

Uncovering Hidden Resources: Progress in extending the coverage of online catalogues

Key findings and recommendations of a
study undertaken for the Research
Information Network

November 2007



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Table of Contents

1.	Executive Summary	4
2.	Introduction.....	6
3.	Key findings.....	8
3.1	Progress in retroconversion over the last five years.....	8
3.2	Impact of retroconversion work undertaken in the last five years	14
3.3	Priorities for future retroconversion.....	18
4.	Conclusions and Further Action.....	22
5.	References.....	25

Acknowledgments

The LISU project officer, Helen Greenwood, wishes to acknowledge the support of the project team throughout the course of the study that led to this report:

- Claire Creaser, who managed the project and provided statistical expertise
- Suzanne Lockyer for assisting with the desk research
- Dr Ann O'Brien of the Department of Information Science for providing expert cataloguing advice
- Michael Jubb and Stéphane Goldstein of the Research Information Network

Gratitude is also due to LISU Administrators - Mary Ashworth for creating the online questionnaire forms and Sharon Fletcher for formatting the report.

The project team are grateful to the respondents of both surveys for their contribution to the study, and, in particular, to those librarians who helped to publicise the researchers' questionnaire.

A fuller version of this report, with detailed analyses of the responses to the two questionnaires we issued, is available at <http://www.rin.ac.uk/online-catalogues>

1. Executive Summary

Researchers now expect to have online access to library catalogues. But many of the resources held in UK libraries are not catalogued at all, or are not covered by online catalogues. Such resources are increasingly likely to be overlooked or ignored by researchers, whatever their potential value for research. UK librarians have therefore devoted considerable efforts to tackling the backlog of uncatalogued material in their collections, and converting to digital and online form catalogues that were originally available only in printed or card catalogue format (termed 'retroconversion').

The benefits arising from such work include increased visibility, accessibility and use of collections; and enhancements to the quality of bibliographic records and to the utility of library catalogues.

Researchers welcome such developments: remote access to catalogues, where the collection itself is not available online, enables them to prepare for visits to libraries much more effectively than in the past.

In order to assess the progress that has been made, and priorities for future work, the Research Information Network (RIN) commissioned the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) to gather evidence from librarians and researchers. The study shows significant progress: librarians estimate that 50% of material in their research collections is now covered by online catalogues, compared with 31% five years ago. But much more remains to be done before all the significant material held in UK libraries that may be of value to researchers can be readily traced through online catalogues. Librarians are keen to pursue this work, and we recommend it should remain a high priority for them.

Sustaining Momentum

Work towards ensuring that all their research collections are covered by online catalogues should remain a high priority for all research libraries; and they should seek to make their users aware of the broad nature and scope of collections which remain uncatalogued, or the catalogues of which are not available online

We also highlight a number of issues that need to be addressed in developing and implementing cataloguing and retroconversion initiatives. There is a need for guidance and advice to libraries on issues such as prioritisation, communications, cataloguing standards, and evaluation; and also for arrangements to facilitate the sharing of practical lessons which currently go unrecorded.

Beyond the benefits to individual libraries, and to researchers interested in specific collections, retroconversion and cataloguing bring UK-wide benefits. They add to the sum of available information about the widely-distributed national collection of material of potential significance for research. Hence they provide an essential underpinning to the co-operative efforts being made between libraries to enhance the quality of the services provided on a collaborative basis to researchers across the UK through

- collaborative access schemes such as SCONUL Access;
- union cataloguing schemes such as Copac and SUNCAT;
- collaborative collection management and development schemes such as CoFoR; and
- collaborative retention, storage and access initiatives including the UK Research Reserve.

Embedding Good Practice

The RIN will work with SCONUL, CURL and other library organisations to disseminate the experiences and the lessons learned through recent cataloguing and retroconversion projects, and to promote examples of good practice and guidelines on issues including

- i. arrangements to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned, and examples of good practice;
- ii. appropriate procedures and criteria, involving consultation with researchers and with other libraries, to identify priorities for cataloguing and retroconversion of individual collections;
- iii. the arrangements for staffing of projects;
- iv. appropriate cataloguing standards for resource discovery and record-sharing;
- v. communications and advocacy for projects under way and recently completed;
- vi. practical and simple ways to evaluate the impact and benefits of new online catalogues, from the perspectives of both libraries and researchers.

Maximising the benefits of all such collaborative initiatives depends upon extending the range and scope of readily-available information about the holdings of UK libraries. That will require significantly more funding than is currently available to libraries to pursue this work. We need therefore not just to build on the experiences and lessons from recent retroconversion and cataloguing projects, but to develop a national strategy and programme. That will require exploration of the new ways in which currently-separate aggregations of bibliographical data can be made more efficient, scalable and amenable to exploitation by new technologies and services used by researchers; and of the potential for reducing the cost of retroconversion by applying new methodologies and business models to the use of public cataloguing datasets such as SUNCAT and the CURL database.

Developing a UK-wide Strategy and Programme

In order to ensure that researchers have ready access to and can exploit information about as full as possible a set of information about the material of interest to them held in research collections across the UK, the RIN will work with SCONUL, CURL and other relevant bodies

- i. to explore new methodologies and models for retroconversion, and ways to improve the availability of and interoperability between catalogues; and
- ii. develop a strategy and the specification for an innovative and cost-effective five-year programme to tackle key cataloguing backlogs and retroconversion priorities.

2. Introduction

Context of the study

A number of initiatives in recent years have increased the availability of bibliographic resources for researchers using UK libraries, both by converting catalogues held in manual formats and by creating catalogues for previously uncatalogued holdings. Whilst the nature of retroconversion and cataloguing work undertaken through these initiatives is well-documented, relatively little work has been undertaken to review the scope and value of the work undertaken and its impact on researchers and libraries; or the scope of the work that remains to be done; or priorities for the future.

These issues are of increasing importance not only for individual libraries, but also in a broader context. Recent years have seen a growth in co-operative initiatives between libraries, seeking thereby to enhance the quality of the services provided across the UK to end-users in general and the research community in particular. Such initiatives include those

- to provide physical access to libraries and their collections on a reciprocal basis, through initiatives such as SCONUL Access¹ and the Inspire programme²;
- to extend the intellectual access to the contents of a wide range of libraries, in the academic sector in particular, through the development of a union catalogue of serials (SUNCAT³) and extending the coverage of Copac⁴, the union catalogue based on the holdings of CURL libraries;
- to enhance collaboration between libraries in managing and developing collections in specific areas, such as Russian and East European studies (through the CoFoR programme⁵) and foreign legal material (through the FLARE project⁶); and
- to secure long-term retention, storage and access to low-use printed material across the UK, through the UK Research Reserve project⁷.

