

Information Strategy Development in the UK and Ireland: a role for Aleph

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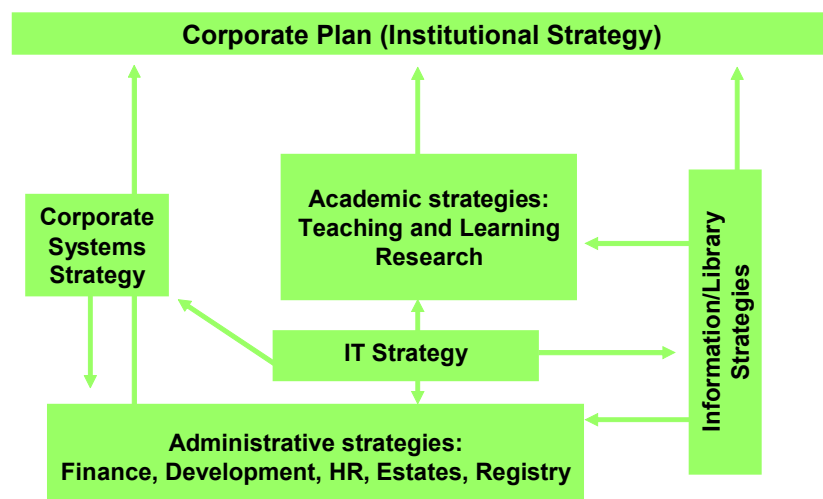
Introduction

Universities in the UK and Ireland are big business. They have Mission and Vision Statements and Operational Plans which should deliver the Mission and help to realize the Vision. In the United Kingdom, the expansion of the Higher Education sector into a mass market has changed the way universities operate. The postgraduate market, at taught Masters and doctoral level, is increasingly important to universities as they compete against each other for students and funding. Libraries are part of this picture, since they are part of the institution and have to help deliver that institution's mission.

This general picture of Higher Education in the UK and Ireland forms the background to the formation of the *UK and Ireland Ex Libris Strategy Group* of HE Library Directors whose institutions use Ex Libris library management software products. Our role is **not** to comment on, or to involve ourselves in, operational matters. It **is** to look at the way our institutions are developing, to survey the global world of information and information technology developments, to look at Ex Libris products in these twin contexts, and to engage with the company in strategic developments which are important for our futures.

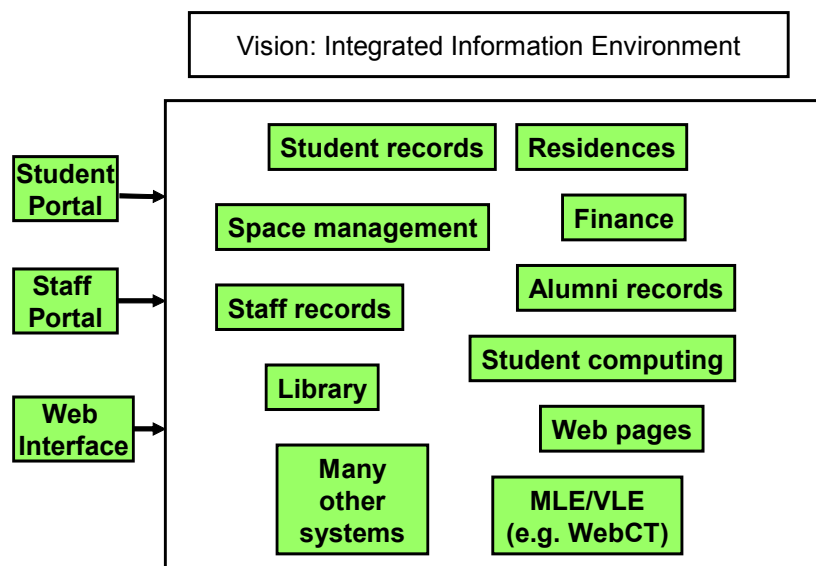
New Scenarios

It is important to look at university developments in more detail.



