

Shrinking horizons – or pushing boundaries?

This paper expands on a presentation delivered to the UKSG One-Day Conference on 15 November 2017, which had the theme of 'Shrinking horizons? Scholarly communication in an anti-globalization environment'. The unique context of Cardiff University as the only Russell Group university in Wales, and a member of both WHELF and the GW4 consortium is explained, with the challenges and opportunities that this brings. The political and economic drivers in Wales are described, with some of the implications for future strategies. An overview of the current benefits from collaborative working within Wales, at a regional and a UK level and globally, and some of the dilemmas faced, is provided, with suggestions on how library services might need to push their boundaries by thinking and acting more tactically. Without concerted action there are risks to scholarly communications, particularly monographs, but there is much that can be done by working collaboratively to achieve change.

Keywords

Collaboration; consortia; WHELF; GW4 consortium; Wales; future of libraries

Challenges

Higher education in the UK was already facing many issues even before the decision to leave the European Union (EU). With students paying fees, caps on overseas student numbers, pressure to perform well in league tables, plus the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and the future Knowledge Excellence Framework, the pressure on staff to deliver more at a lower cost has never been greater. Following the referendum on membership of the EU there has been a decline in the value of sterling, which has affected library purchasing budgets, and a period of intense political uncertainty, which makes planning and forecasting quite difficult. Most universities are anticipating reductions in the number of European and potentially other international students with the associated reduction in income. Many university staff are from the EU too, suffering anxiety about their future status in the UK and considering or actually leaving the country. These challenges are viewed from the context of one University Library, which works both independently and as part of several consortia, within a specific national context.

Context – Cardiff University

Against this backdrop, Cardiff University has set a prudent but ambitious course. It is the only Russell Group university in Wales and works in both the Welsh environment and as part of the Wales and South West regional grouping called GW4 (Great West Four), as well as being a member of national and international groups. The Library in particular has many relationships with consortia, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Cardiff University's Library Service manages the library management system (LMS) for its own libraries in 12 locations, including four which also serve the NHS, and for all 22 NHS libraries in Wales (in hospitals).

As part of the infrastructure strand of the research-focused and university-led GW4 alliance, the libraries have come together to form a Libraries Group. This has focused on: raising the awareness of our research collections; highlighting the strongest themes among the



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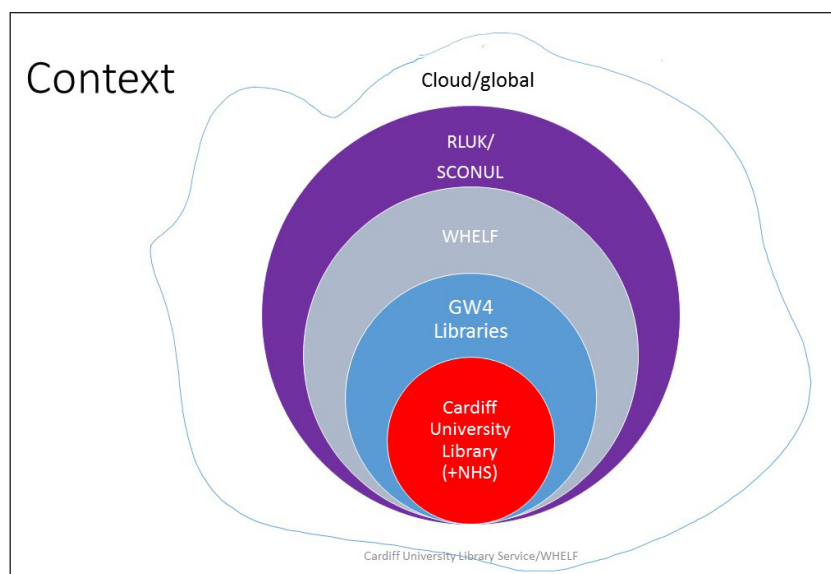


Figure 1. Cardiff University Library Service sitting within a range of local and national consortia

collective 'Treasures';¹ commissioning a Green Paper on the relative strengths in research data management across the institutions and working together on a Jisc-funded project to establish the true cost of article processing charges.² Future activity is likely to concentrate on supporting research bids in the digital humanities.

