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eLib in retrospect: a national strategy for digital library development in the 1990s

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Introduction

The UK eLib programme was launched in 1994 in an atmosphere of expectancy. Seven years, 70 projects and £20 million later, the programme came to a close. The key question is: was it successful? And if so, in what ways? What were its main achievements and, for that matter, failures? These questions (whether it was successful, and if so, how) have been debated within the information profession for a while; a substantial body of the professional literature has addressed them. The consensus seems to have emerged in the literature that eLib was (at least in part) successful, but this success is defined and qualified in different ways. Drawing on the literature and on the personal experiences of the present author of working on the programme, this chapter will attempt to analyse some of the successes and failures of eLib.

The questions ‘whether?’ and ‘how?’ are important, but there is another question which seems to have been explicitly addressed less often and yet, if anything, is more important. ‘Why?’ If the eLib programme was successful, why was it? What were the key factors behind its success? Why were there failures? Addressing the question ‘why?’ is important, since the answers could have serious implications for the way in which electronic library activities are funded and organised in the future.¹

The questions, ‘whether?’, ‘how?’, and ‘why?’ are then the main themes of this chapter. But before these questions can be discussed in any meaningful way, it is first necessary to describe some of the background to the eLib programme. Tracing the historical development of eLib and defining the aims and characteristics of the programme will provide a useful context for analysing its outcomes.

Background to eLib

The story of eLib has been told a number of times (see for example Carr, 2002, and Rusbridge, 1998) and will only be related here in outline. Most accounts of eLib begin (quite rightly) with the Follett report (Follett, 1993). The Follett review group (chaired by Prof. Sir Brian Follett) was commissioned by the funding agencies for higher education (HE) to carry out a full-scale review of the academic library system. Its report, published in late 1993, was an enormously influential document which has had a profound affect on academic library strategy in the UK. Not least amongst its achievements was creating the momentum for the formation of the eLib programme itself. More than ten years on, it is easy to forget that Follett was written and eLib

established in a context of a perceived “deepening crisis in academic libraries”. In an early account of eLib, Chris Rusbridge, the programme’s Director for most of its life, defined this crisis as having three main aspects: “exploding demand (fuelled by huge increases in student numbers), years of relatively stagnant funding, and hyper-inflation in the supply side, particular [*sic*] in academic journals.” (Rusbridge, 1995b).

In simple terms, the practical problems were of two kinds: space and costs. Libraries were finding it difficult to accommodate all of their collections, users, and equipment; they were also finding it difficult to continue to keep up with their users’ demands for information materials. To address the space problem Follett recommended that a major building programme be undertaken to extend existing libraries and build new ones. Both problems (space and costs) could also be addressed through the application of information technology. Chapter 7 of the Follett report made detailed recommendations about areas that should be further investigated, including suggestions for the level of funding for each. The areas were summarised as:

“the development of standards, pilot projects to demonstrate the potential of on-demand publishing and electronic document and article delivery, a feasibility project to promote the development of electronic journals in conjunction with relevant publishing interests, the development of a database and dataset strategy, investment in navigational tools, retrospective conversion of certain catalogues, and investment in the further development of library automation and management systems.” (Follett, 1993).

The report concluded that “the exploitation of IT is essential to create the effective library service of the future.”

Follett was well-received by the academic library community and in HE generally. The funding councils moved quickly to respond to the report and tasked the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) with taking forward Follett’s IT-related recommendations. JISC established the Follett Implementation Group for IT (FIGIT) which, after a period of consultation, in turn set up the Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) office and issued a structured call for project proposals to institutions. The call identified a number of programme areas most of which derived directly from Follett.

Aims of eLib

What were the aims of the eLib programme? Answering this question is crucial for assessing its success (by comparing its outcomes with its aims). And yet, unfortunately, it is more difficult to answer it than it might be assumed. It is curious that whilst FIGIT had a formal remit (quoted by Carr, 2002, p. 224), eLib it appears was never given a formal programme-wide mission (at least not one which was published). As Andrew Green comments, “the two key JISC documents announcing the establishment of eLib, Circular 2/94 and Circular 4/94, conspicuously fail to say what the effect the spending of £15 million was intended to be.” (Green, 1997, p. 40). Other eLib official documentation from the time seems equally silent on this issue. Key aims of specific programme areas are defined in a number of documents (including those mentioned by Green) but the aims of the programme as a whole are

not. This means that one of the obvious ways of assessing the programme's success – comparing its achievements against its stated aims – is very difficult to carry out.

