

"Scholarly Information in a Digital Age - Choices for the University of Melbourne"

A response from the School of Languages and Linguistics

Draft only

The consultation paper poses a series of important open-ended questions, many of which begin with "What ...?" or "How?" At a higher level of generality, it identifies four tensions that characterize the space in which decisions will have to be made:

- (1) focussed research priorities versus comprehensiveness;
- (2) open access versus licensing of intellectual property;
- (3) discipline based libraries versus a central library;
- (4) print versus digital resources.

(1), (2) and (3) are explicitly identified as tensions in the conclusion, while (4) emerges in the section entitled "The changing nature of scholarly practice".

It may be that the tension between open access and licensing of intellectual property (2) will best be resolved by opting for one or the other, as suggested on page 30 ("Can we have it both ways?"). But regarding the other three tensions, solutions will in all likelihood have to be found by striking balances. That is certainly the case regarding the tension between print and digital resources, as the paper suggests with the quotation from Abbott on page 11: "If you are going to have a serious research library, you have to have both a physical library and a technological one". The point might seem obvious, but it is worth making, because the introduction to the consultation paper suggests that defending an existing practice may be an effect of inertia and fear: "some of these choices will require *courage* and a willingness to leave behind some of our dearly held practices and assumptions so that we may embrace *bold* new opportunities in the future" (p. 5, emphasis added). A practice may, however, be held dear for good reasons, and defending it may require as much courage as advocating a new practice.

It is true that information technology itself has evolved at an astonishing rate over the last twenty years, but it is easy to overestimate the impact of that evolution on the practices of research, learning and teaching. The environment in which those activities are pursued is increasingly digital, but remains complex: information is also communicated via the printed word, and face-to-face, through voice, expression and gesture. Recent research in North America suggests that "blended learning", blending face-to-face and on-line activities, is the most promising direction for rethinking pedagogical practice (D. Randy Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education*, John Wiley, 2008). Collaboration and co-authorship are becoming more frequent, but in many humanities disciplines, collaboration has been favoured by funding models better suited to the natural and social sciences, and the basic unit of research remains the single-authored journal article or book. Net-generation students are generally at home on the web, and may find library web resources archaic and confusing (see page 8), but it is also clear that many of them need to be trained to supplement digital with print sources.

Misjudging the impact of technological change can have significant costs for a university. The determination to be among the early adopters of Computer Assisted Language Learning led the University of Melbourne to invest in specialized computer laboratories, which have been under-used in recent years. (In a similar way, the earlier analog audio laboratories failed to live up to their promise and fell into disuse). Information technology is extremely valuable in language teaching and learning, but unless it can be used non-intrusively in standard rooms, as part of a blended learning environment, to which all students in a subject have equal access, its natural place seems to be outside classes, in private study and informal communication.

The consultation paper does recognize that the disciplines vary in their relations with information technology, and quotes Andrew Abbott to the effect that a library works as a "research laboratory" for the humanities and social sciences. (Many scholars in the disciplines concerned, however, would disagree firmly with the following quotation from Abbott, which is presented without commentary: "Scholars of languages, literatures, history, musicology, art history, philosophy, and those from sociology, anthropology and political science [...] These are fields organised *not around the pursuit of truth* but in a "richness and plenitude of interpretations... a set of disciplines whose focus is *less on the true* than on the meaningful" (p. 10, emphasis added).

There is another important respect in which the disciplines vary in their relations with information technology: the degree to which key sources are available in digital form. As the consultation paper points out "the complete replacement of printed books by electronic information was touted some time ago and has not yet eventuated", and even if "virtually all new titles" are "digital within ten years" (a prediction quoted on p. 11, concerning England, not the whole world), many important books will still be awaiting digitization. The process requires human care and labour; it is time-consuming, expensive, and therefore slow. Neither Google Book Search nor the Open Content Alliance yet provides a satisfactory reading environment; they offer searchable indexes. When Google Book Search has scanned all the books in the five library collections of their original project (they have been careful not to set a completion date), they will have digitized only 33 percent of the items in OCLC's WorldCat (see Karen Coyle, " Mass Digitization of Books ", published in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, v. 32, n. 6, preprint at <http://www.kcoyle.net/jal-32-6.html>). Google Book Search's library partners are mostly in North America, and the others, with the exception of Keio University Library in Japan, are all in Western Europe. The Open Content Alliance has very few contributors from outside North America and the UK.

The consultation paper raises the question "what is the ongoing value of the original object to a university?" once the text has been digitized (p. 11). The value of the object depends on many factors, including how rare it is and its aesthetic qualities. It is important to remember also that information is often lost in digitization. For example, when newspapers articles are digitized separately, their disposition on the page, their juxtapositions with other articles and advertisements, which are often of interest to the cultural historian, can no longer be read.

Discussions with colleagues in the School of Languages and Linguistics have identified three common areas of concern :

(a) Browsable, on-campus shelf space

The progressive reduction of browsable, on-campus shelf space is a trend that should be reversed. It is clear that the University will need to store an increasing number of books off campus, but the associative research practices facilitated by the physical library, which are mentioned on page 11 of the paper, can only be learnt by accessing a rich collection of books and periodicals. It is not clear from the paper why it is necessary to locate collaborative study spaces within libraries (displacing books) rather than in other buildings. The Melbourne Model's stress on interdisciplinary study makes the need for a spacious, well-organized central library with long opening hours all the more urgent. Because of lack of space, at the moment users may have to look in four places (main shelf location, overflow shelf, sorting shelf, trolley) to find a book that is in the Baillieu library.

(b) Non-intrusive information technology in standard classrooms

If machines become the focus in the classroom they tend to hinder interaction and actually distract students from the task at hand, but if they can be used discreetly, when needed for specific exercises, they can enrich the classroom experience, and save resources. Equipping more standard classrooms with a computer and a data projector would allow for the opportune exploitation of resources archived in the LMS. Of course, the usefulness of IT equipment depends on the quality of the technical support available to academic staff. Since the disappearance of many LITES due to downsizing, Arts IT is overwhelmed by the demand for support and cannot respond in a timely fashion.

(c) Support for continuing upgrades of Supersearch

Supersearch is an invaluable tool, but it needs to be upgraded and refined. At the moment, for example, access to some articles requires double authentication. No bibliographic tool as complex as Supersearch can be a one-off investment. It would be unrealistic to regard funding for upgrades as an unnecessary expense.

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