Within Wales, the Library is also a founder member of WHELF³ (Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum), which has brought together the heads of library services in Wales since 1992. WHELF has delivered shared staff development and professional support throughout, and has run many projects to explore the benefits of sharing services. The current projects are the joint procurement of some journal packages and, notably, the purchase of the same LMS in 2015. This is leading to the potential for further shared services, such as a union catalogue and inter-lending. WHELF membership began with 13 higher education institutions plus the National Library of Wales and the Open University in Wales, but following institutional mergers there are now 11 from the original group plus the libraries of the National Museum Wales and Natural Resources Wales. WHELF funds a part-time Development Officer who supports the communications and administration elements of WHELF's work. For the LMS procurement and implementation, WHELF also funded a WHELF LMS Programme Manager, who has established and co-ordinated the infrastructure of groups and meetings needed to define the specification for the system, organize training and development and liaise with the supplier.

Beyond the local consortia, the Library is also a member of Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and SCONUL, providing access to UK-wide initiatives and support, and of course it participates in international and global environments with organizations such as LIBER, OCLC and even cloud-based services such as Microsoft.

Context – Wales

When reviewing options for consortial working, it is worth remembering that Wales is a different country from England, with its own government and political agenda. Some of the key ambitions of the current (2018) Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition are:

- *Prosperity for all: national strategy for Wales 2017*:⁴ requiring 'integration and collaboration between services' and the development of a skills-based economy
- *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*:⁵ focus on ensuring that current policies and actions do not damage the future prosperity, health, environment and culture of Wales
- *Cymraeg 2050: a million Welsh speakers*:⁶ requiring 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050 (out of 3.1 million and approximately double the current number).

3 Universities are partially funded by HEFCW (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales), with students paying fees in addition. Unlike HEFCE, its counterpart in England, HEFCW does not retain any significant sums of funding for central initiatives, but passes on the bulk of its funding straight to universities. In the spirit of their agenda of integrating services and improving collaboration, the Welsh Government consulted in 2017 on the creation of a Tertiary Education and Research Commission for Wales (TERCW), which would replace HEFCW and include further education and work-based learning. The new body would include an audit and planning role, but would safeguard institutional autonomy. Universities would be expected to offer apprenticeships, possibly to sponsor schools and to provide leadership training for school teachers and managers.

TERCW would have a statutory committee, 'Research and Innovation Wales', to create 'a more dynamic and responsive-to-need research, innovation and knowledge translation environment in Wales'.⁷ Wales will retain the UK-wide dual support system for research and will therefore participate in the REF. It is clear that research will need to be linked to social and economic outcomes which benefit Wales, although research-intensive universities such as Cardiff will continue to invest in blue-sky research in areas of strength.

It should be noted that in Wales participation in TEF is optional, since there was never any intention to link performance to student fees. But all of the larger Welsh institutions did submit to the TEF, probably because it would look odd if Wales was not represented when potential students were searching the results to help them to decide where to study.

A further difference in the Welsh context is that Welsh domiciled students pay different fee levels to those in England. These were £3,900 in 2017/18, with a government subsidy to cover the difference in fee costs wherever they study, but will increase to £9,000 from 2018/19. At the same time, students will be awarded means-tested maintenance grants of a minimum of £1,000 per student. But overall, according to a report by Universities Wales⁸ the unit of resource for students in Welsh universities is lower than in England so there is an incentive for institutions to work smarter to overcome the funding gap and to ensure a comparable student experience.

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Choices – alone or together?

Working in consortia has been a very successful way of achieving more with less, particularly in the case of the joint purchase of the LMS, which according to an independent study has saved at least £226,000 in the first two years, plus £55,000 on procurement costs, compared with purchasing independently.⁹ The model has been followed once more with the joint procurement of a framework for purchasing reading list software – using a different university's purchasing office.