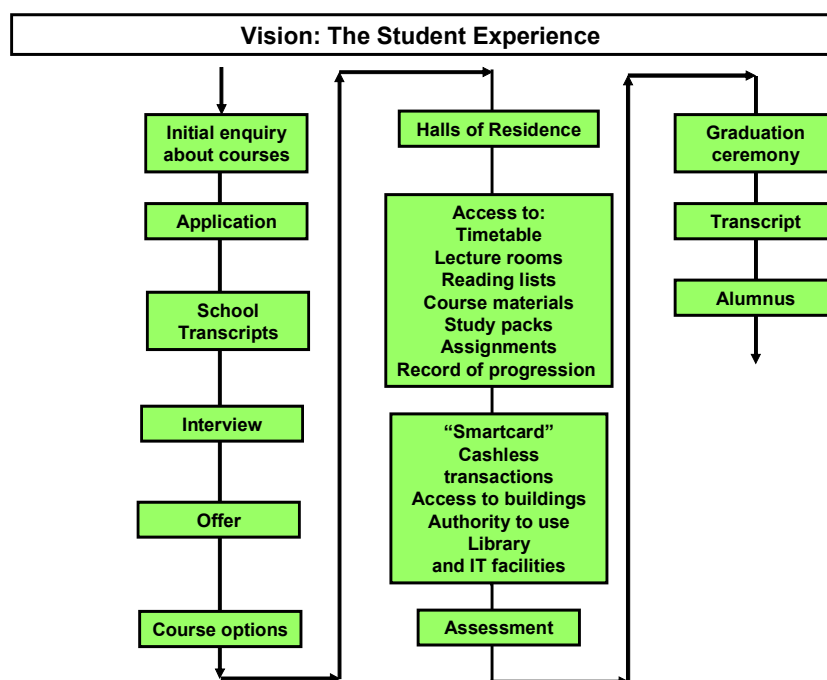
Every university develops a Corporate Plan, which should inform its strategic development. The Corporate Plan should be supported by a number of other more targeted strategies. In my own institution these are strategies such as the Academic Strategy, the Estates Strategy, the Human Resources (HR) Strategy, the Information Technology (IT) Strategy, the Information and/or Library Strategies.

At another level, Information and Information Technology systems need to work in a co-ordinated way.



Many institutions are developing portals, in a web environment, which will give an institution-wide view of the world. And that view will vary, depending on whether the enquirer is a student, a member of academic staff or a member of administrative staff. A student, for example, would want to see their timetable information, access learning resources in digital format, e-mail assignments and talk to their tutor, and to the students on the course, via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Another important feature of university life is the increased emphasis placed on the 'student experience'. Universities now want to build a lifelong relationship with their students. The diagram shows this lifelong relationship with in three phases. The first phase is the pre-university experience. Increasingly, the first contact with a university will be electronic – looking at prospectuses on the web, discussing application procedures with the university and supplying exam transcripts. The second phase takes place whilst the student is at university. This is obviously the important phase for the Library and, increasingly, many of the student experiences will be initiated electronically – access to core course readings, web and e-mail services, learning objects, and room booking, student finance procedures and the like. The third phase is actually the longest phase, since it marks a lifelong relationship between student and university once the student leaves the campus. This phase is a new development in UK Higher Education. Many of the contacts here will be electronic, but, as is obvious from the table above, this part of the student experience is still being mapped out – it is not yet clear to universities what it should include.



Top-Ten Wishlist

The real purpose of this paper is to identify a top ten wish list where, in 2003, the UK and Ireland Chief Librarians, whose institutions use Ex Libris products, would like to have dialogue with the company. This list comprises the following:

1. Back to Basics
2. Corporate Context
3. E-Journals
4. E-Books
5. Open Archiving
6. OAI Compliance
7. OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue)
8. Management Information
9. VLE/MLE (Virtual Learning Environment/Managed Learning Environment)
10. International developments

1. Back to Basics

This is not entirely strategic, but when I asked UK colleagues what I should talk about here in Vienna, everyone told me to talk about this. There are a number of interlinked topics here. There is always room for improved communication between the company and its customers. There can never be too much support, or too much dialogue in fixing bugs or in talking about new products. Documentation is an area where many of my UK colleagues feel that there needs to be improvement. This is an acknowledged weakness which does need to be addressed. Related to this is the need for enhanced support during upgrade procedures. Upgrades are a tense time for systems librarians, and it is important that both the company and the local library are working in partnership here.

2. The Corporate Context

This paper has already said enough about developments at a university level for it to be obvious that the Ex Libris products do not sit in isolation in a university

setting. Corporate Information strategies allow universities to develop joined-up processes using 'joined-up' software products. In a paper environment, this was not always the case. Ex Libris products have to help the Library deliver its Mission and Vision. They certainly need to be interoperable with all the major institutional systems which a university is running, such as the Student Records System. They need to be user-centric, not library-centred, and robust enough to work in a dynamic corporate setting.

