

Changing LIBER

by PETER FOX [1]

INTRODUCTION

LIBER, the Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche, has as its mission the representation and promotion of the interests of research libraries in Europe, the improvement of access to collections in European research libraries, and the provision of more efficient information services in Europe.

The [LIBER](#) organisation was founded in 1971 under the auspices of the Council of Europe, and its membership at present includes over 300 libraries from 38 countries, ranging from Ireland in the west to Russia in the east, and from Norway in the north to Malta in the south.

In the thirty-plus years of its existence, LIBER has evolved through three stages of development. Initially, between 1971 and 1986, it was a small club of library directors, meeting annually, but generally informally, in one of their libraries. From 1986 to 1991, there was a growth in membership; the *LIBER Bulletin* evolved into a scholarly journal, *European Research Libraries Cooperation: the [LIBER Quarterly](#)*; and an increasing number of participants began to attend the more formally organised annual conference.

In 1993 the officers began to formulate a new, more professional, approach for the organisation. This development was led by the President, Michael Smethurst of the British Library, the Vice-President, Esko Häkli of the National Library of Finland, the General Secretary, Maria Luísa Cabral of the National Library of Portugal, and Erland Kolding Nielsen of the Danish Royal Library. At the annual conference in Göttingen in 1994 new statutes were adopted, establishing a new structure, with four professional divisions (Access, Collection Development, Preservation, and Library Management and Administration) and a permanent secretariat. The changes led to a much enhanced professional programme, represented not only by a more extensive and better-attended Annual General Conference, but also by a range of activities, undertaken by the divisions and the expert committees reporting to them, during the intervening months between the conferences.

The reorganisation was extremely successful, and the membership of LIBER, participation in its activities and its influence on the European library scene grew steadily over the next decade. During this period LIBER consciously stretched out to central and eastern European libraries by seeking to involve them in conferences and in the work of LIBER's groups; this was greatly facilitated by the establishment, thanks to the generosity of [OCLC](#) (the Online Computer Library Center Inc.), of a special fund for libraries in those parts of Europe. It was also a period when a major plank of LIBER's policy was to create bridges with North America, the aim being not to reinvent new developments in Europe but to build upon and to adapt existing American initiatives. As President of LIBER from 1999 to 2002, Elmar Mittler played a major role in raising the profile of the organisation, and in this he was greatly supported and assisted by the General Secretary, Ann Matheson of the National Library of Scotland. He was also determined to ensure that, at a time when libraries themselves were changing rapidly, the organisations that represented them could not be allowed to stagnate. In 2001, with the strong support of Esko Häkli, the Past President, he established a Task Force to undertake a review of LIBER's role, and this led to the preparation of a [Vision for LIBER's strategy 2003-2006](#). This *Vision* was circulated to the membership during the spring of 2003 and was approved at the Annual General Assembly in Rome in June of that year.

The vision statement identified the recent significant developments and trends in European research libraries: the development of the 'hybrid' or electronic library, changes in the information chain; greater co-operation among libraries through regional, national and international networks and consortia, and the development of consortial agreements with publishers; and changes in the concept of collection development in line with the gradual evolution of virtual collections. It noted that governments were assigning proportionately less funding to the whole field of culture and education, hence also to libraries, whilst, at the same time library operations were becoming more expensive, partly because of the need for dual services: print and electronic. Universities were becoming more interested in what their libraries did, and more inclined to concentrate physical library facilities in order to save costs. Indeed, some universities may even be doubtful of the need for a large central library. The document's assumptions for the future of research libraries in Europe were that the strongest influence on research libraries would be the global networked economy, and that the primary element in the information chain would be the network. Much of what libraries traditionally store on their shelves would be digitised and made available over networks, legal deposit of digital material would become the norm by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the archiving and preservation of digital material would be one of the most important challenges facing libraries.

The document went on to identify LIBER's role in supporting research libraries in Europe in this new world where 'libraries and their users have entered a common electronic space in which services can easily be made available across the boundaries of individual libraries and countries'. LIBER saw its role as, among other activities: assisting libraries to develop new national, international or regional infrastructures for the production of electronic services and resources, the provision of access to them, and the long-term storage of them; stimulating and supporting developments towards standardisation for electronic information exchange and information discovery; supporting libraries in the development of fair licence agreements; and developing strategic thinking in European research libraries.

