

FREE TO FEE: THE CURRENT ACCOUNT FROM AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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Abstract: The Queen's University of Belfast set up a fee-based service in 1991 aimed initially at built environment professionals. The Architecture and Planning Information Service at the University has long been a major source of architectural and environmental information in Ireland and has close links with the Architecture Library at University College Dublin and professional bodies such as the Royal Society of Ulster Architects and the Royal Town Planning Institute in Northern Ireland. The background to establishing the service is examined. The marketing methods and target audience are described as are the particular services offered. Problem areas encountered including balancing the service to internal and external users, staff training, setting realistic prices, quality control and contract issues. Future trends identified include the development of client-tailored services and cooperation between fee-based services.

Introduction

In this short paper I should like to look at the experience of one university library in providing a fee-based service to external users with particular reference to the service to built environment professionals. The purpose of the paper is to stimulate debate and discussion about such services by looking at some of the successful approaches as well as the problems encountered at the Queen's University of Belfast in setting up its Fee-Based Service. We do not presume to set ourselves up as a perfect model nor to have all the answers but rather hope that by sharing our experiences we can help to solve some of the problems that face us all.

Background

Charging for library services is not a new idea in the United Kingdom. Indeed the issue has been debated in the journal literature for over forty years but it was not until the entrepreneurial 80s under a Thatcher-led government committed to competition and free market forces that income generation became a reality for

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many libraries. The Minister for the Arts reporting on library matters in 1991 encapsulates the fee v free argument as only politicians can by stating that the regulations enabling public libraries to charge help them to „achieve improved value for money and provide even better service to the public while preserving the principle of free access“.[1] The same report notes that self-generated income in libraries rose between 1981 and 1991 by 17.1%.

The government report referred to public libraries and indeed the main debate in the national press did concern public rather than academic libraries. Universities, however, were by no means immune from economic pressures. In 1985 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals produced a report exhorting

universities to increase their efficiency.[2] The Universities Statistical Record for 1993-1994 notes that income from research grants and contracts had increased by 27.1% from the previous year.[3] University libraries, too, began to look at external sources of funding, one of which was some form of fee-based service. The Follett Report, the major recent report on higher education libraries in the UK, noted that „the proportion of total recurrent spending devoted to library provision has declined in the last decade“ while also noting that student numbers and the price of books and periodicals has increased over the same period.[4].

It could be argued that one way to concentrate scarce resources is to cut out services to all but the primary users. However, universities do have a major role to play in the wider community and most institutions' mission statements reflect this. A recent HEFCE circular notes that key areas of development in many institutions are „meeting the educational and training needs of the local or regional community“ and also „diversification of sources of income.“[5]. Academic libraries, too, have a responsibility to provide support to individuals and organisations in their region. One of the Queen's University Library's policy objectives states that „the mission of the University Library is to provide a library and information service which will assist the University to achieve its mission and to extend that provision to the wider community as far as is practical and appropriate“.

At Queen's University as student numbers rose and funds decreased relatively, staff found it increasingly difficult to provide a 'free' service to external users who were becoming more information conscious and more demanding. On the 15th May 1990 the Senate of the University agreed „that the Library be permitted to introduce a fee-based library and information service“[6]. It was felt that this would generate some additional income and also enable the library to provide a service to people outside the university who needed it while limiting numbers to a manageable level.

Establishing the service

In October 1990 a Management Group including the University Librarian, two Associate Librarians and the Fee-Based Service Librarian was set up. Existing services were surveyed and a rather cursory SWOT analysis was carried out. Strengths were skilled staff, strong collections in certain key areas including architecture and planning, a good location and excellent computer support; weaknesses were lack of business skills, gaps in the collection and the need to maintain a balance between internal and external users; opportunities were identified as the potential to attract membership from a large pool of our own graduates and a head start in the field; threats were recession and competition. It was a fairly superficial analysis but we did identify areas to focus on initially.

