

Looking to Foreign Countries: Comparison of University Libraries in Switzerland and Abroad

*Dr. Wolfram Neubauer, Director
Dr. Alice Keller, Head Collection Development
ETH Library Zurich*

Introduction

Studying abroad is becoming increasingly popular amongst students. At the same time many young academics are encouraged to make study visits abroad or do some years of research at a foreign university.

Scientists and engineers often choose to go to universities in the United States. Here they can benefit from excellent research infrastructure and also improve their knowledge of the English language. Scholars in the field of social sciences, arts or humanities normally set different priorities. It is not uncommon that library and archival collections influence their choice.

During their stay abroad, students or academics invariably get to know the university library and compare these institutions with the situation at their home university. Naturally most comparisons are drawn unconsciously. Only very few users will deliberately analyse the services and collections offered by their library.

Scholars who managed to get a place at one of the renowned American universities will most likely be very impressed by the excellent library services and the extraordinarily rich collections at their disposal. Academics or students visiting British libraries will receive a warm welcome and experience user-friendly services. They may, however, be less enthusiastic about the collections or infrastructure. Those studying or working at German universities may be dissatisfied with the library in more than one respect. Due to financial constraints, many German libraries are no longer able to fulfil the requirements of users in various respects.

Why such differences?

A comparison of academic libraries in different countries shows significant differences. Readers will ask where these divergences originate from. Which political or economic factors influence libraries

and their collections? Why are user services and the ambience in a library building so different according to the home country? Not surprisingly, policies of university libraries are generally based on the national university policy. This close relationship between university and library policy was the topic of an international OECD seminar in Paris in August 2002.

The seminar was entitled "Universities & Libraries" and was held within the framework of the Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) programme. Invitations went out to both representatives of university administration and libraries. A glance at the list of names showed that the majority of participants were librarians. This indicates that the interest of university administrators in library issues is very much smaller than vice versa. A fact that will not surprise librarians!

The results of the workshop gave a good overview over the differences between libraries worldwide and the reasons for these divergences. As explained in the following paragraphs the main differences can be found in the area of fund-raising, external cooperation and library buildings.

Fund-raising

Having in mind that most libraries are currently experiencing financial constraints in one or several areas, it is not surprising that funding was one of the major topics of the workshop. Libraries in Switzerland are traditionally fully financed by the university, state or canton, respectively. Scholarly libraries that serve both as university libraries and municipal or cantonal libraries are subsidized accordingly.

The situation, however, in English-speaking countries is very different. Libraries in these areas of the world are required to cover at least part of their expenses by fund-raising. According to some of the speakers at the workshop, library directors in Britain or the United States spend up to 80% of their working hours seeking financial support for their institutions. Professionals applying for management posts in these countries need to be experienced fund-raisers and ideally already enjoy good connections to potential donors.

Fund-raising is much less widespread in German-speaking countries. Public libraries have been the first to take up this idea and have launched some quite successful ventures. Academic libraries are much slower and have only just begun to consider this option. Only very few

scholarly libraries have introduced such activities and are gathering their first experiences. For example, the Bavarian State Library rents out some of its halls for special events in return for fees.

Librarians at German-speaking universities cannot help being amazed at the success their English-speaking colleagues can exhibit. In the United States many ambitious initiatives or buildings have been partly or fully financed by donations: this would be inconceivable at German-speaking universities. The University at Albany, New York, has received US\$ 750,000 from the bookstore Barnes & Noble for the construction of a new library building. The University of California, Santa Cruz, has just opened a new computing centre paid for by private donors. Finally, the Library of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, has been given US\$ 10 million for the foundation of an Institute for Study of American History, Literature and Culture.

One of the most challenging current library projects is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's programme to make all course materials and lectures available over the Internet during the next decade. The project OpenCourseWare is estimated to cost between US\$ 7,5 and 10 million annually. The first two big benefactors, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation, have already committed themselves to contribute US\$ 11 million in total. Further sponsors still need to be found.

