

SOME NOTES ON A MERGER (RHBNC)

On 1 August, 1985, Bedford College and Royal Holloway College, two of London University's oldest-established multi-faculty Schools, ceased to exist as separate entities and were legally incorporated as a new institution known as Royal Holloway and Bedford New College. This was the climax of a dramatic phase of university restructuring, which involved not only the removal of Bedford College to the 110-acre main site of the former Royal Holloway College at Egham but also the transfer there of numbers of staff from Chelsea College, King's College, and Westfield College.

It is the amalgamation of two entire Colleges on one site that has given the merger at Egham its distinctive character and presented the Library with problems which are in some respects different to those which have confronted the libraries of other multi-faculty Schools of the University that have been involved in restructuring. Some of these problems and the attempts made to solve them are described below. Included below too are some personal impressions of the effects of the merger and the needs for the future.

Catalogues

When preliminary planning of the merger began to give way to the first stages of implementation in 1982-83 Bedford College Library's catalogues were on card while the majority of the catalogues of Royal Holloway College Library were held on microfiche produced by photographing the original card catalogue up to 1980 and, subsequent to that date, by entering data into the ULSCS system (University of London Shared Cataloguing System). The incompatibility of the media in which the catalogues were produced on the two sites was a serious drawback, because it was obviously important that these catalogues should be capable of integration, or at least some form of satisfactory rationalisation, when the Libraries were amalgamated at Egham. It was clear that the only effective solution to this problem would be to convert to the ULSCS system both Bedford College Library's card catalogue and that section of Royal Holloway College Library's microfiche catalogue which had been reproduced from card. There was, however, no prospect of rapidly achieving a catalogue conversion of such magnitude because it was impossible at that time to acquire the substantial additional funding which would be required to carry it out. It was decided, therefore, to film the card catalogue of Bedford College Library on to microfiche and to enter all new acquisitions of that Library into the ULSCS system. As a result of this it was possible to make the catalogues of both Libraries available on microfiche on each site: in separate sequences in the case of the microfiche of the original card catalogues, and in one unified name/title sequence in the case of entries generated via the ULSCS system. The availability of these microfiche catalogues proved invaluable when the Libraries were finally merged at Egham, where access to the catalogues of all the collections was required, not only in three separate library buildings, but also in several academic departments. It was a simple matter to fulfill this requirement because of the ease with which copies of the microfiche catalogues could be produced. Without this facility the campus-wide access to the Library's catalogues which had become essential at Egham would have been impossible. This facility was also a great advantage in the years before the completion of the merger when Departments of Bedford College were gradually moving to Egham and staff and students were having to operate on both the Egham and Regent's Park sites. The copies of the catalogues of both Libraries that were provided on each site undoubtedly helped to ease the difficulties of readers in this awkward transitional period.

Classification

Libraries which merge on one site need to have their stocks integrated in a unified classified sequence. While it is not impossible for a library to operate with separate, incompatible classified sequences it is obviously confusing, time-consuming, and irritating for a reader to have to look for books in more than one main sequence. It was, therefore, unfortunate that Royal Holloway College Library was classified by Bliss and Bedford College Library by Dewey. To make matters worse, the staff transferred to Egham from Chelsea, King's, and Westfield brought with them from their libraries books classified by Library of Congress and UDC. A choice of classification had to be made. For reasons primarily of economy the choice lay between Bliss and Dewey because only about half the stock would have to be reclassified if either of these schemes were adopted; on the other hand the choice of Library of Congress or UDC would have involved reclassifying most of the stock and would, therefore, have been infinitely more expensive to implement. After considerable discussion and consultation, involving not only library staff but teaching staff and students as well, Dewey was chosen for a number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that it was widely available in the printed and machine-readable records of national cataloguing agencies, including those used by ULSCS, whereas Bliss was not.

Once the decision to adopt Dewey had been made it was possible to make a start on the formidable task of retrospectively reclassifying the stock of Royal Holloway College Library and the stock received from the Libraries of Chelsea, King's and Westfield. Judging by the difficulties which are now being experienced by readers coping with the different classified sequences at Egham it is very evident that there is an urgent need to complete the reclassification of the Library in a short period of time. The only possible way to achieve this is to acquire substantial additional funding for the temporary extra staff and increased computer processing that are needed for a dramatically accelerated programme of reclassification. Although some additional money has been found for this purpose a great deal

more is required to keep the reclassification programme moving at a brisk pace, and for this reason every potential source of extra funding is being actively investigated.

Accommodation

The existing main library at Egham (the Founder's Library) was incapable of being expanded to accommodate the contents of Bedford College Library and the stock acquired from Chelsea, King's and Westfield. In view of this, provision was made in the new institution's capital development plan for a new building which would supplement the Founder's Library and the separate Music Library. Planning of this new building had reached the design stage towards the end of last session when it was temporarily frozen pending a decision by the UGC on a case which had been submitted for a larger new building which would be capable of housing the entire stock of the library.