Underpinning all these initiatives is the need to ensure that both libraries and researchers have ready access to information as comprehensive as possible about the holdings of libraries across the UK. Hence the Research Information Network (RIN) commissioned the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University to undertake a detailed study of progress in, and priorities for, extending the coverage of online catalogues for UK library collections. The broad aim of this study was *to identify priorities for researchers across a range of disciplines in cataloguing library holdings that are as yet uncatalogued and in converting manual catalogues of holdings to digital form accessible over the internet.*

¹ See <http://www.access.sconul.ac.uk/>

² See <http://www.inspire.gov.uk/>

³ See <http://www.sunat.ac.uk/description.shtml>

⁴ See <http://copac.ac.uk/about/>

⁵ See http://www.curl.ac.uk/projects/documents/CCM_report_summary.pdf

⁶ See <http://ials.sas.ac.uk/flare/flare.htm>

⁷ See <http://www.curl.ac.uk/projects/CollaborativeStorage/About.htm>

Objectives

The more specific objectives for the project were

To gather and assess evidence on:

- the progress that has been made in academic and research libraries in the last five years in retroconversion, the costs of this work, the proportion of catalogued holdings now available in digital format across broad discipline areas, and the use that researchers have made of the additions of content to online catalogues
- the priorities that have been identified by librarians for further retroconversion, and their plans for undertaking the work

To gather and assess the views of researchers from a range of disciplines and from across the UK on:

- the value of the work that has been undertaken in the last five years
- the nature and extent of academic and research library holdings in broad discipline areas that might be of interest to researchers, but which are still not covered by online catalogues
- the priorities for further retroconversion

To consider and present conclusions and recommendations relating to

- The value and impact of the retroconversion undertaken over the past five years
- Priorities as agreed between libraries and researchers in relevant disciplines and subjects for further work over the next 2-5 years
- Any need for additional resources to complete the work agreed to be of the highest priority, and the progress that libraries are likely to make

Approach

Scope and definitions

This study is concerned only with library collections, and not those held by archives or museums. For the purpose of the study, library collections have been broadly defined as *any* collections held by libraries. The term *retroconversion* is used broadly to cover both retrospective conversion of catalogue records from manual to online format, and retrospective cataloguing (the cataloguing of previously uncatalogued material).

The responding librarians were asked to supply details of their library's most important special collections for scholarly research. The term collections is used in a broad sense to refer to groups of library holdings (of any size and type of material), as defined by the responding librarians. It should be noted that the reported collections varied considerably in size (comprising between just two items and eleven million items); and in some cases, a library's entire stock was reported as being a single special collection for scholarly research.

Data collection

The data gathering process was divided into three main parts:

- *Desk research.* A preliminary literature review was undertaken to inform the questions to be asked of librarians and researchers. The sources consulted are referenced on pages 28-29
- *Survey of librarians.* This was conducted by means of an online questionnaire (*Appendix B* of the full report), distributed by email to 221 academic and 210 public library authorities in the UK, and to 131 selected specialist libraries. In most cases, the questionnaire was sent direct to the Chief Librarian or equivalent. Reminder emails were sent in order to encourage responses, which in the end totalled 95. The highest response rate was from academic libraries (23%), and the lowest from public libraries (12%). Issues of particular interest were followed-up by telephone or email, where respondents had expressed a willingness to participate further in the study; and we also sought the co-operation of librarians in contacting the researchers who use their library.
- *Survey of researchers.* This was also conducted by means of an online questionnaire (*Appendix C* of the full report). Librarians who had agreed to publicise the researchers' questionnaire were asked to distribute details of the second survey to their users, and it was also publicised on a number of websites. In total, we received 200 responses.

The findings of each survey are reported on in detail in *Appendix A* of the full report, where the reporting follows the order of the survey questions (*Appendices B & C*). Because the researchers' questionnaire did not seek details of the respondents' institutions, it was not possible to make any formal links between the two questionnaires; but this summary presents the key findings of both surveys, along with the desk research. Profiles of respondents to the librarians' and the researchers' surveys are included in *Appendix A* of the full report.

3. Key findings

The key findings of the study are discussed under the following heads:

- Progress in retroconversion in recent years
- Impact of this work, on both libraries and their researchers
- Priorities and recommendations for future work

3.1 Progress in retroconversion over the last five years

Context

The study focused on progress since 2001, particularly in light of funding made available for retroconversion by the *Research Support Libraries Programme* (RSLP) and the *Full Disclosure* initiative. It may be helpful, however, to set our findings in the context of earlier studies. In the 1990s there was increasing awareness of a backlog of library material requiring cataloguing or conversion, but no clear indication of the scale of the problem. The Bryant study (Bryant, 1997) provided the first hard evidence on the scale of retroconversion required. The purpose of the study was to survey the number of catalogue records in the UK awaiting retroconversion, and to investigate issues regarding access,

bibliographic standards and priorities. It did not cover cataloguing of material for which no catalogue previously existed. The survey revealed that in the HE sector (from which there was an 85% response rate) 28 million records required conversion, amounting to six million individual titles. In the public library sector (with a 60% response rate) nine million records required conversion, amounting to five million individual titles, of which the majority were in special and local studies collections. Among a sample of 20 types of special library included in the survey, another nine million records required conversion, amounting to 6 million individual titles. The report estimated that the total cost of retrospective conversion across the UK would be in the order of £80-100 million.

The recommendations of the Bryant report were taken forward by the *Full Disclosure* report (Chapman *et al*, 1999). That report reviewed major developments and new projects since Bryant. It also set out a methodology for developing a national strategy, including sources of funding and the establishment of a national body to co-ordinate retroconversion initiatives. The report expressed concern about the lack of consultation and co-ordination, and about the limited attempts to examine the overall situation and to identify priorities. When the *Full Disclosure* initiative was taken forward during 2003-04, it provided a total of £115,000 in funding for twelve projects.

In a separate strand, the *Research Support Libraries Programme* (RSLP) was funded by the four UK higher education funding bodies. The programme grew from the Anderson Report (1996), which outlined the burden that some academic libraries face in meeting demands from visiting researchers. A related report (Coopers & Lybrand, 1997) provided estimates of the level of external use of libraries and the costs institutions incurred. The RSLP access funding scheme began in 1999 and was intended to run until 2002, although it was subsequently extended to 2005. Funding that totalled nearly £30 million was distributed to 48 higher education institutions (HEIs), with the key purpose of compensating them for the costs of providing facilities for visiting researchers. But it was also made clear to institutions that they should seek with the help of this funding to enhance their levels of service; hence a number of them used a significant proportion of the funds provided for cataloguing and retroconversion.

Two reports flowed from these initiatives. The first, a survey of their members undertaken by the Consortium of Research Libraries (CURL) in 2003, identified over 14 million items requiring retroconversion or cataloguing (CURL, 2004). The majority (76%) required conversion, but respondents claimed that conversion could be as time consuming as cataloguing from scratch. Librarians reported that, across all subject areas, 42% of outstanding items were of 'high' significance for researchers and 20% of 'medium' significance, although these terms were not clearly defined.

The second study, undertaken by RIN (RIN, 2006a), looked at the use made by HEIs of the RSLP access funds. The report indicated that 30 (63%) of the HEIs that received funding had invested some of the funds under the heading of "bibliographic services" ; and that development of digital catalogues including both retroconversion and cataloguing from scratch was a major feature of this work.