Cooperation between Libraries

Cooperation between libraries is becoming an increasingly important issue for academic institutions. Even very large and financially strong libraries are not in a position to collect and catalogue all relevant documents and store them on their premises. The number of new titles per year exceeds 80,000 in the German-speaking countries alone. It is not possible for any individual library to acquire and process so many publications annually. In order to offer good services and grant access to as many titles as possible, libraries need to cooperate on a national and international level.

Collaboration between libraries can be sought on different levels and in various areas. Cooperation can be focussed on collection development, cataloguing, user services or long-term archiving. On the practical level many libraries are involved in cooperative cataloguing, which leads to union catalogues that serve whole library networks rather than only the individual institution. Another new, but very successful

form of cooperation is the creation of consortia to coordinate licenses for electronic information products. Libraries join forces to negotiate license deals for databases and/or electronic journals and thereby improve their digital collections. Combined efforts will also become increasingly important to tackle the issue of long-term preservation of books, journals and digital materials.

A comparison of library cooperation in various countries shows very different patterns. Great Britain, for example, has a highly centralized approach. The current form of coordination derives from suggestions put forward in the Follett Report, published in 1993. This report made clear that access to scholarly information at British universities was highly inadequate, due to insufficient funding during previous years. The Follett Report suggested national programmes for the creation of digital libraries and library consortia. Just recently Sir Brian Follett was asked to carry out a new strategic study in order to assess further possibilities of collaboration between libraries. In his study he evaluated integration of collections, long-term library planning and methods to improve access to information.

A very interesting concept which has been discussed in Britain is the idea of „Deep Resource Sharing“. This refers to shared collections, i.e. the physical integration of print collections of different libraries. Not surprisingly both users and librarians have great misgivings about such an idea.

The new Follett Report has highlighted one important aspect that could have a considerable influence on future models of library cooperation. On the one hand higher education institutions in Britain are driven to compete against each other for students and funds. On the other hand libraries are encouraged to work together closely and seek new forms of interaction. This contradiction between competition and cooperation could lead to conflicts between librarians and academics.

Unlike the centralised British model of cooperation, American libraries seek collaboration on a subject- or problem-oriented level. In the United States libraries traditionally join forces to master major challenges. American libraries liaised very successfully in the seventies to launch a union catalogue using the then newly introduced automated library systems. This combined effort led to the definition of common cataloguing rules and formats. Unfortunately in Europe this form of cooperation has been limited, due to national or even regional cataloguing rules or conventions.

During the nineties collaboration between American libraries focussed on the creation and management of digital libraries. Many of these projects came together under the auspices of the Digital Library programme, funded generously by the National Science Foundation.

At present libraries of the United States band together to find solutions to the problem of digital preservation for photographic materials, maps, manuscripts, books and journals. Within the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program the Library of Congress is taking a leading role and has been granted US\$ 99,8 million from Congress.

Library cooperation in Germany has led to a number of projects in academic and public libraries. Many German states have union catalogues with integrated document ordering functionalities. One of the most successful projects on a national – or even international – level is the document delivery service Subito. Subito enables electronic document delivery of journal articles at a very reasonable price. Articles can also be sent by fax or traditional mail service. The service is open to the public and gives easy access to the collections of most large German academic libraries. Both ordering and document supply are not confined to Germany: orders are taken from persons abroad, and libraries in other German-speaking countries act as document suppliers (e.g. ETH Library Switzerland). Subito stands for one of the most successful library cooperation projects in Germany and handles over one million orders a year.

License deals for electronic products in Germany are often negotiated by consortia. Most of these consortia act at the level of the individual states (Bundeslaender) and are financially supported by the respective Ministry. At a national level, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft¹ supports projects aiming to improve access to electronic information for academic users.