The adoption of the *Vision* at the 2003 Annual General Assembly empowered the Executive Board to move on to consider how it should be turned into an action plan.

LIBER'S ACTIVITIES

The Board was conscious of the fact that LIBER's main activity was the Annual General Conference and, for the majority of members this was their only contact with the organisation. Recent Conferences had been very successful, attracting over 150 directors and senior library managers from all over Europe, and the Board was determined that this very public manifestation of LIBER's role to 'represent and promote the interests of research libraries in Europe should continue to flourish.[2] The succeeding conference, in St Petersburg in June-July 2004, was attended by a record number of participants, including a delegation from [CARL](#), the Canadian Association of Research Libraries.

However, although LIBER had members from most countries in Europe, the penetration of membership was very uneven, with representation from some countries, such as those in Scandinavia, being close to 100% of the libraries that would be eligible for membership, whilst that from some of the larger countries was disappointingly low, and some countries were represented by only one or two institutions.[3] The reasons for this would need to be investigated as part of any action plan for the future, and possible incentives devised for libraries in those countries that found membership a problem.

Despite the perception by many of the members that LIBER *was* the Conference, by this stage the organisation was in fact engaged in many other activities. Since 2000 these had included:

- the sponsorship and support of [SPARC Europe](#) as a complementary organisation to the original US-based [SPARC](#);
- Open Archives Initiatives conferences at CERN, Geneva;
- the establishment of the LIBER Security Network, a confidential network established to exchange information in the hope of reducing thefts from libraries and archives;
- security conferences in Copenhagen and Paris;
- support for MARC harmonisation and the development of MARC 21 in Europe;
- meetings of the [Groupe des Cartothécaires](#) in Helsinki and Cambridge;
- lobbying activity with the European Commission about VAT on electronic publications;
- work on pan-European digitisation of journals;
- a campaign on copyright;
- development of [LIBER Quarterly](#) into an online journal
- [Architecture Group](#) seminars in Warsaw, Leipzig and Venice/Bolzano
- meeting of the Expert Group of [Manuscript Librarians](#) in The Hague
- support for central European libraries after the Czech floods;
- support for the 'Books for Baghdad' scheme.[4]

In 2003 and 2004, discussions at the Executive Board centred around the view that LIBER was now at a crossroads and had two choices: either it could continue as it had done successfully over the previous decade or so, or it could expand its activities and seek to become accepted as *the* organisation representing research libraries in Europe, becoming a more service-orientated body providing direct support to its members and adding value to their work by facilitating the development of new services, the sharing of resources and the exchange of information for mutual benefit. The latter course carried with it a number of risks, and

would undoubtedly require a fundamental change to the way the organisation was structured and financed, but it quickly became clear that the members of the Board were enthusiastic about exploring this possibility.

THE FUTURE OF LIBER

The Board was equally clear that it did not wish to duplicate the work of organisations operating at a national, or even at a European, level; rather it wanted to identify gaps in the range of activities undertaken by those bodies, to identify possible new activities for LIBER and to consider a possible closer relationship between LIBER and some of those organisations. In order to begin the process of identifying such a role, the London firm, MacDougall Consulting Ltd, were employed in late 2003 to review the current landscape of library organisations in Europe and to consider the activities of similar bodies in North America and Australia. Their report concluded that, in the view of the organisations whose views had been canvassed, 'LIBER had an important advocacy, leadership and co-ordination role both at a European and at an international level'. The principal recommendation of the report was that 'LIBER should consider formalising its role as a European advocate, leader and co-ordinator and that, in doing so, it should systematically define those activities in which it will seek to be active, and define those activities in which it will recognise and support other European organisations which will formally take a lead'. The report was delivered to the Board in early 2004 and a [summary](#) was mounted on the LIBER website.[5]

Using the MacDougall Report and more detailed discussions with some of the organisations as the basis for their planning, the Executive Board was able to take to the Annual General Assembly in July 2004 a consultation paper on the proposed way forward. That paper set out a list of possible areas of future activity, which included the following:

