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# Collaboration and 'resource discovery': reasons, requirements and reactions

Caroline Rock  
*Deputy Librarian, Lanchester Library,  
Coventry University*  
Tel: 024 7688 7516  
E-mail: [c.rock@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:c.rock@coventry.ac.uk)

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The following article is based on a presentation given at the gathering of deputy librarians in September 2002. The purpose of the presentation was to share experiences and to stimulate discussion.

The article outlines and comments on the joint experience of Coventry University and of the University of Warwick in working collaboratively in the process of selecting new library management systems (LMS) and will focus specifically on the selection of 'resource discovery' systems or solutions, whether integral to the LMS or provided as associated or standalone products. The article is not concerned with reviewing actual products or systems (indeed at the time of writing final decisions as to products selected had not been made), but rather with our experience of a selection process which was undertaken jointly by the two universities.

The article will therefore look at the context in which we wished to replace and develop our respective library management systems (including some reactions to and implications of selecting discrete resource discovery tools), the process by which we identified and specified systems requirements, and the benefits and implications of having taken a collaborative approach, and of having treated the 'resource discovery system' separately.

## THE CONTEXT

In the summer of 2001, building on a process of increasing cooperation between our two libraries and realizing that we shared the same timescale for reviewing and replacing our library manage-

ment systems the universities of Coventry and Warwick decided to work collaboratively on a systems replacement project.

In some respects the two Universities would seem unlikely partners. From the outset we were clearly aware of the significant differences between our institutions in terms of student profile, institutional vision, approaches to supporting learning, teaching and / or research. Naturally, these differences were reflected in the different priorities for our libraries in relation to collection development policies, resource availability (capital and revenue expenditure) and user expectations. However, in terms of our need to explore and evaluate a range of products effectively and professionally, we were confident that our project aims were sufficiently similar.

Both libraries were committed to developing the services for our customers through the introduction of a state of the art library management system (LMS), which, as well as performing automated library management functions effectively, would increase user independence through extended OPAC functionality and related services such as self-issue. In addition, a key aim of the overall systems replacement project for both Warwick and Coventry was to be able to offer enhanced 'resource discovery' tools. Initially at least it would be fair to say that our respective priorities in relation to core library management functions and resource discovery tools differed. For Coventry, improving core library management functionality was our highest priority, whereas for Warwick, with a strategic commitment to a university e-strategy and to building a research library together with a need to maximise the value of heavy investment in e-content, 'resource discovery' issues took priority.

However, increasingly, as the project progressed, both libraries shared a desire to improve access to e-content for our user communities, particularly for the benefit of distant and remote learners, and were both seeking ways of managing our electronic resources more effectively

Despite these differing emphases, and given a shared intention of developing our understanding of 'resource discovery' tools, we believed that a parallel procurement process was one in which both libraries could benefit and learn from each other. On a practical level it was also envisaged that it would be cost effective and efficient through sharing the expense and process of organising visits and hosting presentations. In

addition, although we very quickly arrived at the decision that a single system shared by the two institutions was not our intended outcome, we were nevertheless encouraged by early discussions with suppliers which indicated that the possibility of providing LMS and RDS systems to each of two institutions located only a few miles apart was an attractive option for them and might therefore be financially advantageous to us.

Consequently, supported by our respective procurement departments, and indeed by the senior management within our institutions, we began the process of specifying our requirements.

## **COLLABORATION**

### *Process*

Early on in our discussions we took the decision that a 'single shared' system was unlikely to be our goal; this was based on our observations of shared systems elsewhere, combined with the fact that neither institution was under pressure strategically, politically or financially to implement a 'shared system'. We therefore agreed to undertake the project as a series of stages which we would work through together until we reached a point at which the collaborative approach ceased to be mutually beneficial. At each stage of the project we compared thoughts and findings and assessed whether it made sense to continue to work together. The collaborative aspects of the project were led by a 'steering group' which comprised the librarians and deputies of the two universities, working closely with the systems librarians and, in the case of Warwick University, an external consultant, for technical expertise. In addition, each institution had its own broader project group with representatives of the functional and service areas offered by the system.

The ground rules for working together were clear; neither institution would be expected to compromise its activity or priorities. Arguably, the fact that there was no institutional imperative to have to work together was in fact liberating, as we were free to share opinions and views openly in the knowledge that we could still choose our own course should we wish to. If ultimately we did arrive at a decision to take the same system, then it would have been by independent routes.

### *Documentation and definitions*

In reality, collaboration was most significant in the early stages of the project. Firstly, the joint 'steering group' took the decision to use the two stage 'restricted' approach to the European tender process. This process comprised the preparation

of a brief 'pre-qualification questionnaire' (PQQ) concerning the supply of a library management system and / or a resource discovery system, which was issued jointly by the two libraries to, and returned by, interested suppliers; this then resulted in a short-list of suppliers who were invited to provide a full tender response to a detailed operational requirement (OR). The rationale in choosing this two-stage approach was to attract as wide a range of suppliers as possible, since responding to the PQQ would require less work initially on the part of the suppliers. We also hoped that by short-listing for the second stage we would reduce the number of detailed responses that we would have to consider.