The current study seeks to provide a more up-to-date picture of the progress made in cataloguing and retroconversion in the past five years. It underlines the progress that has been made in extending the coverage of online catalogues, but shows that much more remains to be done.

The current position

Retroconversion and cataloguing work has clearly been a continuing strand of work in many libraries over the past five years. That work has included:

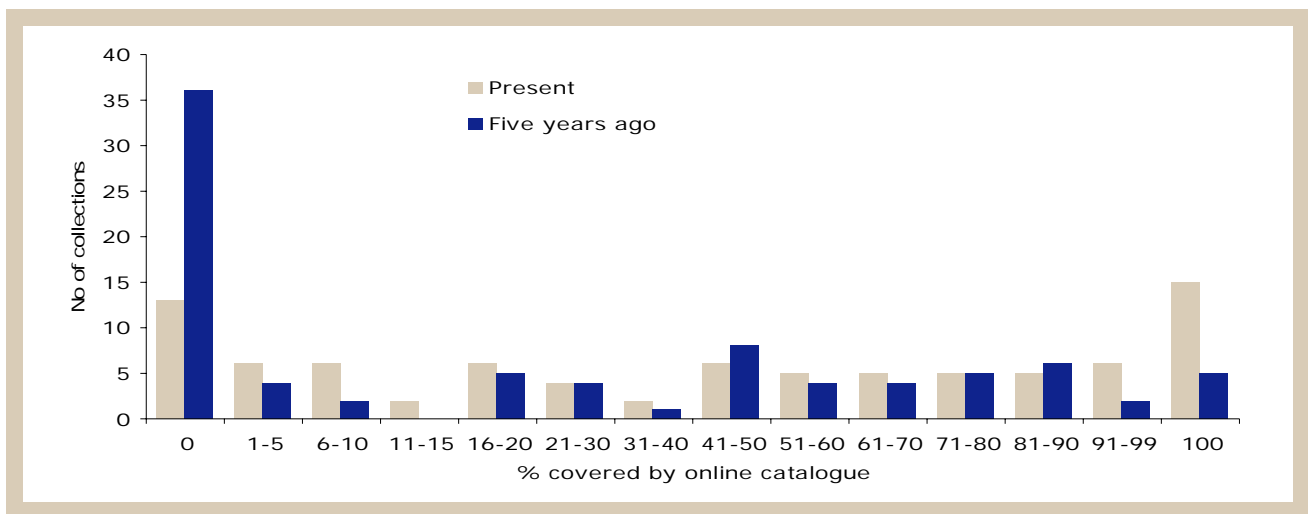
- converting manual catalogues to online form (63% of respondents)
- creating online catalogues for previously uncatalogued material (61% of respondents)

■ upgrading minimal level online catalogues (40% of respondents)

In the first two areas, no significant differences were found between types of library. However, academic libraries were found to be significantly more likely⁸ than public or specialist libraries to have undertaken work to upgrade minimal level catalogues to online format.

The result of this work is that two-thirds of librarians can report an increase in the coverage of online catalogue(s) for the research collections held in their libraries over the last five years; and they estimate that, on average, 50% of the material in their research collections is now covered by online catalogues, compared to 31% in 2001. Figure A shows the distribution of the responses, comparing 2001 and 2006.

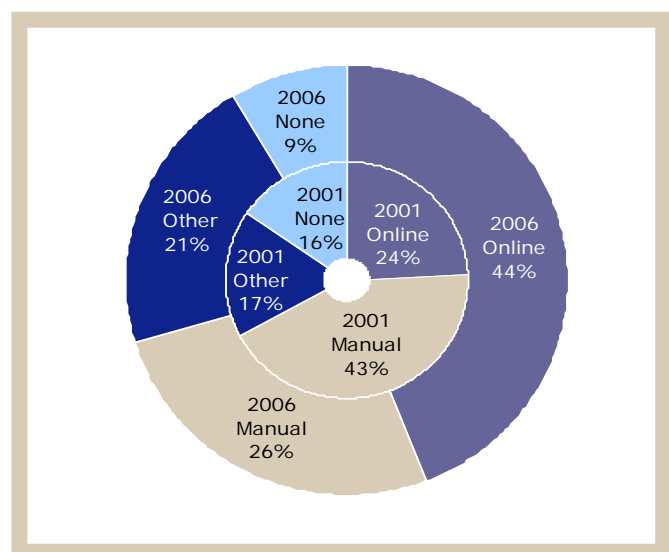
Figure A Distribution of responses for the proportion of material in research collections covered by online catalogues



From the reverse perspective, 34% of librarians said that there had been no change in the coverage of online catalogues over the last five years. The reasons for this may vary, of course: it may be that the library had no collections requiring retroconversion; conversely, libraries may not have had the resources necessary to undertake such work.

We also collected information about individual collections held by the responding libraries. As noted above, the reported collections varied considerably in size; but they nevertheless constitute a significant unit for analysis as identified by the libraries themselves. Of the collections where respondents supplied details of both current and past catalogue availability and format, 44% now have online catalogues, compared to 24% in 2001. Fewer than 10% have no catalogue, compared to 16% five years ago (Figure B).

Figure B Proportion of collections by catalogue format - 2006 and 2001



N=529 | Note: Of the 83 cases of 'other' in 2006, 11 (13%) were collections acquired since 2001.

⁸ Differences have been described as statistically significant when the likelihood of them occurring by chance is less than one in twenty. The significance levels quoted in the Detailed Analysis (Appendix A) are: 5% (i.e. less than one in twenty) and 1% (i.e. less than one in one hundred).

It is not possible to present these findings in terms of the number of individual items covered or not by online catalogues because insufficient data were received to permit valid analysis, and some collections are only partially covered by online catalogues.

Figure C below shows how the extension of online catalogues has been achieved, highlighting the key changes

- from manual to online format (13% of all collections)
- from uncatalogued to online catalogue (6% of all collections)

It also shows where further work is needed:

- 26% of all collections have manual catalogues in both years
- 8% of all collections were not catalogued in 2001 and are still not catalogued

Figure C Catalogue format in 2006 by format in 2001

Format in 2006 ↓	Format in 2001 ↔				All formats
	Online	Manual only	Uncatalogued	Other	
Online	23%	13%	6%	3%	44%
Manual only	0%	26%	<1%	<1%	26%
Uncatalogued	0%	<1%	8%	<1%	9%
Other	<1%	4%	1%	15%	21%
All formats	24%	42%	15%	19%	100%