It is, however, possible to piece together a view of the aims of the eLib programme by looking at the literature, particularly the publications of those who were associated with setting up and directing the programme. Two major themes emerge. The first is that eLib aimed to identify and demonstrate solutions to key technical, managerial and legal problems in the area of e-libraries at both institutional and national levels. The aim was to improve services to users in real-world situations. This aim is clearly shown in the calls for proposals and the professional literature of the time. In one of the earliest summaries of the programme, Chris Rusbridge stated that eLib's "objectives include the use of IT to improve the delivery of electronic library services, to allow academic libraries to cope better with growth, to explore different models of intellectual property management, and to encourage new methods of scholarly publishing." (Rusbridge, 1995a, p. 231).

The second theme is that eLib also aimed to promote "cultural change" in the academic library world and beyond. This was not so widely discussed at the beginning of the programme but became increasingly important as eLib progressed. It was, nevertheless, clearly there as an aim at the beginning. As early as 1995, Chris Rusbridge stated, "greatest benefits will flow not from the success of any individual project, but from the changes in organisational culture and the environment." (Rusbridge, 1995b). As far as individual projects were concerned, he characterised the FIGIT view as "the benefit lies as much in the process as in the results."

Understanding this ambitious aim to bring about cultural change must be a crucial part of any assessment of eLib's success. In particular, it will affect the way in which the programme as a whole is assessed in relation to its individual projects. In a retrospective survey of eLib, Rusbridge (2001) suggests that "in many ways the eLib programme was seen as distinct from the projects. We had a notion that the programme could succeed even if all the projects failed – and vice versa in both cases! This is because we were really aiming at a sea-change, a cultural shift..." This idea, that the programme was more than the sum of its parts, must have been one of the primary justifications for running a national programme in the first place, but it seemed to become more widely appreciated during the late 1990s as people began to think about gauging eLib's success.

Overview of the programme

The eLib programme consisted of three interlocking phases. Phase 1 ran from 1995 to 1998, Phase 2 from 1996 to 1998, and Phase 3 from 1998 to 2001. Each phase was set in motion by a call for proposals which identified areas to be funded (JISC Circulars 4/94, 11/95 and 3/97 respectively). Phase 1 consisted of the following programme areas (sometimes called 'strands'):

- Electronic document and article delivery
- Electronic journals
- Digitisation
- On-demand publishing
- Training and awareness

- Access to network resources
- Supporting studies

Phase 2 came soon afterwards and was designed to plug a number of gaps in Phase 1:

- Pre-prints and grey literature
- Quality assurance in the electronic environment
- Electronic reserve 'short loan' collections

Rusbridge (1998) summarised Phases 1 and 2 under the following headings: electronic publishing, innovative approaches to learning and teaching, resources access, supporting studies, and training and awareness. Between them Phases 1 and 2 consisted of 59 projects and cost nearly £15 million.²

Phase 3 (12 new projects) cost over £4 million and consisted of the following strands:³

- Hybrid libraries
- Large scale resource discovery (or Z39.50 clumps)
- Digital preservation
- Projects to services

All of these strands picked up areas identified in Phases 1 and 2 as requiring further investigation. The 'projects to services' strand explicitly identified successful projects from earlier phases which needed continuation or development funding to bring them to full maturity.

Reg Carr (1998 and 2002) suggests that the different phases of eLib could be characterised in turn as 'Innovation', 'Co-operation' and 'Integration'. Writing in 1998, he says,

“the concepts overlap the phases, of course, but in general terms, Phase 1 was all about innovation, with a multiplicity of projects pushing creatively at a range of issues within a set of pre-defined programme areas. Phase 2 was characterised by filling in perceived gaps in the project array, but its emphasis was also on scalability, and there was a deliberate push to encourage more co-operative solutions as the projects began seriously to consider their viability for the longer term. And with Phase 3, eLib's attention is now centred principally on integration, with the aim being to bring together as many separate developments as possible, and to put flesh on the bones of the new integrating terminology of the 'hybrid library' and of 'clumps'.” (Carr, 1998, p. 18).