As with the pre-qualification questionnaire, the joint production of operational requirement documents for each of LMS and RDS became possible. Initially each library prepared independent draft documents; however, once reviewed by the 'steering group' (and as the documents grew in length and detail!), the benefits to both ourselves and to potential suppliers, of a single set of tender documents became apparent. The content of the OR for the LMS was straightforward, if time-consuming, even with the need to accommodate local details; however, preparation of an OR for the resource discovery system was a voyage of discovery itself and proved to be a valuable collaborative exercise. What were we trying to achieve?

The improvement of access to and management of 'e-content' were the key drivers for the 'resource discovery' project. Led by Warwick, the objectives included seeking to ensure efficient and increased exploitation of resources, improved value for money, greater integration of all collections, irrespective of format, and seamless access to resources.

However, 18 months ago, the all too interchangeable language of 'resource discovery' and 'portal products' was potentially confusing as we tried to define our requirements. After some initial market research to establish the scope of products we reached the following definition of a resource discovery system which, as stated in the essential requirements of the OR:

*'provides for authenticated users, seamless access to a range of resources from a single interface or portal and enables efficient and effective broadcast searching of these digital collections...[and ] ...provides a range of linking services for a given resource, as authorised for the user'.*

In addition, the OR specified that the system should allow customisation of the local search environment, local configuration / grouping of resources, and, in the context of linking services, the ability for the library to designate the most 'appropriate' resource through which full text can be obtained. Equally, integration with the OPAC and with document delivery functions was seen as desirable, as was the need to provide management information concerning resources accessed. Finally, in addition to the functional requirements, compliance with a technical specification which outlined industry standards, technical requirements, and the potential for interoperability with virtual and managed learning environments, was also essential.

#### *Evaluation*

Comfortable though we were with preparing documentation, and attending presentations and participating in product discussions jointly, we had nevertheless agreed that the evaluation of the PQQ responses, the short-listing of potential suppliers and the detailed analysis of tender responses for the short-listed products would be conducted independently by each university using criteria and scoring systems which reflected our respective priorities. Ultimately, it was this process which led to the decision for our two libraries to purchase different systems.

Collaboration in this evaluation phase was valuable for both libraries. The product demonstrations and presentations by suppliers, whether for the LMS or the RDS, were given jointly to the universities. They were well attended by large and representative groups of staff and provided opportunities for sharing our understanding of systems and for working together to find solutions to our particular problems. This was particularly true in relation to the 'resource discovery systems' where the very newness of products posed certain challenges for us including the lack of 'reference sites' for those reassuring visits, limitations in the technical understanding of our staff who were having to embrace a new language of acronyms and technical specifications, and concerns about the direction of future system development and the delivery of appropriate functionality.

Having initially decided to treat the LMS and RDS as separate products in the tender process, it was in the light of issues raised during the evaluation phase that we moved towards a preference for an integrated solution. Consequently, though selecting different products, both libraries chose integrated LMS and RDS solutions.

#### **A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT?**

On a practical level, we consider that the collaborative project, particularly in relation to exploration of resource discovery systems, was successful; both libraries have reached solutions appropriate to their situations (and we're still talking to each other!) In addition, the project has had the related benefit of learning from each other, broadening our perspectives and causing us to review the objectives for our services and how we might achieve them.

At times some aspects of the project have been unsettling. We, at Coventry at least, have had concerns that the emphasis on 'e-content' might threaten the status of our printed collections and depersonalise our information services, or that the introduction of enhanced resource discovery tools might lessen the value of the 'traditional' OPAC and undermine the role of subject-based web pages. Implications for the changing roles, skills and workloads of subject and technical staff have also posed challenges. Throughout the project, communication and the involvement of as many staff as possible in the discussions, presentations and evaluations, and opportunities for appropriate training and development, have provided the reassurance and support needed. Consequently, we can now see that, from a position of relative ignorance and relatively little interest 18 months ago, as we commence the implementation phase, we are experiencing a cautious enthusiasm for the products and for the service enhancement which they offer.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In summary, our experience of collaboration, though not resulting in the procurement of a shared or indeed of even the same systems, has nevertheless had tangible benefits and we believe that the process was enriched by different institutional contexts and perspectives offered by our universities.

At a strategic level it has led to a greater awareness of the products and systems available to support our roles as information providers in an increasingly digital age and has prompted us to review our priorities and perspectives in relation to the management of electronic information.

At an operational level, the project provided opportunities for valuable exchange of experience and ideas between the two libraries and to reflect on and, at times, question the effectiveness of current practice.