- Scholarly communication, including further support for SPARC Europe, the development of a European consortium for database subscriptions and the negotiation of licences at a supra-national level; advocacy for scholarly communication issues; lobbying European bodies on topics such as monopolies and mergers, dissemination of research information, the 'journals crisis', declarations for open access.
- Resource description, including the opening of negotiations about possible closer collaboration with The European Library ([TEL](#)), with the Consortium of European Research Libraries ([CERL](#)) on the database of early printed books, and with the Research Libraries Group ([RLG](#)).
- Development of electronic access to collections, including digitisation and digital archiving of journals
- Preservation, both traditional and digital.
- Collaborative funding proposals, e.g. to foundations and the European Commission.
- Influencing policy and acting as a lobbying force.
- Developing a European access scheme for researchers to facilitate in-house consultation of material.
- Encouragement of collaboration between European research libraries in different sectors (e.g. national, university, public).
- Monograph interlending and document delivery.
- Collection and analysis of comparative statistics.
- Facilitating the development and adoption of standards, e.g. bibliographic, digital..

The consultation paper also drew attention to the financial implications of embarking upon a wider range of activities. It noted that LIBER's current financial position was reasonably healthy, but that the proportion of its income from membership fees had declined and had been replaced by additional but less-secure income from sponsorship and other less stable sources of income. The implications of the proposals for greater activity were that LIBER's income must be increased. The MacDougall Report identified that, in comparison with other similar organisations, the membership fee for LIBER was tiny (about €170 in 2004). The membership also ranged from the very largest national libraries in affluent countries, with annual budgets of many millions of euro, to small research institutions or libraries in less affluent countries, with budgets of a few thousand euro. Each of these paid the same membership fee. In order to increase LIBER's income on a sustained basis, the Executive Board concluded that it would have to recommend that a tiered membership-fee structure be drawn up, taking into account the size of the library's budget, so that the larger libraries would pay a higher fee than they did at present.

At the Assembly there was broad support for the proposed way forward and a general acceptance that members might have to pay a higher membership fee for a wider range of services, provided those services could be seen to be of direct benefit to the member institutions and the constituencies they served.

In January 2005, members of the Executive Board took the process a stage further by arranging a meeting in Cambridge with representatives of a number of the organisations that had indicated in their responses to the MacDougall review that they would be interested in working more closely with LIBER. Apart from LIBER itself, five organisations were represented at the meeting: two mainly-US groups: the Association of Research Libraries ([ARL](#)) and the Research Libraries Group ([RLG](#)); two associations of libraries in the UK and Ireland: [SCONUL](#) (Society of College, National and University Libraries) and [CURL](#) (Consortium of Research Libraries in the British Isles); and [CERL](#) (Consortium of European Research Libraries). This was followed by a similar meeting in Groningen in July 2005 with representatives of other European organisations.

In the discussion, the President of LIBER, Erland Kolding Nielsen of the Royal Library of Denmark, indicated that LIBER was in the process of repositioning itself on the European landscape and was concerned to establish, if possible, one voice for research libraries in Europe, confronting the problem of the disparity between libraries in different parts of Europe (both the north-south divide and the east-west one). LIBER wished to change its image of a 'conference-only organisation' into that of an organisation with a broad array of activities, though it would not try to influence what was happening at the national level, but would work with existing organisations. The precise nature of the collaboration between LIBER and other international organisations was a matter that would require sensitive handling but the participants were clear that it should be possible to identify activities where LIBER would take the lead on a Europe-wide basis and others where LIBER would aim to support another organisation that would take the lead. LIBER did not wish to duplicate the work of other European organisations, but to collaborate and to work in association with other existing and new European organisations where relevant, and thus to gain synergy by joining forces, including possible relevant mergers.

There was widespread agreement among the participants at the meeting that initiatives by LIBER would be welcomed in areas such as improved networking among existing European organisations, the development of an effective voice in lobbying on behalf of European research libraries (for example with the European Union), the creation of a single European umbrella organisation that could speak for Europe on research library issues at the international level and provide more professional power on behalf of European research libraries and their organisations.