Any such schematic view of eLib will inevitably be rather artificial, but this nevertheless provides a useful framework for thinking about the programme. At the very least, it makes the important point that the eLib programme as a whole developed over time. Lessons were learned, new priorities emerged and new technologies developed as the programme progressed.

Characteristics of eLib

The fact that eLib was a ‘learning programme’ (that it developed over time in response to emerging lessons) is one of the most important characteristics of the initiative. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was that Phase 3 was a direct response to the outcomes of Phases 1 and 2. But even within individual projects, investigators were given enough freedom to allow them to change tack if this was thought to be necessary. Sometimes project outcomes were intentionally different from those initially envisaged in project plans. The programme also developed in other important ways. Notably, it showed a growing awareness of the importance of project management techniques and it made increasing efforts to promote these in host institutions.

Learning was possible partly because of the fact that eLib placed considerable emphasis on evaluation. Every project was expected to have a clear strategy for both formative and summative evaluation. Evaluation was regarded as an ongoing activity which should be in place from the outset of a project. These evaluation activities were designed to feed into further project and programme development. There were also formative and summative evaluations at the programme level. The latter were too late to inform further planning for eLib, but were useful to JISC for applying to development programme areas which succeeded eLib.

The fact that the programme was able to learn was also partly due to the way in which it was structured. The structure was one that might be characterised as ‘loose co-ordination’. There was a small central programme office with the oversight of a large number of distributed projects. The projects were distributed in a wide range of HE institutions (several institutions often being involved in each project). The idea was that the programme office could provide direction and guidance but projects were to be responsible for their own day-to-day activities.

Each project was normally on a fairly small scale. In Phases 1 and 2, Whitelaw and Joy (2000, p. 15) calculate the average cost of each project was about £252,000. The average rose to about £341,000 in Phase 3 as eLib attempted to concentrate on a smaller number of larger projects (see Whitelaw and Joy, 2001, p. 10); but even here the numbers are relatively low, especially considering that many of the projects were run by consortia of institutions. This is certainly true when eLib is compared with say the US Digital Libraries Initiative (DLI) where single projects often cost the equivalent of £1 million. The philosophy in eLib was to run a large number of small projects and to see if any worthwhile results emerged from them collectively. In some cases, this did mean that there may have been more than one project investigating the same issue at the same time. The fact that the projects did not always choose the same approaches was in itself regarded as interesting and useful.

Another contrast with DLI is that in eLib the emphasis was very much on practical development. eLib was a research and development programme but with the accent very much on development. On the other hand, DLI was more of a “computer science *research* programme.” (Rusbridge, 1998, emphasis added). eLib was in this respect part of a UK tradition identified by Peter Brophy (Brophy, 2001) of “practice-based library research”. The emphasis was on activities which would have a direct impact on working library services and on products which could be implemented by other practitioners. As a result, the majority of partners in eLib projects were library

organisations. Some academic schools were involved, as were publishers and systems suppliers, but most projects were run by and in libraries themselves. This had a profound affect on the kinds of approaches taken and the kinds of deliverables generated.

One important deliverable expected of eLib projects was dissemination. Dissemination was an important characteristic of the eLib programme. Projects were encouraged to communicate to others about their work in various ways. This did not just include describing what they had done but also guiding others in applying the lessons that had been learned in their own context. Once again, every project was required to develop a clear dissemination strategy. A number of projects (particularly in Phase 3) also carried out joint dissemination activities which helped to ensure greater co-ordination in getting the message across.