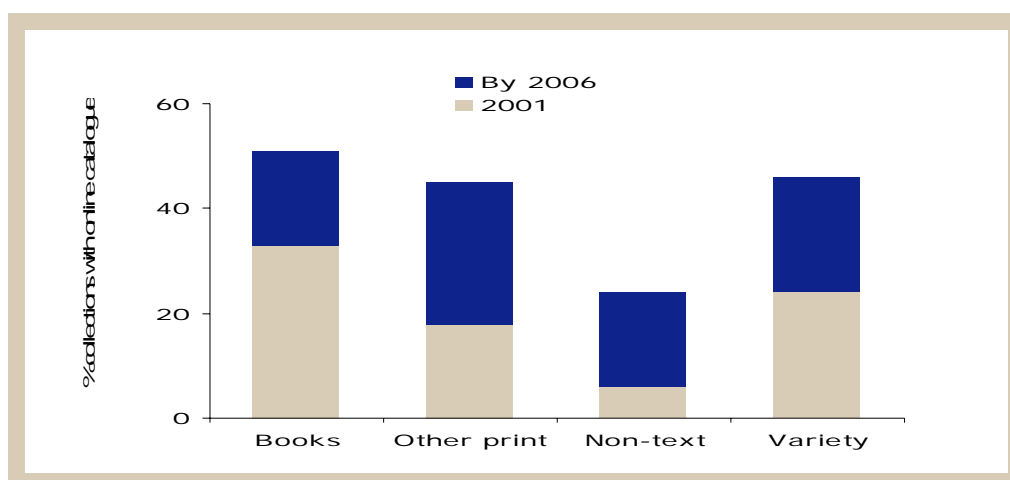
N= 540

For specialist and, to a lesser extent, public libraries, the greatest advances appear to have been in moving from collections with no catalogue to online catalogue coverage. In academic libraries, more progress has been made in the conversion of manual catalogues to online format.

Collections comprising mainly books are significantly more likely to be covered by an online catalogue than collections of other types of material. Proportionately, however, the change between 2001 and 2006 in the online catalogue coverage of collections of other types of material (other print, non-text materials and collections with a variety of materials) has been greater than for books: as shown in Figure D on page 12, online coverage of collections of non-text materials increased from 6% in 2001 to 26% in 2006. This may be the result of the progress already achieved in tackling the cataloguing backlog for books; but it may also indicate a shift in the priorities for retroconversion, from more 'traditional' materials such as rare books towards grey literature, non-text materials and mixed collections.

Researchers said that 95% of the libraries and collections they use have online catalogues, although the coverage of these catalogues may vary. In many libraries, of course, the coverage is incomplete, and some respondents said that the libraries they use also have manual catalogues (22% of libraries and collections) and/or computerised catalogues that are not online (16% of libraries and collections). None of the researchers said that the libraries they use do not have a catalogue, presumably because they tend to avoid such libraries. Indeed, 54% of researchers said they had never used material that was not catalogued. As noted in other surveys (RIN, 2007b), researchers increasingly expect, and attach the greatest value to, catalogues that are online. As one librarian in the current survey observed, 'Material which is only represented in card catalogues might as well not exist for modern library users'.

Figure D Changes in the proportion of collections covered by online catalogues



A majority of researchers, not surprisingly, did not know whether the particular online catalogues they used were available online five years ago. But nearly a quarter (23%) of researchers said that they had used an online catalogue to gain information about collections that were covered five years ago only by a paper or card catalogue; and 12% had used an online catalogue for information about collections that five years ago were not catalogued at all.

Evidence from an earlier study undertaken by the RIN (2006b) suggests that arts and humanities researchers are more aware of gaps in catalogue coverage than their counterparts in science disciplines; and it is notable that in the current study arts and humanities researchers were found to be significantly more likely (at the 5% level) than those in other disciplines to have used an online catalogue for collection(s) that five years ago were not catalogued at all.

Potential for extending the coverage of online catalogues

In spite of the progress that has been made, there are still many collections for which no catalogues exist, or which are covered only by a manual catalogue. A librarian told us that it is currently estimated that there are almost one million music titles in the UK 'for which there is no good electronic record'. One quarter of collections in the libraries responding to the current survey were covered only by manual catalogues in 2001 and are still without online catalogue coverage, and nine percent of the collections reported in the survey are not catalogued at all. Special collections comprising only books are the most likely to be covered by online catalogues, whereas for non-text material, despite the increases of the past five years, coverage is still only 26%.

Just as most librarians reported having undertaken retroconversion work in the last five years, an even larger majority (84%) said they had plans for the future. Extending the coverage of online catalogues thus appears to be increasingly viewed as a core element of library services, and there is continuing momentum behind such work. As one respondent stated, *'libraries should be doing this'*. Details of plans/ideas for future work supplied by 78 librarians are listed in *Appendix E* of the full report. The plans may be categorised under one or more of the following themes:

Building on current work

- *We have a workplan which is revised every year, identifying those collections which will be retro-converted or catalogued into the OPAC.*

- *Our priorities are to complete the online cataloguing of the collections we have identified... Our next priority would be to complete work which has already started on the remainder of the 50 named Special Collections*

Upgrading existing catalogues

- *Gradual upgrading of brief records to full MARC and cataloguing from scratch of some donated rare books.*
- *[We have] a high percentage of records for older printed material online. The quality of the vast majority of records for older printed material is questionable. The records need to be enhanced with more detail, and critically, including copy-specific information, some of which is available but has never been incorporated into the records.*

Making resources available online

- *To migrate our Idealist on-line Special Collections catalogue to the web*
- *Work towards making the early printed books online catalogue ready for release. Create an online catalogue for the last remaining special collection without online records*

Integrating catalogues into the library's main catalogue

- *Both collections came with heritage catalogues. I plan to integrate them into our main OPAC*
- *We hope to be able to add our Local Studies Catalogue and separate Illustrations Index to the new version of our in-house online catalogue which is due to appear in 2007*

Seeking funds/resources to undertake work

- *I have catalogued a handful of items ... to demonstrate the value of good quality online records and am hoping we can raise funds for a retrospective project.*
- *[We have] conducted an audit of backlogs and of printed catalogues. We know what needs to be done. We have a process for achieving it. What we lack is resources from 2008/9 onwards*
- *We want to find funding to catalogue [a collection] designated as of national importance in 2005*

There is little evidence, however, of strong support being sought or secured from researchers for specific projects and plans. Although researchers are well aware of the benefits of the extension of online catalogues, only 22% of respondents were familiar with specific projects or initiatives undertaken in the last five years. Since a number of projects have focused on arts and humanities collections, it is perhaps not surprising that researchers in those disciplines are significantly more likely to be aware of such initiatives than their counterparts in other areas.

Most researcher respondents (57%), however, were not sure whether there were any library collections they would use more extensively if they had online catalogues. Those who had used uncatalogued material in the last year were more likely to see the potential of online catalogues, perhaps because they are more aware of the existence of uncatalogued collections, and of the difficulties in accessing them.

Eighteen researchers made specific reference to material and/or libraries in the UK which would benefit from online catalogues, and seven mentioned collections and institutions beyond the remit of this study

(either libraries in other countries or archive services). Details are included in *Appendix F* of the full report. As might be expected, researchers focused on their own specific areas of interest, and no two researchers mentioned the same collection.

3.2 *Impact of retroconversion work undertaken in the last five years*

Although there has been little systematic evaluation of retroconversion projects, the positive impact of online catalogues is widely accepted, and both librarians and researchers who responded to the current surveys provided examples of the benefits of the work that has been done.