The outcome of this meeting was a workplan, which would encompass the following activities:

- Identification of the tasks and objectives of LIBER with respect to services it could provide to the library community.
- Creation of an inventory of existing service organisations so that overlaps and gaps could be identified
- Development of a network of services, both through collaboration with existing organisations and through new initiatives where service gaps were identified.
- A start to discussions with those organisations to test out and discuss these ideas and establish their level of interest in participation with LIBER in the development of services.
- Development of a new membership formula which would encompass national (or regional) organisations and associations, as well as its traditional institutional members (i.e. libraries) in order to allow LIBER to position itself as the overall umbrella organisation for research libraries in Europe.
- Development of a new fee structure, including the possible introduction of a graded level of fees for institutions of different sizes and the possibility of interconnected fees with other organisations or associations, and geographical discounts.
- Re-evaluation of LIBER's own internal structure, including the possible replacement of the four permanent professional divisions by temporary task forces, to allow a more flexible approach to its activities.
- Augmentation of the permanent staff of LIBER, probably by the appointment of an Executive Director at library director or equivalent level, in order to perform these tasks and drive forward LIBER's agenda.

It was intended by the Executive Board that this work would be carried out during 2005 and 2006, so that the results could be presented to the Annual General Assembly in Uppsala in July 2006. If this timetable can be successfully achieved, and if the plans are subsequently approved by the membership, LIBER will be in a very strong position to move forward with its mission of supporting the research libraries of Europe through a portfolio of services and the ability to undertake effective lobbying at a European level in a way that has not been possible hitherto.

The *Vision for LIBER's strategy* began by reiterating the mission statement that 'the general aim of LIBER is to assist research libraries in Europe to become a functional network across national boundaries in order to ensure the preservation of the European cultural heritage, to improve access to collections in European research libraries, and to provide more efficient information services in Europe'. [6] By the middle of 2006 this vision should be well on the way towards being fulfilled.