The drive to share outcomes was such an important aspect of the way in which the eLib programme was designed because it was a *national* programme. This is the final and perhaps most important characteristic of eLib. Whilst particular projects were managed within particular institutions, it essential to recognise that they were carrying out work as part of national programme. Moreover, the eLib programme was itself part of a larger strategic whole in which e-library services were being developed and delivered to the UK HE community (as outlined by Pinfield, 2000). Reg Carr (Carr, 1998) emphasises this point, demonstrating that the activities of eLib were part of the larger aims of JISC and the HE funding councils.

Successes of eLib

Having discussed the background, historical development, aims and characteristics of eLib, we can now go on to examine its successes and failures. Running throughout this discussion will be the complex problem of ‘what constitutes success?’

As one of the aims of eLib was to improve the delivery of library services in the electronic environment, then one sign of success would be the existence of products and services which have continued beyond the life of the eLib programme. There are a significant number of examples of these. The subject hubs, originally funded within the Access to Network Resources strand of Phase 1, are often held up as examples. These services, which identify and catalogue quality internet resources across different subjects, have continued to be a funded by JISC (as well as in some cases receiving income from other sources) as part of its Resource Discovery Network (the policy background to which is described in Law and Dempsey, 2000). They have also continued to develop and expand their services. The latest strategy of expansion builds on their success as catalogues of resources and is aiming to make them portals to a wider range of quality data and metadata.

The subject hubs, however, are not the only example of successful services which have continued beyond the life of eLib. Another example is HERON (Higher Education Resources On demand) which acts as a national clearing house for copyright permissions for retrospective digitisation of published works. This service grew directly out of a series of successful projects in Phases 1 and 2 looking at Electronic Short Loan and On-Demand Publishing services. It has now been taken into a new era by being part-funded by a commercial provider. The Higher Education

Digitisation Service (HEDS) is another example of a successful ongoing service originally funded within the eLib programme. This service provides advice and support in addition to carrying out practical digitisation work for HE institutions.

In the area of electronic publishing eLib had a number of successes. Firstly, a number of e-journals were set up which are now well established with separate income streams (either subscriptions or other funding). Examples here are *JILT (Journal of Information, Law and Technology)*, *Internet Archaeology* and *Sociological Research Online*. Another example is *Ariadne*. This was originally set up to publicise developments in the eLib programme itself and it is interesting to see that it has developed a life of its own, publishing articles on e-library developments quite apart from eLib. As well as journals, eLib also encouraged the development of innovative forms of publishing and communications. Examples of this which have continued beyond the life of the programme include Education Online (a pre-print service in the area of education), WoPEc (economics working papers) and CogPrints (an e-print service in the area of cognitive science). The software which originally provided and infrastructure to CogPrints has also been funded and is now freely available from eprints.org to support the development of e-print repositories. The impact on scholarly communication of this development alone may prove to be profound.

Some of the projects investigating information searching and retrieval have also produced ongoing services. All of the Clumps projects have continued in some form and in 2003 were all involved in a continuation project looking at integrating their services with those of COPAC (the joint catalogue of the Consortium of University Research Libraries). Also the service produced by the Agora Hybrid Library project has now been developed into a commercial product, VDX, by Fretwell-Downing, who were a partner in the original eLib project.

Still other projects such as Digimap are now ongoing services. The training and awareness project, Netskills, continues to be a very useful and popular service within HE and is an important component of the ongoing JISC training and awareness strategy. In a completely different area, the LAMDA document delivery project has also continued as a service.

Commenting on another document delivery project, Chris Rusbridge (2001) states, “the document delivery project InfoBike may have failed in its original terms, but it mutated: first into the BIDS JournalsOnline service, which then provided the core of the spin-off company Ingenta, now a £100 million publicly quoted company! In this sense it was an extremely successful project, and one of which we can be justly proud...” Other projects seem to have continued in a similarly “mutated” form (although they may not have been as commercially successful). Most of the hybrid library projects, for example, have continued at least in part within their own institutions. One hybrid library project, HEADLINE, formed the basis of an ongoing project also funded by JISC called ANGEL. This was designed to investigate how e-library services could begin to be incorporated into wider online learning environments.