3 & 4. E-Journals and E-Books

Commercial content, such as E-Journals and E-Books, are important new developments in the range of content which Libraries wish to use. In research-led universities, this is particularly the case with electronic journals, where the desktop availability of this content is revolutionizing the way that researchers do their work. Major publishers now offer the 'big deal', where the whole of a publisher's offering is offered to a university library, often bundled with journals in paper format where libraries have had historic subscriptions to titles. Libraries need management systems to manage this content, to monitor rights management and to enable subscriptions to be reviewed on time, without a loss of access. Systems also need to be in place to manage access and authentication – access concerns the right of licensed users to gain desktop connection to the content they wish to use; whilst authentication is concerned with a system's ability to guarantee that the person using the resource *is* the person they say they are.

It needs to be clear exactly how this content should be managed in an Ex Libris context, and it is not clear. Libraries will wish to catalogue their individual e-titles into Aleph, but where do the responsibilities lie for the other activities and how are they managed in an Ex Libris environment? There needs to be dialogue between Ex Libris and the user community to take this debate forward.

E-books present different issues. The UK and Ireland Ex Libris Strategy Group has been advised by Dr Hazel Woodward, Chair of the JISC E-Books Working Group, on how to tackle these formats. The truth is that, at the time of writing, there is not a mass of content in terms of e-books which libraries in the UK actually want to purchase. Also, it is far from clear what business model publishers of e-books will adopt. So for Ex Libris, e-books are a subject on which they and the library community should adopt a watching brief.

5 & 6. Open Archiving and the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata harvesting (OAI-PMH)

Open Access is an important new development in the global information landscape. The SHERPA project at <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk> is leading the way forward in the UK and I am privileged to chair the SHERPA Management Group.

An open access repository is essentially a databank, maintained by a university or a subject community, where content is stored and made available over the Internet. Because repositories conform to the OAI-PMH, metadata describing the stored content can be exposed and harvested by search engines such as Google or OAISTER. Those institutions, or subject repositories, which provide data are known as data providers, whilst those who harvest metadata to form search services are called OAI service providers.

In the United Kingdom, the SHERPA project has (at the time of writing) constructed 13 open archive repositories in research-led universities. The content on these servers tends to fall into one of three categories:

1. Pre-prints
2. Post-prints
3. Grey Literature

Pre-prints, usually the final form of a published article, incorporating comments from the Editorial Board of the Journal in which the final version is published, are commonly found in repositories. Indeed, in some subject areas such as economics or physics, pre-prints are the final form of an article as published in a Journal. Where copyright permissions allow, this will be the publisher's pdf of the published article. Ph.D. and research Masters theses are often deposited. Known technically as Grey Literature, the repository movement is an important way of opening up access to institutional resources such as these.

Within the United Kingdom, bodies such as the Russell Group of the Vice-Chancellors of research-led universities are beginning to engage with the repository movement. There are clear institutional advantages in the branding and visibility that repositories can offer to universities. Another major issue for repositories is Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). Authors commonly sign away copyright in their IPR. In an Open Access environment, this is not the best way to proceed. Authors should be encouraged to retain all rights themselves, granting the publisher a non-exclusive right to publish their work. In this way, the author is then free to deposit materials in their institutional, or subject-based, repository. The Romeo copyright listing at <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo.php> is an authoritative listing of publishers' copyright policies, which shows which publishers allow deposit in repositories, and at what stage of the process.

At the time of writing, there is clearly a problem for Ex Libris in the Open Access debate – and indeed for all vendors. It seems as though Ex Libris is not yet present at the table. The software most commonly used to support repository development in the UK is e-prints, supported by the University of Southampton, or D-Space from MIT. Nor does Ex Libris see itself as having a role as an OAI service provider, in terms of harvesting metadata from open access repositories which can be manipulated by the Ex Libris suite of tools. There *is* a role for OAI in library-type applications. Could not OAI be used to harvest bibliographic records, for exchange or to create virtual union catalogues. Is this a better route than using Z39.50 for federated searching? Does Ex Libris have a view on these protocols?

