

The Distributed National Collection

A University Perspective

by Helen Hayes

The proposal for a Distributed National Collection ('DNC') is essentially a plan for libraries throughout Australia to develop their collections with an overall national perspective in mind. It is proposed that all libraries should describe their existing subject strengths and their plans for future development. These plans would be made available in a published form, known as *Conspectus*, thus allowing future collection decisions by individual libraries to be made on the basis of information about gaps in the *national* 'collection'. In an age where it is increasingly difficult to finance and house library collections this will allow libraries to make considered decisions about whether to attempt to build or maintain research collections in particular disciplines.

While information about the location of many individual titles is already available to researchers (through both the National Union Catalogue of Monographs and the Australian Bibliographic Network) there have been few guides available to collections by subject which would allow a researcher to make a decision to visit a collection. It is proposed that libraries with particular subject strengths will either volunteer or be requested to make a commitment to maintaining those collections as part of the national collection for the benefit of all

researchers. In some cases institutions which no longer teach in certain areas may transfer those collections to the institution with designated national responsibility for the subject. It is also envisaged that in certain instances where no institution is currently collecting at research strength in a particular area, funding will be given to that institution to build in that area.

Most academic libraries are well aware of their own research strengths, and areas which receive significant support can be readily identified. For example, the Univer-

which the collection at Melbourne University is one. Areas of collection building can be agreed between universities holding these collections, based on our current strengths and future needs. We are currently looking at this issue in relation to the collections at the University of New South Wales and Monash University and we will do so for other areas of the Collection.

What can the DNC achieve?

From a global perspective the DNC offers a rational distribution of

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sity of Melbourne receives annual funding from a bequest to develop the history collections in relation to the French Revolution and the Tudor period in English History. We should be able to quite confidently agree that we will continue to build these collections for the foreseeable future. Another example is that we know that there are only a few large older medical collections in Australia of

library collections and services developed collaboratively, from which the University of Melbourne would be a beneficiary along with everyone else. In this University it has been recognised that in order to fully participate in the DNC, our records must be added to the National Bibliographic Database (NBD). The University administration has accepted this view and is assisting

the Library by providing funding toward this purpose.

With this level of bibliographical control, through the National Bibliographic Database, we will be able to gain a far greater level of knowledge of our own and other collections which will enable us to make more informed decisions about what we purchase at the research level.

What are the problems?

There are very few collection policy plans available in academic libraries that are clear and sufficiently detailed to be useful as a tool for justifying cancellations or alerting other libraries to areas we will continue to build on, although many are being developed.

Given that the resources available to university libraries are not sufficient to build research collections in all subjects where research is going on, it is critical that information is available to all university librarians to enable them to plan

Many large and older collections still contain a significant amount of worthwhile material which is not catalogued onto the NBD and is inaccessible to researchers. We hope to have achieved a major part of our cataloguing and retro-conversion in the next three years. Until this is achieved a detailed approach from the University of Melbourne to the DNC will not be possible, although it is certainly possible to identify *broad* areas of collection strength at this stage.

One major problem is duplication because universities in Australia currently compete in the same areas, and parallel collections are being purchased to support internal initiatives: of course we must support and serve our own institutions in the first instance. Indeed the current trend is to more, rather than less, duplication (e.g. law courses and Japanese stud-

ies) meaning that if we all teach in, for example, Japanese we will all have to collect in that area.

In addition, the development of our collections in certain areas reflects the interests and enthusiasm of the staff members concerned. This has created inconsistencies as well as peaks and gaps in our collections, although it should be possible to address these problems through agreed collection plans.

Another issue is that strong central direction for a DNC would not be acceptable to most higher education institutions. If no university wants to collect in the area of Ruritanian Studies no amount of persuasion will convince them to do so. We not only have to consider the pur-

chase and processing costs but also the space such collections occupy on our shelves. Inevitably there will be areas which will never be supported by the DNC and so the requirement for libraries to take an international perspective will be essential. Strong centralisation is not however supported in the literature on the DNC. Participation, including the means of participation, will be voluntary.

These limitations should not be seen as reasons for not supporting the DNC, but as a guide to how we approach the DNC. It may be useful to start with the areas where we already have a known commitment. When we know what is not covered nationally we may be in a position to consider national and international solutions for areas of need.

It has been asked why we should bother at all with the concept of the DNC when technological develop-

ments will soon effectively provide us with a distributed international collection in any case. One answer is that such a situation does not exist now, and the costs may prove quite prohibitive as we rely on fewer providers of information to meet our needs. This situation leaves us too vulnerable: we could be cut off by sanctions, costs, the technology itself or the decisions of other people. Access now is currently weighted to those who can afford it and who have the technology and the ability to use it so that some groups and some libraries are missing out more than others. Sometimes as we have seen, the modes of dissemination invest information with private features adding cost and exclusiveness rather than value.

In addition, some material is unlikely to ever be included in a database. For example, the 19th century medical periodicals held at the University of Melbourne which would probably not be used often enough to ever warrant on-line access, or even perhaps the esoteric chemistry journals wanted by the Heads of Chemistry Schools.

Information in *all* formats will comprise the Distributed National Collection, and both the balance and means of access will change along with the availability of new technologies.

Given that the resources available to university libraries are not sufficient to build research collections in all subjects where research is going on, it is critical that information is available to all university librarians to enable them to plan their collecting, and for researchers to know where the strong collections are. The Distributed National Collection will provide this.

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