

NATIONAL LIBRARY PLANNING AND UNIVERSAL AVAILABILITY OF PUBLICATIONS

STEPHEN VICKERS,

Assistant, IFLA Office for International Lending

Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) means the availability to any individual, wherever he may be, of any document that he may require, no matter where or when it was published. While such an objective would seem to represent an enormous undertaking, it is merely a statement of one of the basic functions of the service of a library to its clientele. This objective now enjoys the full support of IFLA and Unesco; but why are such an objective and an associated programme necessary?

The origins of UAP go back to the 40th General Council of IFLA at Washington in 1974, when a motion embracing this concept was put forward and accepted. IFLA had previously initiated its programme of Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC). This, allied to very rapid developments in the availability of information networks and data bases, the dramatic and continuing increase in published material, and higher levels of education stimulating increased demand for document access, gave rise to serious doubts about the ability of contemporary practice to meet the demand. Improvements in bibliographical access must be accompanied by improvements in document access, if readers are not to be frustrated and research hampered.

As a concept UAP touches on virtually all aspects of librarianship, but the two major elements are collection building, ensuring that documents are acquired, and efficient interlending systems to make them available; archival collections, though they play an important role in the national library system of a country, and are necessary for a number of reasons, do little to further availability, as there will be many who, for various reasons, will be prevented from using them. These two elements are obviously closely interrelated; national acquisitions policies and methods must be allied to the interlending system in operation. This will vary from country to country, from the collection of documents in a central institution dedicated to interlending to their acquisition on a cooperative basis by a number of institutions within a country; alternatively the holdings of a number of major libraries may simply be co-ordinated by the use of union catalogues.

Whatever system is used, it must be able to guarantee the availability of national imprints. It is often assumed that these will somehow always be available and attention is focused instead on elaborate means of locating foreign material, which is often in fact much less in demand. Recent studies in the Federal Republic of Germany and the United Kingdom have revealed just how false such an assumption is - and these two countries have highly developed interlending systems. Both the present national coverage of indigenous publications and interlending provision are inadequate in nearly all countries. This has been clearly shown by a comparative study of national lending systems recently completed by the IFLA Office for International Lending under contract to Unesco. In most countries systems have evolved in the light of experience and need but have rarely benefited from systematic analysis. Just as national systems of collection building must be able to guarantee the availability of national imprints to meet both national and international needs, so efficient international lending or universal availability can only be based on efficient national lending systems. If collections in Britain and the British interlending system cannot provide a British publication, whence can it be obtained?

Progress towards UAP can be made on several fronts: by the divisions and Sections of IFLA, by Unesco within the framework of its General Information Programme, in which the concept of UAP is clearly implicit, by an IFLA International Office for UAP which is surely required as a focus for activity and centre for monitoring progress and the identification of areas for detailed study, and by individual countries.

The national library of a country has a particularly important role to play. It is essential that adequate legal deposit laws exist and are enforced to ensure that at least one copy of national imprints is available in that country. This of course may be linked to a programme of UBC, all material being received by legal deposit being used for the compilation of the national bibliography. In addition to national imprints, in most countries the national library also houses the most substantial collection of foreign material. However, as already noted, if the collections of the national library are purely archival, they do little to further availability, though it is possible to make some material available from them by the use of reprography. Such material will include journal articles and older works that are free from copyright, but the extent and nature of such a service must obviously depend upon copyright legislation. In most countries the national library will lend material, though this is usually

only when other channels have failed. Certain categories of material will always have to be consulted in the owning library due to fragility or rarity, but this still leaves a large corpus of publications that could perhaps be loaned.

All national imprints must be amenable to photocopying or, if not, to lending. In most cases the majority of the population of a country does not live within easy access of the national reference collection. Loan collections can serve everyone in a way that reference collections cannot, and greater attention must be paid to availability and methods of supply when planning national library systems.

For most people, however, the main point of access to literature is the public library. All public libraries must therefore be familiar with the library system and resources of the country, be fully equipped with machinery and personnel to tap those resources, and be prepared to do so on behalf of any user. It is essential that there is an adequate interlending system to support them. An efficient interlending system is equally essential for special libraries. Their own collections tend to be small and geared to a particular field of activity or research, and their specialized character inevitably results in the need to obtain material from other sources, both national and international; they must therefore have access to efficient systems and assured sources of supply. In the United Kingdom some industrial libraries may obtain 20% or more of the references their users need from elsewhere.