Of course, many projects were not designed to have an ongoing life. Rather, they were designed to inform the thinking of the community and create the conceptual underpinning for further development. In some respects the hybrid library projects

performed this function. However, perhaps the most important example of this within the programme was the MODELS project. MODELS was a way of generating and encapsulating the latest thinking on information delivery. It created an influential conceptual mapping of information delivery known as MIA (the MODELS Information Architecture). In many respects MIA gave rise to the clumps and hybrid library projects (although it was in return informed by them). It brought together information professionals from the e-library and learning technology fields alongside representatives from commercial providers in a series of intense workshops. The results of their work were widely disseminated (see for example Dempsey et al, 1998). It is interesting to see that a number of commercial packages delivering cross searching functionality now on the market reflect the thinking of these early research and development projects (MODELS, hybrid libraries and clumps). JISC strategy itself has been influenced by these projects (as well as many other eLib activities) particularly in relation to the Distributed National Electronic Resource and the JISC Information Environment (see for example Pinfield and Dempsey, 2001).

Another project designed to inform the thinking not just of the information professionals but also of publishers and commercial suppliers was SuperJournal. This project aimed to analyse uses made of electronic journals and to investigate ways in which the journal literature could be developed in an online environment. It involved extensive input from publishers and information professionals and engagement with users and potential users.

Other projects have been influential in developing formal and informal standards in important new areas of activity. The CEDARS project for example was a very early player in the field of digital preservation. For several years it was the main focus of UK activity in this area (its funding was extended a number of times by JISC) and played a major part in the development of early digital preservation standards. The Clumps projects all played an important role in developing Z39.50 standards. Similarly, a number of the supporting studies commissioned by eLib were equally successful in establishing ways forward in a variety of areas.

The success of a number of eLib projects (both in generating ongoing services and in impacting upon the strategic thinking of the community) was then a major contribution to the success of the programme as a whole. However, the programme can be said to have had other major impacts quite apart from the success of particular projects. One important example of this is in the area of skills development. The eLib programme was instrumental in creating a pool of highly skilled staff. Many technical staff cut their teeth on eLib projects and they have gone on to be very useful to the community as a whole. At an organisational level, these staff have often been at the interface between libraries and computing services within their own institutions. In many cases they have acted as conduits for improved communication between these services.

Although more difficult to quantify, these kinds of developments are nevertheless important. Similarly, the whole question of the cultural impact of eLib is very difficult to measure and yet many have argued that it was the most important way in which eLib affected the UK information community in HE. Charles Oppenheim has usefully defined cultural change:

“I would argue that cultural change involves:

- The lasting structural and social changes (within an organisation or set of linked organisations), PLUS
- Lasting changes to the shared ways of thinking, beliefs, values, procedures and relationships of the stakeholders within that grouping.

This definition assumes that both the formal (structural) and informal (socio-cognitive) aspects of stakeholders’ work must change in some way for the ‘culture’ to have been fundamentally changed. The word ‘lasting’ is important. Changes caused by, say, the initiation of an e-lib [*sic*] project, but which do not last beyond the project’s end, cannot be counted as cultural change.” (Oppenheim, 1998, p. 22).

A number of commentators have shown that it is difficult to assess the impact of eLib in these areas in a very precise way. Andrew Green (1997, p. 45) in particular has drawn attention to a number of problems in this area. Libraries were changing anyway, there were other factors encouraging change apart from eLib, and the influence of eLib may have been “indirect rather than direct”. Despite these problems, there is a consensus in the literature that the eLib programme caused significant cultural change or at least acted as a catalyst for it. Oppenheim (1998, p. 22) himself says, “looking at e-lib, my perception is that it has aroused a lot of interest, and probably accelerated cultural change within the library community.” Green (1997, p. 48) is rather more effusive: “despite some reservations I believe that when the time comes for judgment the Electronic Libraries Programme will prove to have had a powerful catalytic effect on professional library practice. Without it, our knowledge would be weaker, our standing lower, and our confidence to face the future less.” Projects such as IMPEL2 (itself a successful eLib project) have provided data to illustrate these conclusions. The summative evaluations of eLib also cite evidence in this area based on the perceptions of information professionals.