But it is not always sensible to use the same approach for every procurement. For the book purchasing framework, all Welsh universities decided to use the Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium (SUPC) to obtain maximum leverage and to take advantage of a very skilled negotiating team. Likewise for the purchase of electronic journals, all Welsh universities use Jisc Collections to negotiate on their behalf. The difference now is that WHELF members are consulting with each other on which consortium to use, and wherever possible, are choosing to act together.

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Other choices are less straightforward. One example could be the decision over the storage of less-used print collections.

In Cardiff we could choose any – or some – of the options listed below, all of which have their pros and cons.

- **Local – build/rent own space**

This would have the advantage of being close to the most likely users and would be completely under the University's control. Disadvantages could include the cost and the difficulty of finding a suitable location close to the University.

- **Regional (GW4) – shared storage facility in a central location**

This would have the advantage of supporting a shared research agenda, but would be some distance away from all members (being most likely between Bristol and Exeter), requiring additional staffing and transport costs. Disadvantages could include the need to manage ownership of the content and to agree on funding, which could be complicated by the need to support universities from different countries with different funding priorities.

- **National (Wales)**

This option would support the Welsh Government agenda to collaborate and integrate services, and could be based at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, which is relatively central geographically. Disadvantages could be the need to manage ownership, and for a distribution service to be created (which the National Library does not currently offer). The different funding mechanisms between a national library and higher education libraries of varying sizes could also be an issue.

- **National (UK)**

There have been various initiatives which have benefited from UK-wide funding:

- The UK Research Reserve (UKRR)¹⁰ was initially funded by HEFCE and by participant universities with the aim of ensuring that the British Library and three other locations would keep copies of all little-used print journals in perpetuity. Other libraries holding those titles could discard them in the knowledge that they could be obtained from those locations if needed, enabling them to release space for other purposes. Cardiff University was an early member of UKRR and has been able to save 4,500 metres of shelf space, which has enabled more study spaces to be created in some of its libraries.
- The shared management of monographs has proved to be more complex. Recently, a report¹¹ was commissioned by UKRR, RLUK, HEFCE and Jisc to address the related issue of ensuring that an appropriate number of monographs are retained in the UK, while allowing university libraries to discard commonly held copies. The report proposed that a UK Research Reserve for Monographs (UKRR-M) should be established. For such solutions to be reliable, the underpinning data will need to be robust, which will again require libraries to work together to improve and share their records.
- The British Library has been exploring the possibility of providing a nationwide storage solution.
- Jisc is working on digital archiving and addressing how that can open up current print collections to a wider audience and provide a preservation medium for born-digital as well as digitized content. Multiple projects are working on different elements.¹²

- **Global solutions**

There are now international organizations, such as the HathiTrust¹³ and the Digital Public Library of America,¹⁴ offering access to digitized content. This might be sufficient to replace the need to keep large numbers of print copies in individual countries.

Consortial working – is it sustainable?

Both WHELF and the Libraries Group in GW4 have been successful in sharing expertise, obtaining some joint project funding and saving money to some extent. But consortia do

5 require time and effort to sustain, and increasingly these resources are difficult to justify when local pressures increase.

WHELF particularly is at a watershed moment. The new LMS has been implemented separately in each library, with the benefits already explained. But to develop those benefits further, for example into developing a union catalogue for Wales and participating in shared cataloguing, or in establishing a reciprocal inter-lending service, requires concerted and consistent effort. The current resource of a half-time Development Officer is not sufficient, and the funding for the WHELF Programme Manager role is only agreed until October 2018. Discussions about the shape of the support that WHELF needs in the future are continuing, with envious looks at the structures of consortia such as the Orbis Cascade Alliance with seven staff.¹⁵ When staffing levels in all of the libraries are reduced, it limits the capacity to work with external partners on projects, however beneficial this may be to the group as a whole, which is why a shared resource is likely to be the only way to deliver change through greater collaboration.