The Royal Society of Ulster Architects, a regional branch of the Royal Institute of British Architects, was concurrently examining the information needs of its members. Close links already existed between the Society and the University's Architecture and Planning Information Service which also had a long running association with the Northern Ireland branches of the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Institution of Civil Engineers. The decision was taken, therefore, to focus the activities of the new Fee-Based Service on these groups. The relationship between this service and the architecture profession was further cemented in 1991 when the Royal Society of Ulster Architects set up its Practice Services Scheme to provide support to member practices [7]. The Fee Based Service Librarian was co-opted to the Practice Services Management Committee and an information package was agreed upon which included contributing book review and information alerting sections to the Society's quarterly Practice Bulletin and also a discount on membership of the University Library. Similar discount arrangements were then set up with the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Institution of Civil Engineers. Other existing users of the Architecture and Planning Information Service working in related areas were approached. These included landscape architects, consultants, amenity societies, housing associations, museums, the Tourist Board, the DoE Historic Monuments and Building Branch and numerous architecture, planning and engineering practices.

The Queen's Library was fortunate in having kept records of external users and enquiries fielded by the Architecture and Planning Information Service. These helped enormously in setting up the service and deciding exactly who to target initially for membership. Also a high proportion of Queen's graduates stay in the area and this group was targeted early on as well. Initial marketing was the least of our problems. We encountered greater difficulty in producing promotional literature. Well-designed and informative publicity material is crucial especially

when targeting a design-conscious audience. We had little time or expertise and limited set up funds so we did not perhaps make as big an impact initially as we could have. We have subsequently improved our brochure design and content. Talks to interested groups stimulated demand as did publicity in the local architectural press.

It is always difficult to move from a free service to one for which there is a charge and we received our fair share of abusive correspondence! Webb points out that „It is not a good idea to introduce charges randomly for existing and unchanged services which have previously been free at the point of delivery“ [8]. We cannot claim to have entirely avoided this pitfall although we did offer an enhanced service and with hindsight we should have spent more time before setting up the service on detailed forward planning, analysis of existing services and market research. Nonetheless by the beginning of 1992 we had 106 members almost entirely drawn from our existing base of architects, planners and engineers and five years later we have 726 members from a wide range of disciplines.

Table 1 Membership Figures

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996 (April)
Pers.Assoc ¹	451	486	497	491	516
Prof.Assoc	148	163	179	183	210
Total	599	649	676	674	726

Services

In an academic library the would be entrepreneur is always torn between providing a service which mirrors that already available to staff and students or branching out into innovative packages that appeal to the busy professional and may have a different slant. At Queen’s University we decided to concentrate initially on the core services of lending, document delivery and literature searching. However we were soon seduced into offering consultancy services to practices which mainly involved sorting out their libraries, often as part of a quality assurance exercise. Such services are superficially attractive because they

¹ There are two categories of membership: personal associate for members using the library for educational and leisure purposes and professional associates for members using the library in connection with their profession or business.

are easy to cost and lucrative but they are fraught with liability and contractual difficulties. They are also hard to run in tandem with the core services unless work is contracted out which brings its own difficulties. We also flirted with hiring out our decorative Ruskinian Gothic library building as a film location but after a camera crew had set off the entire alarm system almost irretrievably one Sunday we rather lost interest in that particular income generating activity.

There are two additional services which have proved popular with architects and others. We publish, in print or on disk, a fortnightly current awareness service, APIS Bulletin, which lists books and articles of interest to architects and planners. This service is backed up by the lending service and an efficient document delivery and invoicing system. (Participating practices pay £100 or more in advance to set up an account which attracts a 20% discount). The other service which is proving increasingly popular is the recently established database IDEAL (Irish database on environmental and architectural literature) set up in co-operation with the Architectural Library at University College Dublin. IDEAL enables users to access information relating to Ireland which is not available in national and international bibliographies and databases. The bulletin service will probably cease when other CD/online material becomes more readily available whereas it is hoped to develop the IDEAL database and make it more widely available. It is important to continually monitor the services offered, revise prices and procedures as necessary and remove or add services as appropriate.