NOTES

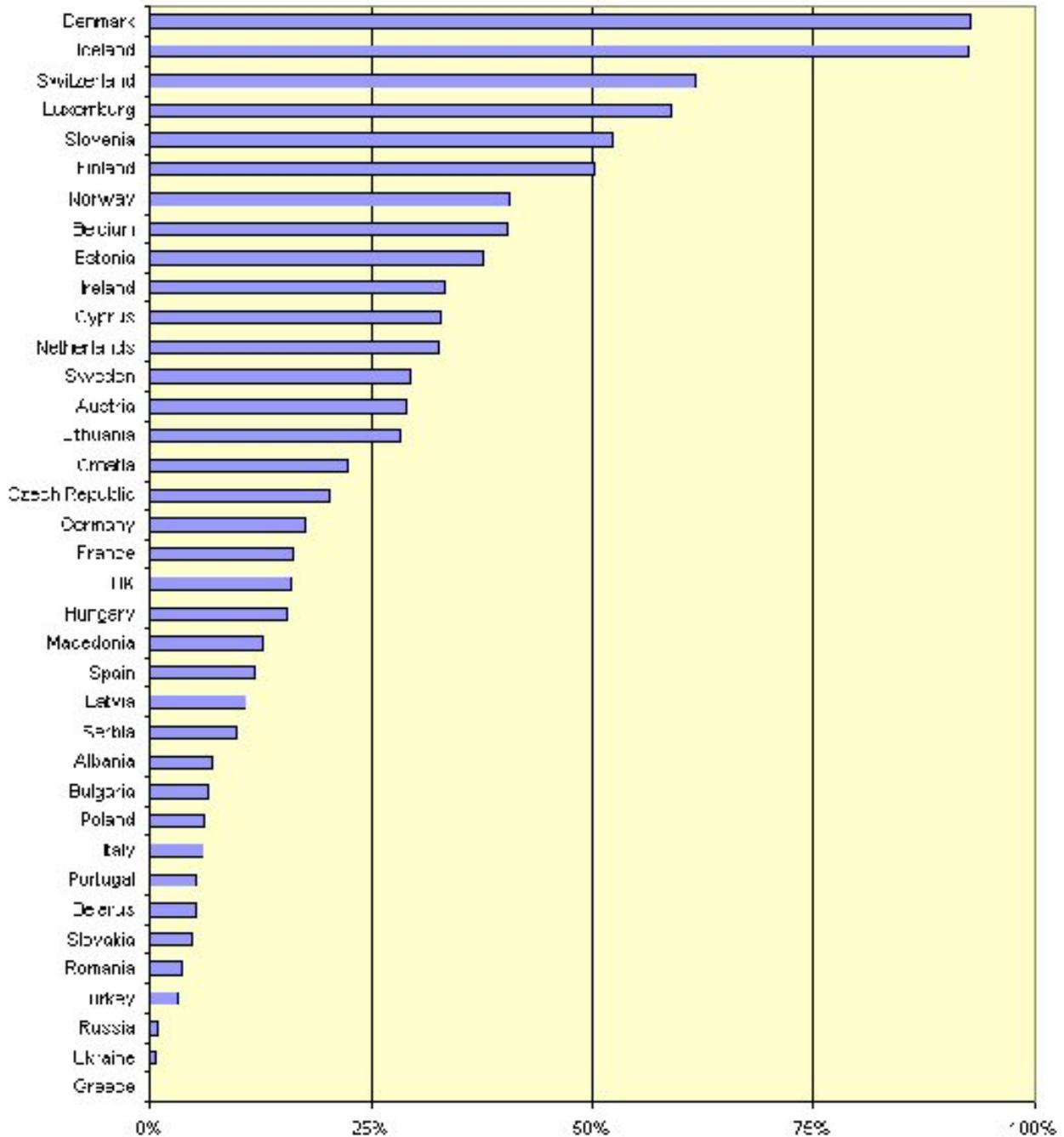
1. This article is a slightly amended version of an article originally published in: *Die innovative Bibliothek : Elmar Mittler zum 65. Geburtstag*, hrsg. von E. Kolding Nielsen, K.G. Saur und K. Ceynowa. München : Saur, 2005, and reproduced with the permission of the publisher.
2. LIBER *Statutes*, 1994. <http://www.kb.dk/guests/intl/liber/statutes/stat-en.htm>
3. See appendix: Penetration of LIBER membership
4. For more information on the activities, see: LIBER Current Professional Initiatives. <http://www.kb.dk/liber/currentinitiatives/index.htm>
5. MacDougall Consulting Ltd, *The future of LIBER: Report to the Executive Board*, January 2004 <http://www.kb.dk/liber/news/liberfuture.htm>
6. LIBER *Statutes*, Chapter 2, Article 2.2. <http://www.kb.dk/guests/intl/liber/statutes/stat-en.htm#2>

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

- ARL - Association of Research Libraries. <http://www.arl.org/>
- CARL - Canadian Association of Research Libraries. <http://www.carl-abrc.ca/>
- CERL - Consortium of European Research Libraries. <http://www.cerl.org/>
- CURL - Consortium of Research Libraries in the British Isles. <http://www.curl.ac.uk/>
- LIBER - Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche. <http://www.kb.dk/liber/>
- LIBER Architecture Group. <http://www.zhbluzern.ch/LIBER-LAG/default.htm>
- LIBER Expert Group of European Manuscript Librarians. <http://liber-manuscripts.kb.nl/>
- LIBER Groupe des Cartothécaires. <http://liber-maps.kb.nl/intro.htm>
- LIBER Quarterly: The Journal of European Research Libraries. <http://www.kb.dk/liber/liberq/> and <http://liber.library.uu.nl/>
- OCLC - OCLC Online Computer Library Center Inc. <http://www.oclc.org/>
- RLG - Research Libraries Group. <http://www.rlg.org/>
- SCONUL - Society of College, National and University Libraries. <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/>
- SPARC - Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources. <http://www.arl.org/sparc/>
- SPARC Europe. <http://www.sparceurope.org/>
- TEL - The European Library. <http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/index.htm>
- Vision for LIBER's strategy 2003-2006. <http://www.kb.dk/guests/intl/liber/vision/visionstatement.htm>

APPENDIX

Penetration of LIBER membership



Figures are illustrative but are based on the number of LIBER member libraries in relation to the population of the country, and the expected penetration of LIBER if all research libraries were members.