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The participation in WHEEL (Wales Higher Education Electronic Library) has also become more difficult as budgets have tightened. While publishers are willing to discuss 'all-in' deals where all WHELF members take out a subscription to a package of resources, they are not always (often?) of relevance to all institutions, and so it is not appropriate for those members to pay, however little, for content to which they would not normally subscribe. This has major implications for the scope of Wales-wide deals, with a growing tendency for sub-groups to negotiate separate arrangements. Without the leverage of the whole group, these are not always worth the effort of the negotiation. However, WHEEL has been successful in achieving some good offers from publishers where there is universal interest and existing wide take-up of their content. The benefit has been the opportunity to move together to e-only bundles, with all students in Wales gaining access to the same content. The publishers also gain from only needing to provide a single invoice to Jisc Collections Ltd, with WHEEL deciding how to subdivide the costs between members.

The Scottish equivalent of WHEEL, SHEDL (Scottish Higher Education Digital Library),¹⁶ has been much more successful with joint purchasing, to the benefit of all. Is this because there are more larger universities in Scotland that are more able to spread the costs between them, or because they managed to put mechanisms in place for sharing budgets before the more recent financial squeeze began? Their achievements in negotiating several journal bundles with publishers and e-book packages are impressive.

Another consequence of tightening budgets is the possible reduction in capacity of national 'insurance policies' built on long-term national collaboration, such as the British Library Document Supply Service, to be able to provide a back-up for libraries. The economics of providing content which generally is little used, and very wide-ranging, will not always be viable; what will happen if the range of content available from the British Library is significantly reduced? Will researchers do without – with the risk of duplicating research – or will they rely on lower quality content from sources that have not been peer-reviewed? Or will they use the black market for publications? Or will libraries need to develop inter-lending systems to supply each other, which would require them to keep little-used material on behalf of others?

Consortial working – is it more essential?

When horizons shrink, it can be argued that working together is even more important if a more efficient, lower-cost infrastructure for scholarly communications is to be created. For example, without concerted action, how viable is the monograph market? A recent study into the future of academic books¹⁷ has shown that average sales are only 200 per title, which requires increasingly higher sales prices to libraries to cover publishing costs. With shrinking library budgets, lower numbers are being purchased, creating a downward spiral.

Are libraries willing to pay for new publishing models such as the Open Library of the Humanities or Knowledge Unlatched – or to create their own publishing services – to ensure

6 that the monograph type of publication can continue? If not, what are the implications for humanities publishing and academic promotion routes?

Likewise, are libraries ensuring that digital publishing outputs are being stored safely, whether by subscribing to services such as CLOCKSS or LOCKSS or Portico or via their own institutional repositories? Are all libraries confident of their post-cancellation access rights to content that they have subscribed to in the past, but have subsequently cancelled? Is the sector doing enough to invest in these 'insurance policies'? It may require national and global collaboration to overcome these kinds of issues and potentially some local investment by libraries to support these tactical initiatives.

Within the UK, there are actions that could be taken for the collective good. UKRR is now open to all university libraries, offering the opportunity to build a national collection of print journals as a safe archive, while allowing remaining copies in local libraries to be discarded. The extension of this service to an equivalent service for monographs has been proposed, as mentioned above,¹⁸ but this UKRR-M will need to be funded. Will this be a test of the collective resolve of libraries to contribute to the development of a shared service for the benefit of all?

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Likewise, the development of a simplified way of managing open access (OA) publications, such as that offered by the UK Scholarly Communications Licence,¹⁹ could be worth the investment of time and energy to save staff costs in the future.

Within Wales, the current issues are whether WHELF members are willing to invest in shared staff resources to further the collaboration with the LMS, and whether they will give up some of their purchasing budget to create a central fund to buy shared resources. The jury is currently out.