Balance of fee and free service

In our experience a number of problems await the intrepid entrepreneur or, in academic circles, the cautious dabbler of toes in the water. Each of these problems could be, and indeed have been, the subject of whole papers in themselves. Here it is only possible to raise the issues, examine some solutions or compromises and introduce topics for debate and discussion. Much has been written on the fee v free debate. There are impassioned supporters of both viewpoints and I don't propose to rake over old ground here. We decided to charge fees to those users who needed access to our collections and services and, crucially, whom we could not otherwise help. Being a university library with a clearly identifiable set of prime users, we did face the problem of balancing the fee and free service. Tension mainly arises in relation to use of key texts and staffing. We tackled the former by including a phrase in all our publicity material which enables us to restrict the use of certain material to internal users only. We make it quite clear to potential members at the outset what is, and is not, available to them. Problems do sometimes still arise when, for example, practice members and university staff and students enter the same architectural competition. Perhaps because we are a

small region with close contacts with all our professional members, we have found them very co-operative in returning material required by students.

Staff training and management

Training, motivating and managing staff who are providing a service for both internal and external users can be a harder problem to solve. This problem is particularly pertinent to academic libraries where staff work in many different areas and buildings as well as working different shifts. All staff must be given clear procedures to follow and be kept up-to-date even if they only very occasionally encounter a fee-paying user. We have attempted to solve this problem by using a combination of integrated and specialist/independent staffing structures and services. The registration of new members and renewal of existing memberships are mainly handled centrally by the FBS staff. Problems are referred to the Unit from service and information points. Literature searching is delegated to appropriate subject specialists but if any member of staff is overburdened the work is reallocated sometimes on a consultancy basis. The Fee-Based Service keeps a small register of trained and proven consultants to whom work can be sub-contracted.

At Queen's University Library there has recently been a long overdue increase in the emphasis put on staff training. The skills taught are equally valid for the service to internal or external users and training sessions tend to emphasis similarities, not differences, between different types of users. It is no longer good enough to say the architect in practice needs this information to-morrow but the academic architect can wait until next week. With clearly established and realistic targets, perhaps what we should be saying is that they both need the information the day after to-morrow.

As well as keeping a close watch on distribution of work and providing suitable training courses for staff, we keep everyone informed of changes in policy, procedures or prices through written communication and a regular series of updating seminars. Guidelines are issued to every member of staff and kept at issue desks and information points. Income generated through fee-based services is ploughed back into the whole library service which helps to motivate staff.

It would be overly optimistic to claim that no tension exists especially at busy times or when particular problems arise. Staff are absolutely vital to the success of a fee-based service within a large university library and we work hard at ensuring that everyone knows what is going on, feels they have a stake in the service and can benefit from staff development opportunities. We also try to

ensure that FBS staff are available to help when problems arise or pressure of work becomes too intense.

Quality control

Service standards are closely related to management and training of staff. Introducing charges brings the responsibility to users which should already exist into even sharper focus. As a profession we are increasingly attempting to develop sensible performance indicators to measure our services and improve their quality. At Queen's University we have set targets for acquisition and cataloguing of material and document delivery. We have a complaints procedure and ask for feedback, through user surveys and evaluation sheets, on all aspects of our service. We monitor the use made of our collections and services by our associate members although we could do much more in this area.

Table 2 Use by Associate Members

	1992/93	1993/4	1994/5
Book Loans	4452	4779	4782
Inter Library Loans	140	388	481
Literature Searches	45	67	53
Photocopies	-----	1014	1564

Costing and pricing

Library staff on the whole have little experience in this area and it is often wise to seek help certainly when it comes to pricing services. We were fortunate at Queen's when we set up the Fee-Based Service because our Medical Library, with the aid of external management consultants, had just carried out a thorough study of the cost of its services for the Department of Health and Social Services. We, therefore, had accurate costs from which to work.