In Switzerland, library cooperation is traditionally determined by the major library networks. Although Switzerland is only a small country there are several networks and union catalogues. In the French-speaking part of the country most university libraries have opted for the library system VTLS/Virtua and form the union catalogue RERO. University libraries in the German-speaking part of Switzerland have introduced the automated library system Aleph 500 and form the Informationsverbund Deutschschweiz (IDS). Swiss libraries are currently

¹ The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft is the central public funding organization for academic research in Germany.

exploring ways to integrate online ordering functionalities into these networked systems. This option should finally give users easy and direct access to the holdings of other libraries.

In the year 2000 the Swiss University Conference launched a project to establish a national consortium. The Consortium of Swiss Academic Libraries gives institutions of higher education and the National Library improved access to electronic materials. This project has experienced a very successful start and will run for an initial period of four years. Cantonal universities received special governmental aid in order to cover part of the license fees (total SFr 7 million). Thanks to special funding and central, professional administration access to electronic information could be drastically improved at many Swiss universities. Currently a study on digital preservation of electronic journal literature is being carried out within the framework of the national consortium. The Consortium of Swiss Academic Libraries is the first major national library project in Switzerland. An earlier national initiative exploring possibilities of coordinated collection development was abandoned due to insufficient political and financial support.

Library Buildings and Opening Hours

During the last years a number of new library buildings have been designed and built worldwide according to changing requirements and demands. In this respect Swiss universities are neither modern nor innovative. The typical library building in Switzerland is inconspicuous, modest, often unattractive or even uninspiring. With very few exceptions, none of the Swiss universities has recently invested in a prominent new library building as often seen in the United States. The exceptions are the newly renovated National Library in Berne – strictly speaking not a university library – and the library of the Uni Mail in Geneva. Or the Zentralbibliothek Zurich, which was extensively renovated a couple of years ago and represents a modern functional building.

However, in other parts of the world one finds new and attractive library buildings that mirror the changing attitude of librarians towards users and of users towards libraries. Good example of this trend are the new university libraries in the United States. In many respects these libraries fulfil a very central role at the university. They support new forms of studying and teaching, offer a pleasant working and reading atmosphere for students and are ideally open 7 x 24 hours a week. All major libraries have their own cafeterias, some offer bookshops or gift

shops. Very obviously, libraries do not only promote research and scholarly work, but also invite patrons to relax, unwind and literally put their feet up. Impressive examples of university or research libraries that offer such infrastructure are the Weiner Library at Harvard or the New York Public Library. Amongst the public libraries, the monumental building of the Public Library of Chicago deserves to be mentioned.

A glance at a few of these libraries shows how different the understanding of university or research libraries on the Continent of Europe and in English-speaking countries are. In the States librarians try to offer each user his or her ideal study and/or research ambience. European libraries often limit their services to handing out the required literature to the user. Let them take care of the rest!

Learning from Others

Despite the success of the Internet, the dominance of digital information and web services, academic libraries – and in particular university libraries – play an important role in granting access to scholarly information. Naturally the traditional role of university libraries is changing fast and we expect this process to continue in the future. One of the most important changes is the transformation of an institution that relies heavily on its own (print) collections, to an institution that acts as a mediator, offering users (electronic) access to the most suitable information sources no matter where they are. Library collection management is therefore becoming more user-oriented and less focussed on building enormous physical collections.

The question remains how libraries in Europe can stay user-oriented and guarantee best possible access to the required information. This task remains the real challenge for libraries in the future. In order to answer this question it is a very good idea to look around and see how other libraries do it. If librarians keep this perspective in mind they will remain flexible and open to the requirements and demands of the scholarly community. The strong focus on user-orientation as observed in English-speaking university libraries could set an example for libraries on the Continent. However, this does not mean that European librarians should adopt all ideas from libraries overseas without examining them critically. We need to keep our eyes and ears open to what is happening abroad and try to select those elements that could add value to our own libraries.