The aspects of cultural change promoted by eLib are very varied but a number of significant areas may be highlighted. eLib acted as a focus for a great deal of professional discussion and debate in the second half of the 1990s. It generated stimulating ideas about information services and the organisational structures and professional skills required to deliver them effectively. It seems to have been instrumental in promoting the wide acceptance of technology as being fundamental to the delivery of core library services. Alongside this, it also promoted the idea that librarians should be innovators – looking for opportunities to imaginatively enhance the service given to users in new and exciting ways. eLib also encouraged good practice in managing such innovation, particularly through formal or informal project management methodologies. All of this led, it is sometimes observed, to a greater confidence within the library community; confidence to play the role of leaders in their institutions and also to become more demanding customers when they deal with publishers and suppliers. And these factors were perhaps magnified by the fact that eLib projects were housed in a large number of different institutions. This meant that cultural change was more easily able to diffuse throughout the community.

Of course, much of this cultural change would probably have happened anyway, whether eLib was there or not. However, the fact that cultural change did happen in the UK within the context of a structured national programme has been important. It

probably meant that it was quicker and more evenly spread than it might otherwise have been. Reg Carr (2002, p. 231) observes that eLib “enabled the UK HE community, to a large extent ‘to stay in control’, or at least to make coherent sense of the global information environment, and to harness many of its possibilities more effectively.”

Limitations and failures

It is clear that the eLib programme was in many respects successful both in terms of identifying and demonstrating solutions to key technical, managerial and legal problems and also in promoting cultural change. However, this success was by no means unqualified. A number of important factors came into play which meant that eLib was not as successful as it might have been.

First, there were a number of projects which sank without trace. It would perhaps be rather unfair to name these projects. Projects can fail for a whole number of reasons, many of them not to do with the quality of the project management. Nevertheless it needs to be observed that there is a continuum of success-failure and eLib produced projects at many points on this continuum. However, it is interesting to note that the eLib programme office was never afraid of projects failing to deliver sustainable products or services. Chris Rusbridge observed during a meeting for project managers that sometimes a project could illustrate that ‘the answer is no’ and this in itself may be a valuable outcome. What was important is that the lessons should be disseminated. Projects were always encouraged to be as honest about their failures as they were about their successes. But it is difficult to know whether or not this always happened.

At the programme level, it is sometimes suggested that although eLib was a co-ordinated programme, in some respects it was perhaps not co-ordinated enough. There was considerable duplication between projects, for example. Sometimes this meant that a number of different projects were tackling the same problems and that the available resources had therefore been spread very thinly between them. This may not always have been the most efficient way to deal with problems, especially as in some cases competition seems to have developed between projects within the same strand. This issue was, however, recognised by programme managers, who in Phase 3 of eLib, explicitly sought to encourage inter-project interaction and co-operation. Phase 3 itself also featured a smaller number of larger projects compared with Phases 1 and 2. This may well have been an attempt to co-ordinate developments more closely.

Other areas where co-ordination might have been more useful were at the JISC level. It has been observed that there might have been greater co-ordination between the eLib programme as a whole and other similar programmes being funded by JISC, particularly JTAP (Joint Technology Applications Programme). The fact that JTAP was administered by a different JISC Committee was probably significant here. Rusbridge (2001) observes that the JISC committee structure may also have got in the way of achieving all that might have been done in the area of cultural change. A new JISC committee was established to cover training and awareness partly as a result of the first phases of eLib highlighting it as a problem, but the fact of the creation of a separate committee itself meant some barriers to making progress in this area were almost inevitably erected.

As well as failures of commission in eLib there were also failures of omission. There were gaps in the programme strands and their coverage. Economic issues were, for example, given little attention. As a result of JISC policy, which set itself against funding large-scale digitisation activity, eLib was never in a position to create a critical mass of online material. There were also missing strategic developments in the programme. Too little was done in developing strategies for turning projects into services. Part of the problem here was the uneasy relationship eLib (and JISC) seems to have had with commercial providers. There was never a clear view of what the relationship should be with the profit-making sector.