The benefits identified by librarians include increased awareness of, and access to, their collections; improved quality of catalogue records; and increased visibility for their library and its collections. Researchers identified the efficiency gains brought about by online searching, and the ability to access catalogues outside the library. Researchers regard collections covered by online catalogues as significantly more valuable and convenient to use than those which are covered by manual catalogues. Convenience and value are closely related, of course, although researchers are more likely to describe manual catalogues (or digital catalogues that are not online) as *not convenient to use*, rather than *not valuable*. Addressing the cataloguing backlog is clearly a key issue for researchers.

Accessibility and awareness of library collections

Increases in accessibility and visibility of collections brought about by retroconversion are the impacts most commonly cited by librarians: more than 30 respondents commented on increased accessibility to catalogues and/or collections. Many also comment on the benefits of increased awareness of and recognition for their libraries and collections, among both the library and the research communities.

- *Retrospective conversion (and backlog clearance) gives users a more comprehensive picture of the collection. It makes their research easier; it gives them more confidence that it is comprehensive and it enables them to plan their work more cost effectively*
- *It has improved users' ability to search the whole collection, and has led to increased use of previously undiscovered material*
- *Increased access to collections; increased knowledge of collections (library staff as well as wider academic community). Enquiries answered more speedily and efficiently*
- *The impact goes beyond the local research community to a national and international audience because of the visibility of the collections in our online catalogue*
- *It has had a major impact on the use and visibility of our collections and is the single most important thing we can do to make them available to the research community*

Researchers also emphasise the importance of online catalogues in raising awareness of library holdings, both at their 'home' library and other libraries. Their responses also highlight the danger that what is not discoverable through an online catalogue may remain invisible and unused.

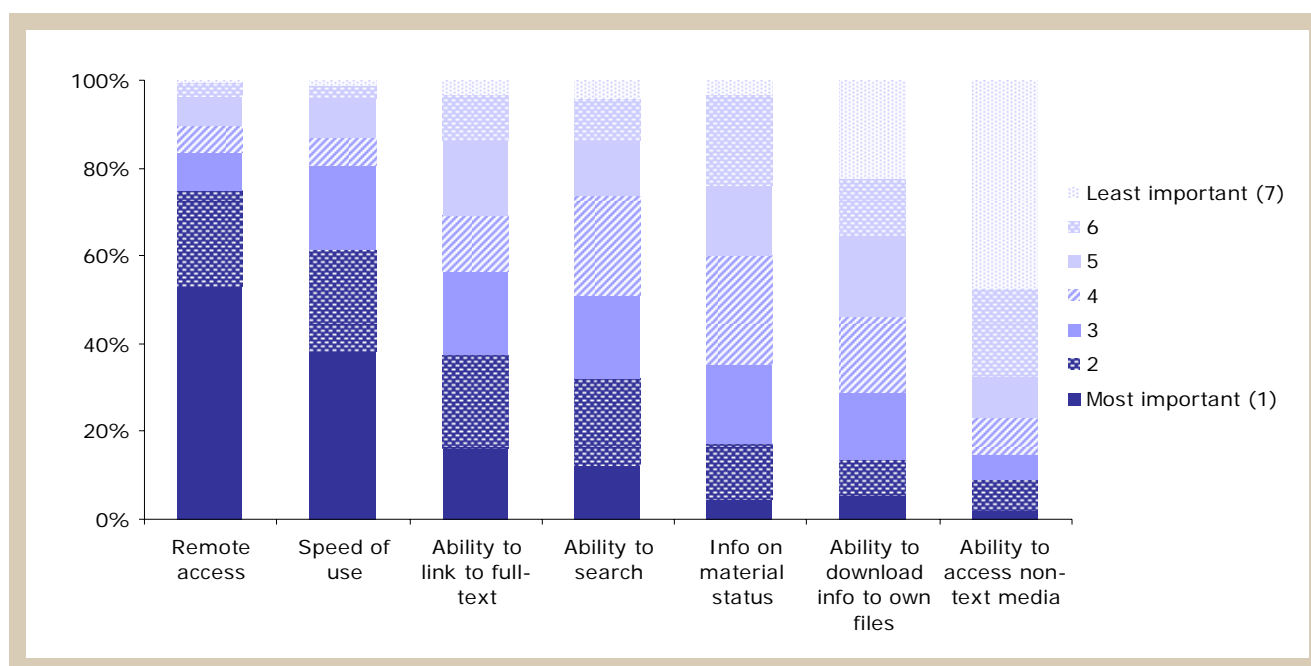
- *If a catalogue is available at home over the internet I am more likely to use a library*
- *If a catalogue is online you are much more likely to find its existence - there may be good collections that I don't know about*
- *To some extent, my research is led by what is available online, so I am less likely to be aware of libraries without an online presence*
- *Huge improvement in ease of access - especially for collections held at other institutions*

Remote access and ability to plan library visits

Among researchers, the ability to access online catalogues remotely is seen as the most important benefit of retroconversion (Figure E), although scientists regard it as relatively less important than researchers in other subject areas.

- *Made a big impact for remote access but they are often copied straight from a paper version that could be over sixty years old*
- *I only use the online catalogues - and do so from home. I don't do research in my university office, too many interruptions*

Figure E Researchers' views on the benefits of online catalogues, ranked by importance



Stockdale (2000) observed that remote access high-quality records remotely allows researchers to prepare more effectively for a visit to the library. This benefit was underlined by several researchers:

- *Online catalogues enable me to prepare visits ahead which increases efficiency by an order of magnitude*
- *Without an online catalogue I wouldn't have made the trip to consult the resource*
- *Faster and easier. Allows short, quick trips to the library*

Enhanced quality of records and functionality of catalogues

Librarians refer to improved quality of records and functionality of catalogues following retroconversion:

- *Impact in the sense of improvement to the quality of data has been dramatic. Upgraded records are far fuller and more accurate, redundant records have been removed and others consolidated as appropriate*
- *Has made the records much more searchable and made them available outside the Library*

Such comments underline reports from a number of projects in recent years which have highlighted the added value of cataloguing collections from source - for example the Durning-Lawrence Collection in the University of London Library (Attar, 2003) and the Winterbottom and Maltby Collections at Durham University (Durham University, 2004). Cataloguing from source provides an opportunity to review such collections, revealing previously mis-identified material and unexpected provenance, as well as any need for conservation work.