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Whatever size of new library building is finally agreed by the UGC and the Court it is unlikely now to be available until 1988. In the meantime temporary accommodation had been acquired to supplement the libraries which already existed at Egham. This accommodation consists of prefabricated buildings, erected in three phases between 1983 and 1985, and linked together. This complex of buildings increased to five the number of libraries that had to be administered in the period up to the formal inauguration of the new institution. With only the limited staff resources of Royal Holloway College Library available during this period, the task of coping with five libraries proved extremely difficult and the service to readers inevitably suffered. No relief could be provided from Bedford College Library which was at that time having considerable difficulty maintaining a residual service at Regent's Park with a severely depleted staff.

Staff

One of the main aims of merging on one site is to produce savings, particularly in the area of staffing. Like other departments the Library had to make its contribution to the rationalization of staff. At a very early stage in the planning of the merger it was proposed that a staff of 31 was appropriate for an integrated library in the new institution. At that time there was a staff of over 40 in the two College Libraries. It was, therefore, necessary to shed a considerable number of staff by the time they merged at Egham. The reduction of staff was achieved by accepting voluntary premature retirements and not filling permanent posts which fell vacant as a result of normal resignation. At a critical juncture in the slimming exercise a Working Group on the Library Structure, which was convened in 1984, produced a report in which a permanent staff of 33 was proposed. As this proposal was accepted the Libraries had two less staff to shed than originally anticipated and this was undoubtedly an important factor in being able to accommodate all the remaining permanent staff when the merger was finally completed.

Although those still in post after the rationalisation of staff had been carried out were guaranteed jobs in the new institution, there was for a time considerable anxiety about the content of these jobs and who would be appointed to them. This was a period of great strain for the staffs of both Libraries and it was not relieved until the Working Group on the Library Structure, referred to above, had made its recommendations concerning the type of posts that were to exist in the new library and the mechanism that was to be employed for filling them. Once these recommendations had been approved, the task of slotting staff into the posts available was achieved without too much difficulty. This was largely because once the Librarian and Deputy Librarian designates had been appointed, they were given a more or less free hand to ensure that the remaining posts in the library structure were filled by members of the rest of the existing library staffs as appropriately and in as mutually agreeable a way as possible. This helped to reduce competition for posts to a minimum and to avert a potentially abrasive situation.

Reducing the staffs of two Libraries to a size considered to be commensurate with the scale of operation at Egham has not been an entirely negative exercise. It left some scope for constructive development, mainly in the area of subject specialization. Neither College Library in the past had sufficient staff to provide subject specialists on the scale it might have wished. With the comparatively larger number of staff available at Egham it has been possible to extend this element of the Library's service by appointing staff to develop the collections and liaise directly with appropriate academic departments in the broad subject areas covered by the new institution.

The staff of both the original Libraries have been profoundly affected by the long-drawn-out merging process and being finally brought together on site. They have had to get used to different people and different ideas, cope with matters related to merging as well as their own individual work, absorb new techniques and procedures, adopt fresh ways of thinking, and generally adapt themselves to a new situation. Staff who previously worked in Bedford College Library have had the additional problem of getting used to working in an entirely new location and environment. These members of staff have had to uproot themselves completely and make significant changes in their personal lives. In some cases this has meant travelling a longer distance to work by an inconvenient route or by a different form of transport, in other cases it has meant moving house to be nearer to the Library at Egham. It is on these members of the staff that the merger has had the most traumatic effect and for them the task of settling down in the merged library must have been infinitely more difficult.

Importance of a New Library Building

The merger of the two College Libraries at Egham has undoubtedly produced savings in staff costs and in other recurrent expenditure, and appreciable sums of money have been realised from the sale of duplicate material. The maximum possible amount of savings will not, however, be attainable until the Library's entire stock is under one roof. Following the absorption into the central library complex of the originally separate Botany and Zoology Departmental Libraries of the former Royal Holloway College the Library's collections are now distributed between three separate buildings. Such a distribution, even though it is more rationalized than it was hitherto at Egham, is still very wasteful, not only in the more obvious areas of costs such as staffing, heating, lighting, equipment, stationery, and space, but also in less tangible areas of cost related, for example, to additional circulars, mail delivery, printing, telephones, portorage, etc. This point has been made very convincingly in the revised case submitted to the Court and the UGC for an integrated new Library, and so too has the point that the present multi-site library system at Egham can be operated only on the basis of an unavoidable but academically damaging split of a significant proportion of the stock in overlapping subject areas. Apart from these financial and academic drawbacks there is the purely practical drawback of having to administer three buildings with a permanent staff establishment really only capable of coping satisfactorily with one building. This situation has put the library staff under abnormal pressure at a time when an expanded staff and student population has caused the amount of business transacted in the Library to escalate to a level never previously experienced at either Regent's Park or Egham.

The Future

After years of intensive preparation the Library of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College has finally emerged. There are inevitably teething troubles. Many problems still remain to be solved but there is scope for exciting developments in the years to come. The extent and speed of this development will depend mainly on the provision of adequate recurrent budgets, a building to comprehend all the collections, and additional resources for comprehensive reclassification and automation. If these needs can be satisfied the true potential of the rich collection of over 400,000 volumes which have been assembled at Egham will be fully realized.

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