Pushing our boundaries

Other ways of coping with shrinking horizons can be achieved closer to home. In 2016 David W Lewis published a thought-provoking book²⁰ on the need to reimagine libraries so that they have a future. His 'Ten things to do now' include some of the suggestions outlined above to act together to support new ways of publishing, together with other proposals. These include:

- retire or consolidate legacy print collections to release space
- reduce spend on materials budgets to make space for OA initiatives. Give up buying books/journals 'just in case'. Obtain on demand instead.
- support the creation of, access to and preservation of the scholarly content created on your own campus (via repositories, local university press, archives)
- invest in your special/distinctive collections
- have a plan to develop the expertise your library will need – or hire if necessary.

Libraries can and are making these changes. Print collections are being actively managed as part of a shift to more digital delivery, inter-library loans could be used instead of purchasing, information literacy teaching can be delivered online rather than face-to-face – with no observable detrimental effect²¹ – and investments are being made in those collections that are not available anywhere else, creating a unique selling point for their universities, and improved access for all researchers.

'Libraries can also aim to maximize the use of freely available content'

Libraries can also aim to maximize the use of freely available content. They can promote OA publications by making them available in their catalogues and on reading lists; they can establish services to support OA publishing, or create a university press; they can ensure that their unique content is managed to high standards (such as Archive Service Accreditation from The National Archives²²); and they can insist that research data are equally well managed by their institutions, to make sure that the digital legacy is preserved for future generations.

7 This will all require change, and often working together in multiple partnerships – but there will be consequences if nothing is done.

Consequences

In a world where the economic climate is volatile, it is interesting to map funding levels against greater or lower levels of collaboration as in Figure 2.

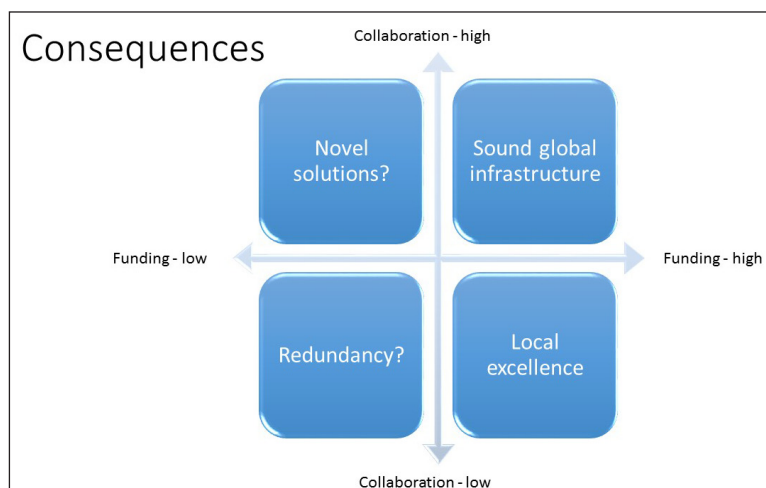


Figure 2. Funding levels mapped against levels of collaboration

In an ideal world, where funding and levels of collaboration are high, there could be a strong infrastructure to support information worldwide, making it available reliably and consistently to all (upper right-hand corner), possibly with a reduction in long-term costs as more information is shared.

In another scenario where funding is high, but levels of collaboration are low, there is likely to be local excellence, and potentially competition between information providers, which may not produce a consistent experience for end users (lower right-hand corner).

Where funding levels are low, there are two options: either to try to work alone, with a reduction in resources and a decreasing offering to staff and students (lower left-hand corner), or to increase levels of collaboration as a response (upper left-hand corner). This will require some bold thinking and altruistic decisions, but it could also lead to some novel solutions that no individual body could have invented by itself.

'libraries that are willing to trust each other and to work together may yet have the best chance of survival'

Shrinking horizons in a time of global challenges will not be easy to navigate, but those libraries that are willing to trust each other and to work together may yet have the best chance of survival, provided that they are willing to push the boundaries of their thinking and their actions. Whether institutions will allow their libraries to take such steps is a different question – and maybe the subject of another paper.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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