The comments of researchers tend to focus on enhanced functionality and the improved quality of searching, as distinct from the quality of the records themselves:

- *Just much easier to be sure I have searched more thoroughly. Essential for literature reviews*
- *Useful links can be made between one work and another more easily*
- *It simply makes all kinds of "discovery" possible - connecting materials that are of no direct use to, or are overlooked by, those working in situ, to scholars all over the world who understand immediately their significance and the need to consult them*

As expected, a number of researchers also focus on the speed and ease of use of online catalogues:

- *Tremendous saving of time; ability to pinpoint relevant material; ability to discover unsuspected new evidence*
- *Being able to access the information I need with the click of a mouse – it's great!*
- *Incredible, it speeds up research connections as well as providing archival information, that I know I will be able to get access to if I go to where it is*
- *Material is much more accessible now: less time searching means more time actually consulting research material*

When the responses are analysed by subject area and type of researcher (academic staff/PhD students and post-doctoral researchers/other researchers), we find that:

- Speed of use is ranked more highly by scientists than by arts and humanities and social science respondents
- Ability to search by a variety of fields is less highly rated by scientists than by the other subject groups. This is also true of respondents in the *other researchers* group
- The ability to link to full-text material is more important to scientists and social scientists than to arts and humanities researchers
- The ability to access non-text media such as manuscripts, images, video, maps and music is relatively more important to arts and humanities researchers than to scientists or social scientists

Benefits of collaboration

Collaboration, and the opportunity to share expertise and develop common solutions to difficulties, are seen as a beneficial aspect of a number of retroconversion projects, with a librarian reporting *'useful comparisons with other libraries and ability to share cataloguing expertise'*. Collaboration is also seen as adding impact to projects by, for example, linking individual collections via a project website and providing enhanced promotional opportunities.

It is notable, however, that librarians did not identify enhancing collaboration between libraries as a significant driver for retroconversion projects and initiatives. The scope for sharing catalogue records and adding to union catalogues was mentioned by one librarian who said that retroconversion *'has*

encouraged us to participate in union catalogue projects, for example, Open WorldCat, and bid to join Copac'. But benefits in terms of adding to the sum of available information and knowledge about the UK's widely-distributed collection of materials of interest and relevance to researchers, or of facilitating collaboration between libraries in managing and developing their collections, received no specific mention. Initiatives such as the UK Research Reserve - a collaborative approach to securing long-term retention, storage and access to low-use printed research collections – or the Copac Challenge Fund – through which two million records from twelve non-members of CURL are being added to the Copac database – may become significant drivers for retroconversion projects in the future.

Increased use of catalogues and collections

Bryant (1997) noted that all collections are important to someone, but that without accessible catalogues use may be very low; and since then the need for accessibility online has been enhanced. A number of responding librarians said that they had seen an increase in the usage of collections since retroconversion:

- *It has had a high impact on the use of collections and has been beneficial to our users who do not have to travel to other libraries or request items through ILL. In the modern era the vast majority of researchers don't have any experience of card catalogues and other manual finding aids and will assume that if an item is not on the computer catalogue then the Library does not have a copy. Making our catalogue records available online has increased the number of enquiries from and visits by remote users (UK and worldwide)*
- *There was a view before recon work was undertaken that if material wasn't being used we should relegate it. The contrary argument that the material was a valuable research resource that would be exploited if only its existence was known prevailed and has been proved correct*
- *Our core function as a public library is to increase library use in all areas; the online catalogue is a powerful tool to facilitate this*

It is important, however, not to conflate usage with significance or importance. Low usage of material that is not identifiable through online catalogues may not indicate a need to make the material more visible, but rather that it lacks significance, or that it is relevant and significant for the work of only a very small number of researchers. Moreover, as Attar (2003) notes, there may be some delay after retroconversion of valuable material before increased usage becomes evident. For all these reasons, care needs to be taken in any cost-benefit approach to retroconversion.

In the current survey, librarians were asked to quantify changes in the level of use their catalogue(s) and collections since retroconversion. Just over half the respondents say that catalogue usage has increased a lot, and a further 35% that use has increased a little. Increases in collection usage are not quite so marked, with approximately of third of respondents saying use has increased a lot, and 59% saying it has increased a little (*Figure F*).

Figure F Respondents reporting changes in the levels of catalogue and collection use

	Catalogue(s)	Collection(s)
Increased a lot	54%	35%
Increased a little	35%	59%
No change	10%	6%
Decreased	0%	0%
No of respondents	48	54

The basis for these judgements is not clear, however, since only two-thirds of responding libraries record the usage of special collections, and only 15% of them measure the use of catalogues covering such collections. Assessment of impact thus seems often to rely on informal observation and perception, rather than firm data. Thus the report of the CURL/RSLP 19th Century Pamphlets project (Detraz, 2002) notes a “significant increase” in the usage of collections, but could not provide detailed usage statistics. The RIN’s review (RIN, 2006a) of the RSLP Access Funds noted the lack of any systematic evaluation of the value added through the investments made under the scheme and the impact on researchers and libraries, including the results of the retroconversion work.

In line with these earlier findings, the current survey shows that librarians are keen to emphasise the benefits of online catalogues both for the library and for their users. The lack of systematic evidence as to the nature and extent of the benefits of retroconversion work may be difficult to overcome without complex additions to library systems. And since most librarians *‘just assume it’s a good thing’*, only 38% of them indicate that they have sought in any way to assess the impact of retroconversion projects, with library staff opinions and/or collection use data the most commonly-used methods.

3.3 Priorities for future retroconversion

There is a strong consensus in the library community about the need to add to the coverage of online catalogues by addressing the backlog on uncatalogued material, and material that is catalogued only in print or on cards. There have been frequent calls, notably through the Bryant Report (1997) and *Full Disclosure* (Chapman *et al*, 1999) for investment in retroconversion and to address the cataloguing backlog; and these have been repeated recently by Parkinson (2006) and in the report of a seminar hosted by the RIN in January 2007 (RIN, 2007a).

The key driver behind retroconversion projects tends to be the interests and needs of individual libraries and the institutions in which they are located. But key benefits and impact may arise at a broader level, in enhancing knowledge of the UK’s distributed collection of books and other materials relevant to research; and in underpinning collaborative initiatives such as the UK Research Reserve, which depend on the availability of information as to the contents of collections.

Any successful retroconversion project will add to the information available about individual collections, and may in addition provide a valuable addition to the sum of knowledge about the distributed collection across the UK. Retroconversion can and should bring benefits to all libraries and researchers. Nevertheless, the need for prioritisation has also been recognised for some time.

Full Disclosure noted that whilst there was general agreement that attention should focus on the ‘most important collections’, priorities would vary with library type: government, health and arts libraries, for example, might place a particular emphasis on grey literature, whereas national, academic and public libraries might emphasise non-English language materials. Parkinson notes that ‘the specialist library’s

first loyalty is often to its governing body and members while any wider service, and drivers to increase access to collections for intellectual or political reasons, may be secondary’ (Parkinson, 2006, p. 26). There have been few attempts to engage the interest of the research community, or specific sectors of that community, in discussions about cataloguing backlogs or deficiencies.

Librarians are very much aware of the need to prioritise, and we asked both librarians and researchers about the criteria they would use to prioritise retroconversion and cataloguing work. Librarians were asked to select from a list criteria they had used in the past and those they would use in the future; and researchers were asked to rank criteria from a similar list.