Finally in this section, it should perhaps be observed that Follett and eLib were both set up in a context of the crisis of space and costs. It is an irony that, although successful in many ways, eLib did not provide any magic bullets in these areas. “One of the lessons of eLib as a whole... is that electronic media do not save money or library space and are not likely to in the near future.” (Whitelaw and Joy, 2001, p. 50). This does not perhaps indicate that eLib was a failure but rather that any expectations that it would solve the problems proved unrealistic.

Why was eLib successful?

Having qualified the success of eLib in various ways, it still needs to be emphasised that it was fundamentally a successful programme. It effectively addressed many key technical, managerial and cultural issues and did so in ways that had a real impact on the library and information community in HE. The remaining question is ‘Why?’. Whilst more work needs to be done on this question, a number of preliminary suggestions may be made. They are divided here into two main categories. Firstly, there are contextual factors – those which were outside the eLib programme but which provided eLib with an environment in which it could grow. Secondly, there are factors to do with the programme itself and the way it was structured and managed.

Perhaps the most important contextual factor was the Follett report itself. Follett in many ways expressed the concerns of the library community in the early 1990s, but also identified possible solutions. It provided a sense of direction. In doing so, it helped to turn a sense of crisis into a sense of urgency. Reg Carr summarises the successes of the Follett report which had become clear by 1997:

“...it had focused attention on the challenges facing academic libraries in the fast-moving transition into the world of digital information; had provided a coherent national framework for addressing those challenges; had leveraged considerable additional funds into HE library and information services for digital library developments; and had become an important central plank for the five-year forward strategy of the JISC itself.” (Carr, 2002, p. 229)

Most importantly, it provided what Lorcan Dempsey described as a “motivating scenario” for a large number of projects.

The timing of eLib was also right. The programme got moving just as the World Wide Web was beginning to make its influence felt in UK HE. It is interesting that the Follett report, written in 1993, did not make any mention of the web. A year later, as

the projects were being set up, the potential of the web was becoming clearer. Even then, many projects considered other options, but certainly by late 1995 it was obvious that all eLib projects would be concentrating on web-based services. In many cases the projects then became an early showcase for the web in the UK library community and helped to raise an awareness of its potential in delivering information services. The combination of the flexibility provided by the new World Wide Web and also the solid infrastructure provided by the well-established Joint Academic Network (JANET) gave eLib a head start.

The technical infrastructure was important, but there was also a supportive policy infrastructure in place. The eLib programme was part of a larger strategic whole. It was seen in many ways as the development arm of JISC's content-based services. Carr (2002, p. 229) comments that, "by 1997... the eLib programme was already firmly embedded in the longer term development plans of the JISC." In practical terms this meant that the eLib programme was seen as important enough to be given the time and the money to carry out its work. The fact that eLib became an important staging-post in the development of the Distributed National Electronic Resource and the JISC Information Environment initiatives shows this was the right decision.

High-level JISC support was crucial in the eLib success but so was grassroots institutional buy-in. eLib was widely supported in the HE information community from the beginning. Following the Follett report, FIGIT took care to consult institutions about the range of projects that should be undertaken, making their support more likely and more widespread. FIGIT was also careful to ensure that a variety of institutions were represented amongst project partners. In fact over the course of the eLib programme the vast majority of UK HE institutions were involved in projects in some way or another. This meant that the national programme was able to have local impact. Host institutions took their part in the programme seriously and worked hard to ensure that their projects delivered.

One element of the programme was particularly popular in institutional library and information services – its practical emphasis. The programme encouraged projects to think about how their work could have an impact on real-world services in a practical way. This meant that information professionals in institutions could see that eLib was working, whether they were directly involved or not. This was especially true since the programme office encouraged projects to work iteratively and to have things to show quickly. The adage that 'demonstration is better than description' came to be used in Phase 3 in particular (see Pinfield, 2001), but reflects the attitude that ran throughout the programme.

Such attitudes were characteristic of the programme largely because of the way it was structured and managed. The structure involving a central programme office and distributed projects gave eLib its particular flavour. Most of the time this seems to have created a successful balance between central direction on the one hand and local innovation on the other. Individual projects were given enough freedom to experiment where necessary but they always had the discipline of regular reporting and accountability. This seemed to work. The fact that the later Research Support Libraries Programme, also funded by the Higher Education Funding Councils, adopted the same model demonstrates that it was considered to be successful at the time.

