

Guest editorial

It seems to me that the Library and Information Research Group has, potentially, a vital role but that much will depend on its officers and members over the next couple of years.

For a change, libraries and information services are headline news. In the academic sector, a quite remarkable programme of research and development centred on libraries is taking place, inspired by the Follett report. Public libraries are regularly the subject of commentaries in the press, partly because of Tony Blair's address to the Labour Party Conference in 1995 when he endorsed the idea that schools, hospitals and libraries should be connected to the Information Superhighway, partly because of the impact made by National Library Week and partly because of the spate of official reports and Government statements on their future. There was even an article in The Financial Times on the contribution of corporate libraries to business success (17 January 1996 page 20). And finally, the British Library is always in the news, whether with the St Pancras building, cuts in its budget or with The Times editorial on the importance of the Library's concentrating on the future (22 February 1996).

There is a growing demand from Government, practitioners, decision-makers and commentators for information on libraries and their contribution in the age of rapid social and technological change. Library and information managers are also asking for data and new ideas to help them chart a way forward in tumultuous times.

The Library and Information Research Group can make a significant contribution by encouraging interest in research, its methodologies and evaluation. Increasingly practitioners must monitor trends in demands on their services and assess how to respond; the skills and the approaches that LIRG has been encouraging over the years now have a wider applicability in day-to-day operations; user surveys, performance measurement, collection and interpretation of statistical data now feature in any library or information service, no matter how small.

At national level, the arrival of the Library and Information Commission and the review of the role of the British Library Research and Development Department (currently in progress) will lead to a new stimulus for research programmes in library and information services to add to that given by the Follett Report. Again LIRG can play a role here by working with national bodies, especially in terms of ensuring a regular dialogue on funding, programmes and their evaluation and on widening the research community and developing its skills.

These are exciting but critical times for our profession. LIRG members can play a very constructive role through active participation in the Group and in encouraging their colleagues to

join in as well. We at the British Library R&D Department are keen to see the Group prosper and grow, and will assist as best we may.

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