Pricing, however, remains an area fraught with difficulty or at the least requiring clear headed decision making. Most prices are based on actual costs (including salaries, stationery, materials and overheads which involve running costs and purchase of equipment), demand and prices set by competitors. Decisions have to be taken about loss-leaders, cost-recovery or profit margin.

Literature searching is particularly hard to price because of the unpredictability of number of relevant references and staff time required. Our charges for annual membership and document delivery (inter-library loan and photocopies from stock) are fixed but consultancy work and literature searching are priced per job.

Table 3 Charges

Membership	Additional Services
Personal Associate Membership	Inter-library loan £10 per item (urgent action) £20 per item
QUB graduates £33	Literature searching : minimum £25
Others £55	Photocopying £1 (first page) + 25p.(subsequent pages). 20% discount for account holders.
Professional Associate Membership	Fax £1 (first page) + 75p. (subsequent pages)
Full Rate £110	
Discounted rate £100	Consultancy - costed per job
Charities £55	

Copyright and contracts

At a recent seminar on income generation at the University of Hull [9] there was much discussion about copyright and contracts. These are specialist areas which need to be looked at carefully. Copy-right has been well covered in the literature by Wall [10] and others. Contracts, with clients or with suppliers of information, can be straightforward but are often more complex, for example when dealing with database hosts, and may need to be looked at with professional advisors. More discussion and co-operation between providers and suppliers can help to solve these issues and a platform such as IFLA with representatives from both groups is an ideal place for discussion.

Future developments

What does the future hold? Looking at the service we provide to built environment professionals in Northern Ireland, there are pointers to the future which may be relevant to others contemplating, or already involved in, some level of income generation. No library these days can hope to provide its users' needs from its own collections. Co-operation is an obvious answer to limited resources, shrinking budgets and increasing information sources. Collaboration among fee-based services has long been the norm in the USA mainly thanks to the work of the

discussion group FISCAL (Fee-based Information Services in Academic Libraries). In Ireland the two main academic libraries supplying architectural and planning information to professionals, University College Dublin and Queen's University Belfast co-operate very closely together. As well as helping each other with enquiries and lending material, the two libraries have set up the database IDEAL mentioned earlier. The days of jealously guarding one's home patch have gone, if indeed they ever really existed. Obviously there must be clear financial benefits for all concerned but this is not hard to achieve.

The impact of full text and bibliographic CD and on-line services such as Avery, APId and Construction Expert is not yet clear. The impact of the RIBA's recently established fee-based service has also yet to be seen. It may be that our fee-paying clients will require less help from information brokers like ourselves. Indications at Queen's, however, are that there is an increasing demand for what are termed „value added packages“ and for consultancy work.

One thing is certain, managers of fee-based information services must keep in touch with clients' changing needs and with trends in information supply and provision. No service should be static. Some services will cease to be viable and other needs will arise. In an academic library where the fee/free balance has to be maintained, this means constant reassessment of services offered.

Conclusion

The Fee-Based Service at Queen's University has enabled us to offer a service to architects, planners and others that we would not otherwise have been able to provide. In addition it brings us in a useful amount of extra income that is ploughed back into the library service wherever it is needed whether it be for equipment, additional book and periodical funds or staff salaries. It has raised our profile both within and without the University and it has caused us to look hard and long at the various services we offer and at staff training and management. With hindsight we should have spent far more time at the initial planning stage checking that we had adequate provision of stock, appropriate staff skills and were offering the right sort of services. Looking ahead there are still problems to solve in the age of electronic access. In conclusion from our experience even built environment professionals, notoriously unwilling to spend money on information, are willing to spend money to save staff time and get results. Don't do it for money alone but for money, kudos and the satisfaction of providing a useful service, developing new skills and meeting the challenges of change, then by all means go ahead - or, to quote Coffman [11], pass the business to us.

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