7. *The OPAC*

The OPAC, once known as the central gateway to a Library's online holdings, no longer has that role in an inter-connected e-environment. Most US undergraduates will use the Internet to answer an information query before they could think about using their University Library. This speaks volumes, both about the information-seeking behaviour of students, but also of the 'Googlization' of content services – where many see Google as the main/only port of call.

The Google interface, with clear and user-friendly presentation, and its huge retrieval capacities, presents a challenge to vendors and libraries alike in terms of the role of the OPAC. The value-added features, such as ranking/ordering of search results and suggested alternative spellings of search terms have made an impression on users, who now see the Google interface as a defining experience in the way they access Internet resources.

The 'Google effect' poses enormous challenges for libraries and system vendors alike. RLG, the Research Libraries Group, has initiated the Red Light Green project, which is attempting to re-define the nature of the OPAC in terms of the presentation of consortial catalogues and the ranking of search results (at http://www.rlg.org/en/page.php?Page_ID=435). At the time of writing, the database contains 126 million bibliographic records, representing 42 million titles. Such developments pose enormous challenges for vendors such as Ex Libris. Where is Ex Libris in terms of the international debates on the future of the OPAC? Is it necessary for vendors to maintain sophisticated front-ends to the OPAC in the era of Google and meta search tools such as MetaLib?

8. Management Information

In the competitive environment that is UK Higher Education, it is vital for libraries to be able to show that they add value to their parent institution. One of the ways that they can do this is by the compilation of management information reports. In the UK, all the libraries make returns to SCONUL, which provide important benchmarks against which individual libraries can measure their own performance. It is known that Ex Libris does not currently provide a sophisticated suite of management reporting tools. The announcement here in Vienna, concerning the development of ARC – the Aleph Reporting Centre – is welcome in this respect as an attempt by Ex Libris to plug a known gap in its provision.

9. Virtual and Managed Learning Environments

Most universities in the United Kingdom and Ireland are rolling out VLEs and/or MLEs campus-wide. Increasingly, the VLE/MLE will provide the student's view of his/her resources, and the administrative functions which support them, at university. Chat rooms, e-mail contact with tutors, personalised information resources, core readings, educational quizzes, training materials and the like will all be provided via the VLE. It is essential that Ex Libris products interface with systems such as WebCT and Blackboard as these are the future for many universities as they pursue the goal of E-Learning.

The model for the interaction between VLEs and Ex Libris products is one of embedding Ex Libris activity into the VLE at appropriate points, e.g. between MetaLib as a meta search engine and the VLE itself. Should MetaLib be developed as a general harvester for metadata from Open Access databases conforming to the Open Access Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)? Certainly, an improvement in the Aleph Reading List module will be required in order to provide the functionality in an E-Learning environment that libraries require in order to meet the needs of their users.

10. International debates

It is not simply a question of local development. Information provision is an international issue. Many of the providers are global companies and the technologies which underpin delivery are international in extent. However, where are the fora to generate debate in these areas? UK Higher Education has a high profile and the Government White Paper on the Future of Higher Education ensures that this is so (see <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/>).

Research library provision was recently surveyed in the UK by the Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG) - see <http://www.rslg.ac.uk>. The debate on top-up fees to be paid by students is intense. The UK Higher Education System is becoming much more market-driven, much more like a North American system in this respect.

In terms of Information provision, it is no longer possible for any one library to be self-sufficient in terms of the materials it can make available to support learning, teaching and research. The RLG plans developments in OPAC provision which are international in their outreach. But perhaps the greatest challenge posed to libraries is the way in which Google has come to dominate the information landscape in terms of the being the first port of call, in many cases, for taught course students searching for information.

Where is the forum where international political and technical debates are being taken forward? How do Ex Libris libraries figure in that debate? How can their voice be heard? It is not yet clear to me that the correct platforms exist for this debate to be pursued. Yet, for academic libraries – especially in research-led universities – this is an issue which needs to be addressed with some urgency. ICAU – the International Conference of Aleph Users – is a useful body for discussing technical issues, but it falls far short in other respects. Its governance procedures are

informal in many respects, and it does not speak with authority on pedagogical or research issues at national or international levels. How is Ex Libris to know what the community wants? This is an issue which the library community itself must address.

Conclusions

This paper has identified a number of conclusions. Libraries must support their institution's mission. They must be seen to deliver. They must support their customers. Aleph and Ex Libris products have a vital role to play in this.