Four common criteria were among those listed for both librarians and researchers:

1. Importance of material for research
2. Difficulty in accessing/browsing collections
3. Rarity of collection(s)
4. Relation to other collections which have already been catalogued

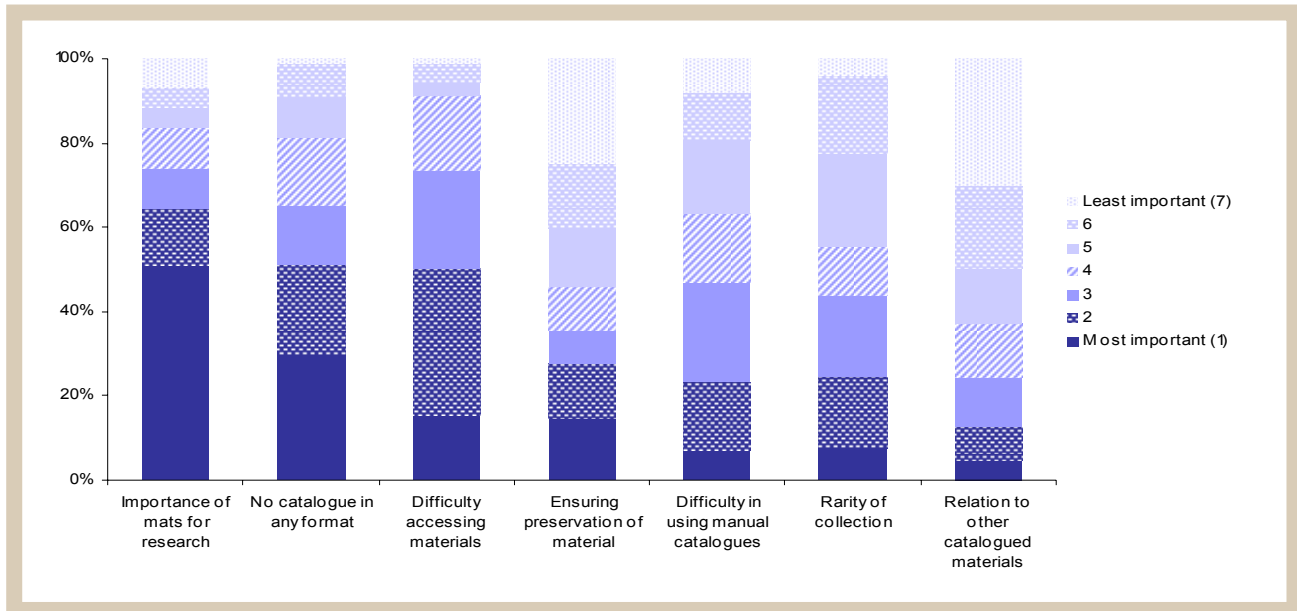
Both groups identified importance for research and overcoming difficulties in access as the most important criteria for decision-making, followed, for librarians, by the rarity of collections. The reduction in “other” criteria in respect of future retroconversion projects suggests a coalescence of view among librarians as to the key criteria for decision-making (*Figure G*).

Figure G Criteria librarians had used and would use to prioritise collections for retroconversion

Criteria	Last five years (% of respondents)	Future retroconversion (% of respondents)
Importance of material for research	85%	82%
Difficulty in accessing collections	62%	73%
Rarity of collections	58%	67%
User demand	44%	58%
Relation to other collections already catalogued	41%	52%
Opportunities for collaborative work	35%	41%
Low usage of collections	24%	33%
High usage of collections	24%	30%
Other	32%	12%

Researchers' views on criteria were broadly in line with those of librarians, although they were not as concerned as librarians about the rarity of material or to what extent a potential candidate for online cataloguing may relate to collections which are already catalogued (*Figure H*).

Figure H Researchers' ranking of criteria in prioritising material for online cataloguing



Determining importance of material for research

The *importance of materials for research* is of course an imprecise criterion, and *how* the relative importance of material for research is determined may inevitably differ from one respondent to the next. Several librarians who did not select this criterion said they were not able to determine the importance of materials for research. As one observed, *'this is an area for which we do need some better definition of criteria'*. This is an enduring problem: in the study undertaken by CURL (2004), for example, collections were discussed in terms of 'significance', but without any indication of how different levels of significance were determined.

Lessons learnt from previous retroconversion work

Librarians were asked to reflect on their experience of retroconversion initiatives undertaken in the last five years and comment on anything they would do differently in future work. The lessons learnt may be divided into four broad areas:

Cataloguing standards and classification

Problems arising from inconsistencies in cataloguing standards are mentioned in the literature, and cataloguing standards and classification issues remain a prominent feature of the comments from librarians.

- *Use up-to-date internationally-recognised classification schemes (i.e. DDC22) rather than in-house adapted schemes*
- *Tighter control over specifications for outsourced retroconversion and better quality control*
- *More appropriate format for data storage and retrieval*

- *More online matching against external databases of quality*
- *Greater emphasis on interoperability of smaller databases which record specialist material*
- *Improve and enhance subject terminology to provide better access to content*
- *Local editorial control. Ensure early incorporation in main archives and online catalogue as opposed to access via project driven websites*

Staffing

Several of the reports of RSLP and Full Disclosure projects discussed problems arising from lack of specialist staff with expertise in cataloguing. The 19th Century Pamphlets project (Detraz, 2002) discusses the importance of specialist staff and the difficulty in recruiting them. One respondent in the current survey noted that the problem was exacerbated by the number of RSLP projects starting simultaneously. The survey also confirmed the importance of dedicated staff:

- *We would prefer to undertake all cataloguing projects in-house by employing temporary staff or offering extra hours to existing staff*
- *Try to get some temporary assistance from the local library school*
- *Better to have dedicated staff, rather than fitting the work in with other duties.*
- *Often funding is for a limited duration. This can lead to projects being started but never completed within the funding period. The work then has to be either dropped or incorporated into the library resource allocation.*

Establishing priorities

Although initiatives such as Full Disclosure and RSLP provided an excellent opportunity for special retroconversion projects, external funding is not without problems. Projects may be bounded by funders' objectives; the prioritisation of collections for retroconversion in collaborative projects can be problematic; and there is typically an added administrative burden (Stockdale, 2000).

- *Hope that our own priorities could be followed and not those of funding bodies or campaigns*
- *If we had had complete freedom to spend the recon money as we thought appropriate then our priorities would have been different*
- *Many externally-funded projects were subject based. They allowed us to partially catalogue certain collections but not to complete specific collections because of constraints in the project scope. We want to follow a far more systematic approach which completes collections and gives more clarity to users in their use of our online catalogue and collections*

It is important to note, however, that there may be legitimate differences between the priorities of external funders and of individual libraries; and that navigating between competing priorities is likely to be a feature of successful externally-funded projects.

Planning and preparation

Five respondents mentioned placing more emphasis on the planning stage. As one respondent stated, 'Plan, and keep planning!'. Another said:

- *Spend a bit more time at preliminary stage - do a mini-pilot to ensure more accurate assessment of time involved in cataloguing and processing*

4. Conclusions and Further Action

Building on the progress achieved over the past five years

Significant progress has been made in retroconversion and cataloguing over the past five years:

- two-thirds of librarians report an increase in the coverage of online catalogues for research collections held in their libraries; and
- librarians estimate that, on average, 50% of the material in their research collections is now covered by online catalogues, compared to 31% in 2001.

