and access. New arrangements will be complicated to manage, will take time to put in place and will demand commitment from participating institutions. The greatest challenge may be in obtaining the initial acceptance needed from users.' (British Library, 2001)

The nature and extent of the challenges have been carefully examined in the report *Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries*, prepared for the RSLP. The report looks at varying

levels of resource sharing, identifying a three-tiered model consisting of collaboration, resource sharing and 'deep resource sharing', defined as 'collaboration between or among libraries in which institutional autonomy in service provision is in some degrees surrendered, and which involves some degree of risk' (Higher Education Consultancy Group, 2002, p.14). It is willingness by research libraries to undertake deep resource sharing that is required to support a distributed national collection.

It is an oddity of the report that although it includes an international survey of collaborative activity, including several past and present attempts in Australia, it makes no mention of Australia's experience with the DNC. The report also concludes that 'No published work has been found on "deep resource sharing"' (p.14). Although that *term* has not appeared in the Australian context, the *concept* was central to the considerable body of DNC-related literature which was published both before and after the scheme's development.

The report is important, however, in that it nominates a variety of technical, administrative, financial, legal and staffing barriers to resource sharing, and generally it is quite pessimistic about the prospects for deep resource sharing amongst higher education libraries. Two recommendations warrant particular note. Recommendation 7 states that 'Growth in genuinely collaborative collection management would probably be the best indicator of deep resource sharing. However, we are doubtful that change can be brought about in this area if any initiative is left as voluntary, and recommend that the RSLG and the funding bodies consider the case for central action and associated incentives. (p.78). And Recommendation 11 reads in part 'A high profile, centrally coordinated, programme to develop the DNC with an associated programme to effect discovery of, access to, and the availability of materials is necessary.' (p.78)

The report's authors are clearly pessimistic about higher education institutions taking the initiative with regard to, or even supporting, the implementation of a distributed national collection. They acknowledge the extent of the cultural shift required, and observe that 'many librarians are reluctant to engage in deep resource sharing activities' (76).

If the British Library is to push ahead with a distributed national collection, it is therefore clear that a key challenge remains in convincing research libraries and their parent bodies that entering into formal agreements will eventually produce advantages for themselves and their users. This was not achieved in Australia. As Colin Steele (2000) has concluded, 'Australia's experience with the Distributed National Collection ... reveals that even with the best will for cooperative mechanisms, institutions will not abrogate their individual rights for national interest'. It will be crucial to the success of a UK DNC that research libraries are persuaded to look beyond the pressure to satisfy immediate demand, and to commit themselves to helping to implement a research collection infrastructure that meets the needs of researchers over the long term. This requires good faith on the part of such libraries, evidenced by a willingness to be committed to and to honour formal agreements, to guarantee the necessary levels of access, to undertake the required collection assessment and description activity, and to trust that other libraries will do likewise. Despite the push for a distributed national collection being given by the Higher Education / BL taskforce, the BL is the only individual research library which has to date given a public commitment to the concept. Its premier task therefore is to obtain similar commitments from a critical mass of higher education and other research libraries.

Even if the requisite change of culture is achieved, it will not be sufficient to ensure the successful implementation of a distributed national collection unless adequate funding is secured. The Australian DNC was severely hampered by failing to obtain independent funding either for the management of the scheme or for the support of libraries undertaking particular collecting responsibilities. In the past decade, however, governments in the UK (and elsewhere) have demonstrated a greater willingness than their Australian counterpart to fund large-scale information infrastructure. The implementation of a successful distributed national collection in the UK will depend on funds being provided which are additional to the recurrent funds given in support of the nation's research collections. It is encouraging to see that estimates from the HE/BL report acknowledge the need for substantial seeding money, although financing an office for a distributed national collection and providing assistance with access and collection description will not by themselves achieve adequate levels of collecting. Using the Australian experience as a guide, it is apparent that targeted funds must be provided to support and enhance collecting by libraries undertaking particular subject responsibilities within a distributed system.

CONCLUSION

As indicated above, broad-based cooperative collecting programmes for print material are currently unfashionable, and some commentators question whether there is any role for such collecting in the current environment (Shreeves, 1997; Line, 2000). Others, however, are more optimistic – acknowl-

edging the challenges while arguing that the benefits of broad-based cooperation can be worthwhile. 'Effective collaboration (in collecting) is often easier to bring about with a smaller group of institutions, although this should not hinder us in our efforts to create new, more sophisticated models.' (Jakubs, 2000).

With its advocacy for a distributed national collection the BL has now embarked on the creation of a 'more sophisticated' model, even if it is not one which is necessarily 'new'. The library's success or otherwise with this endeavour will be closely watched. As the collection development expenditure by research libraries inexorably shifts towards the acquisition of electronic product, these same libraries will be looking more keenly than ever at ways in which the collecting of print material can proceed in a manner which guarantees in so far as possible that immediate and future needs of researchers are met.

It may well be that the model of a distributed national collection, despite its perceived 'failure' in Australia and the substantial challenges it faces in the UK, will yet be rehabilitated.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the prospects for the successful implementation of a distributed national collection policy in the United Kingdom. It does so by tracing the Australian experience with the implementation of a similar scheme, the Distributed National Collection (DNC), during the late 1980s and 1990s. The rationale for the introduction of the DNC is explained, and some of the reasons for its perceived failure are examined. The paper then traces the recent development of a similar proposal in the UK, and discusses the differences between the Australian and UK contexts for the introduction of such an approach to collaborative collection building. It concludes that these differences give some cause for optimism that the UK push for a coordinated and formalized approach to collecting print material on a national scale may be more successful, while pointing to the key challenges ahead.