The importance of an efficient interlending system cannot be stated too strongly. Once material has been acquired, steps must be taken to make it available. It is worth stressing that UAP stands for Universal Availability of Publications and not Universal Access to Publications, the latter is too passive a concept. As stated above, in most countries interlending has not benefited from systematic analysis. All too often it is seen as a marginal activity, an optional extra. No library can be self-sufficient, and if it is to offer a satisfactory service it must call upon the resources of other libraries, both within the country and abroad.

To be economic, library provision within a country must be able to satisfy some 70%-80% of the needs of its inhabitants internally. This figure is given as a rough guide only, it is appreciated that it will be affected by many factors, such as the libraries in existence within the country, the volume and level of publishing that might generate further demands, the economic condition of the

country and so on. Various interlending systems can be devised to achieve this; each must be judged by the level of satisfaction that it can offer, by the speed with which documents can be supplied and by the costs needed to support it.

Interlending may take the form of planned centralisation on a dedicated loan collection, which, while it possesses significant advantages in speed of supply and facility of operation over all other systems, can however be too costly for some countries to establish, even though unit costs per transaction may be the cheapest overall if the volume of interlending handled by the collection is large and if the scope of the collection is geared to meet this demand. In a country in which several libraries benefit from legal deposit it may be possible to designate one of them as a national lending centre at little extra cost if it can easily be absolved of its present responsibilities. It might be possible for a national library to combine both reference and lending functions. Although this would be less efficient than a dedicated loan collection, it would be much less costly than establishing a loan collection ab initio, the only additional expense required being on extra copies of material in heavy demand. Alternatively demand could be concentrated on a few existing large libraries which are known to acquire most of the material that is in demand. As they are likely to receive a substantial number of requests, it is important that they be adequately funded, either directly or indirectly, to operate efficiently.

Union catalogues will always be necessary to provide access to older publications but their extent should be limited. They are expensive to maintain and it is difficult to ensure that locations for new material, upon which most demand falls, are entered quickly enough; similarly, discarded titles are not always notified. The use of union catalogues inevitably requires two steps before the union catalogue to a potential holding library takes time and costs money, and the ability to provide a location is no guarantee of the availability of the document itself. Solutions to the problem may vary with the form of publications.

It is possible to establish a basic collection of periodicals in high demand that is dedicated to interlending, and to rely on a few major libraries for the loan of monographs.

Different countries will identify solutions that correspond most closely to their immediate needs, but planning must also take account of possible international systems. A number of national collections already fulfil an internatio-

VICKERS, Stephen - National Library and Universal Availability of Publications

nal function, at least in terms of the provision of photocopies. Such provision need not conflict with their responsibilities to their own country as original documents remain available to satisfy further requests. It would be foolish to overlook the potential contribution of such collections to UAP. Alternatively, two or more countries may combine resources to establish one central loan collection. Whatever system is adopted it must be remembered that any major improvements are likely to create an increase both in demand and in expectation, and it is important that the system should be susceptible to monitoring and change.

A further aspect of library planning that is of importance to UAP is a national repository policy. In many countries the economic climate has led libraries increasingly to discard material that is seldom or never used to make way for needed documents. Greater attention must be paid at the national level to ensuring that at least one copy of every publication is retained somewhere. A national repository policy is of equal importance to a national interlending system and to UAP, as is a national acquisitions policy. Indeed a national loan collection could also function as a national repository, this would enrich the collection with older material that it could not otherwise acquire, it would be available for loan, and individual libraries would have more space to provide needed current publications. Failure to attend to this problem in the past means that some publications are no longer available and UAP can never be 100%. Censorship too means that certain works are not freely available, be this for political or moral reasons.

All improvements to availability are steps towards universal availability. Research must be undertaken to establish much needed data on the present situation, and successive generations of librarians must be made aware of the nature and extent of the problem. Future technological developments may result in a substantially different approach to satisfying the information needs of individuals, but in the meantime much can and must be done to improve the present situation.