As well as reporting to the programme office on progress, projects were also expected to report on their evaluation activities. The emphasis placed on evaluation within eLib was also important in its success. Indeed, it was this which allowed projects to develop iteratively. They incorporated regular formative evaluation activities right from the beginning. Projects also collaborated with programme level evaluation, both formative and summative, as a way of informing overall development.

Like evaluation, dissemination was also a central element of the programme which contributed to its success. There was an emphasis on sharing lessons learned and products in practical ways. Projects were active in contributing to the professional literature, taking part in conferences, organising practitioner workshops and other forms of publicity. This meant that the learning outcomes from the programme were diffused throughout the community rapidly. Whilst perhaps more could have been done to practically assist non-project partners in implementation, dissemination was nevertheless significantly successful.

History is made by a combination of impersonal forces and individual actions, and eLib was no exception. The final key reason for the programme's success was the work of particular people. At the programme level, a number of important figures had the vision and determination to get the programme moving, and also the management and communication skills to ensure it was successful. Individuals such as Lynne Brindley (chair of FIGIT), Derek Law (an active member of FIGIT), Reg Carr (chair of the JISC Committee with responsibility for eLib), Chris Rusbridge (Director of eLib), Lorcan Dempsey (leading advocate of the programme), as well as Brian Follett himself, helped to ensure the success of the programme. At project level, there were also a large number of imaginative and determined project directors, managers and staff who devised project proposals, managed project development, and communicated project outcomes in effective ways. These people worked hard on their projects in particular and on eLib in general. In the end, the success of eLib was very much down to them.

Conclusion

The fact that eLib was a success (albeit a qualified one) indicates that it is a model upon which future e-library research and development activity can be based, at least in the UK. It is good to see that since eLib closed, follow-on programmes have been set up by JISC and other agencies and managed in similar ways. They include RSLP, the DNER and Information Environment, the 5/99 programme, the Focus on Access to Institutional Resources programme, and others. These initiatives have built on the foundations of eLib in interesting and useful ways. Like eLib they have aimed to diffuse benefits throughout the whole of the HE community and beyond. They have also tried to tie developments into the strategic directions of JISC and the funding councils (and UK HE generally) in ways that will mean the activities are more likely to be sustainable. In many ways eLib was the first of these sorts of programmes. They are its legacy and a testament of its success.

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Web sites

ANGEL <http://www.angel.ac.uk/>

Ariadne <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/>

CEDARS <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cedars/>

CogPrints <http://cogprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>

COPAC <http://www.copac.ac.uk>

eLib <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/>
eprints.org <http://www.eprints.org/>
Digimap <http://edina.ac.uk/digimap/>
HEADLINE <http://www.headline.ac.uk/>
HERON <http://www.heron.ac.uk/>
Higher Education Digitisation Service <http://heds.herts.ac.uk/>
IMPEL2 <http://ilm.unn.ac.uk/impel>
InfoBike <http://www.bids.ac.uk/elib/infobike/homepage.html>
Internet Archaeology <http://intarch.ac.uk/>
JANET <http://www.ja.net/>
JILT <http://elj.warwick.ac.uk/Jilt/>
JISC <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>
JTAP <http://www.jtap.ac.uk/>
LAMDA <http://lamdaweb.mcc.ac.uk/>
MODELS <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/dlis/models/>
Netskills <http://www.netskills.ac.uk/>
Resource Discovery Network <http://www.rdn.ac.uk/>
Sociological Research Online <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/>
SuperJournal <http://www.superjournal.ac.uk/sj/>
WoPEc <http://netec.mcc.ac.uk/WoPEc.html>

All URLs visited on 11 December 2002.

¹ The terms ‘electronic library’, ‘e-library’, and ‘digital library’ are used in this chapter interchangeably.

² For detailed figures, see Whitelaw and Joy, 2000, p. 15.

³ For detailed figures, see Whitelaw and Joy, 2001, p. iii.