There is a strong consensus about the value of such work, and the benefits that arise from it, especially among librarians. And there is clearly a considerable amount still to do in extending the coverage of material regarded as potentially of high importance for research. Hence a large majority of librarians who responded to our survey have plans for further projects in the future, although the amount they can achieve will depend on their ability to attract internal and external sources of funding. Librarians identify a number of benefits arising from cataloguing and retroconversion work, including

- increased visibility, awareness and accessibility of library collections
- increased use of both catalogues and collections
- enhancements to quality of records and to functionality of catalogues
- enhanced collaboration between libraries

There is a good deal of evidence from this and from related surveys that researchers also welcome the increased availability of online catalogues; that very few of the researchers who use libraries for their research are aware of the nature and extent of the material that remains uncatalogued; and that there is an increasing risk that the considerable amount of material still not covered by online catalogues will be overlooked or ignored. Remote access to catalogues, where the material itself is not available online, enables researchers to prepare for their visits to libraries much more effectively than in the past.

We therefore believe that cataloguing and retroconversion should remain high priorities both for individual libraries and in the interests of the library and research communities across the UK.

Sustaining Momentum

Work towards ensuring that all their research collections are covered by online catalogues should remain a high priority for all research libraries; and they should seek to make their users aware of the broad nature and scope of collections which remain uncatalogued, or the catalogues of which are not available online

Sharing lessons, experience and good practice

Our report also highlights a number of issues that should be addressed in developing and implementing cataloguing and retroconversion projects or initiatives. There is a need for guidance and advice to libraries on issues such as prioritisation, communications, cataloguing standards, and evaluation; and

also for arrangements to facilitate the sharing of practical lessons and experiences which currently go unrecorded. Issues to be addressed in this way should include:

- **Prioritisation.** 84% of the libraries responding to our survey have plans for future retroconversion work, with priorities based mainly on how important the material is for research, and on the need to overcome barriers to access. Such broad criteria are not especially helpful in determining priorities, and as one respondent observed, '*we do need some better definition of criteria*'. Nor is it easy to secure effective help from researchers in establishing priorities: as an RIN study on researchers' use of academic library services (RIN 2007b) makes clear, there are a number of barriers to effective communication and engagement between librarians and researchers; and there is an understandable tendency for researchers' interests at any one time to be highly specific. Nevertheless, the specific suggestions from researchers gathered in the course of this study (see *Appendix F* of the full report), however *ad hoc* and specific they might be, are of some value; and it would be useful if such suggestions could be gathered more regularly and systematically.
- **Staffing.** Specialist, designated staff with appropriate expertise are important in ensuring the quality and overall success of retroconversion and cataloguing projects. A number of the projects reported in this study lacked the funding for designated staff, and cataloguing was undertaken on a piecemeal basis by staff undertaking other duties. This prolonged the projects and prejudiced their success. Adequate staffing depends on the financial resources made available. But there are also limited numbers of specialist staff available for this work, and there were difficulties in recruiting specialist staff when a number of RSLP projects started simultaneously.
- **Cataloguing and classification.** Cataloguing standards featured prominently in the comments we received from librarians; and a number said they would pay closer attention to the quality of records created in future retroconversion work. But it seems likely that the quality of online catalogue records will continue to vary significantly in the absence of agreed standards.
- **Communications and raising awareness.** Most libraries have undertaken some form of retroconversion work in the last five years. But only one fifth of the researchers who responded to the survey (who may thus be presumed to be interested in such issues) were aware of specific projects or initiatives; and most those making use of online catalogues did not know whether they were available five years ago. As one researcher observed, '*it is vital that potential users can find out about newly catalogued collections - no point in doing it unless you make people aware.*' Libraries should not assume that online catalogues once completed and available 'speak for themselves'. A co-ordinated approach may help to achieve a higher profile for retroconversion work, and that in turn could be beneficial in publicising the development of online catalogues to library users. Promotion and awareness-raising needs to be a feature of all retroconversion projects.
- **Evaluating impacts and benefits.** Evaluation is of critical importance in demonstrating benefits and impact, and value for money. It plays an important part also in advocacy and in attracting future funding; and in helping to determine priorities for future work. This report illustrates a number of the benefits that arise from cataloguing and retroconversion work; but it is not easy to gather systematic evidence. Any approach to evaluation based on crude quantification of usage would clearly not be appropriate, even if it were feasible, since it would not take into account many of the qualitative impacts from a user perspective. But some simple and practical ways to evaluate benefits and impact, from the perspectives of both libraries and researchers, would be helpful in assessing value for money in relation to completed projects; and in providing a guide to priorities for the future.

Embedding Good Practice

The RIN will work with SCONUL, CURL and other library organisations to disseminate the experiences and the lessons learned through recent cataloguing and retroconversion projects, and to promote examples of good practice and guidelines on issues including

- vii. arrangements to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned, and examples of good practice;
- viii. appropriate procedures and criteria, involving consultation with researchers and with other libraries, to identify priorities for cataloguing and retroconversion of individual collections;
- ix. the arrangements for staffing of projects;
- x. appropriate cataloguing standards for resource discovery and record-sharing;
- xi. communications and advocacy for projects under way and recently completed;
- xii. practical and simple ways to evaluate the impact and benefits of new online catalogues, from the perspectives of both libraries and researchers.

A UK-wide Perspective

Beyond the benefits to individual libraries, and to researchers interested in specific collections, retroconversion and cataloguing bring UK-wide benefits. They add to the sum of available information about the widely-distributed national collection of material of potential significance for research. Hence they provide an essential underpinning to the co-operative efforts being made between libraries to enhance the quality of the services provided on a collaborative basis to researchers across the UK through

- collaborative access schemes such as SCONUL Access;
- union cataloguing schemes such as Copac and SUNCAT;
- collaborative collection management and development schemes such as CoFoR; and
- collaborative retention, storage and access initiatives including the UK Research Reserve.

Developing a UK-wide Strategy and Programme

In order to ensure that researchers have ready access to and can exploit information about as full as possible a set of information about the material of interest to them held in research collections across the UK, the RIN will work with SCONUL, CURL and other relevant bodies

- iii. to explore new methodologies and models for retroconversion, and ways to improve the availability of and interoperability between catalogues; and
- iv. develop a strategy and the specification for an innovative and cost-effective five-year programme to tackle key cataloguing backlogs and retroconversion priorities.

Maximising the benefits of all such initiatives depends upon extending the range and scope of readily-available information about the holdings of UK libraries. That will require significantly more funding

than is currently available to libraries to pursue this work. We need therefore not just to build on the experiences and lessons from recent retroconversion and cataloguing projects, but to build a national strategy and programme. That will require exploration of the new ways in which currently-separate aggregations of bibliographical data can be made more efficient, scalable and amenable to exploitation by new technologies and services (from Google Scholar to Cite-U-Like) used by researchers; and of the potential for reducing the cost of retroconversion by applying new methodologies and business models to the use of public cataloguing datasets such as SUNCAT and the CURL database.

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