

Libraries in Finland Establish Consortia

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CONSORTIUM AS AN ORGANIZATION

The word „consortium” has become fashionable almost everywhere in the library world. The real meaning of the expression, however, is not always self-evident. It is not clear, whether only a loose group of cooperating libraries is meant or an organization based on a legal contract or at least a Memorandum of Understanding. In most cases the message seems to be that there is a group of cooperating libraries which have agreed on a common goal and a common policy to achieve it. In Europe libraries have not been used to regulate their cooperation with the help of legal measures whereas in the United States it has been a custom already for some time e.g. for organized resource sharing. Another reason for the European situation is obviously the fact that the university libraries are not legal bodies and that they, therefore, can not sign any legal contracts. Therefore, if formal contracts are needed, the contracting partners are the universities on behalf of their libraries.

Close cooperation has been typical for Finnish research libraries already for years and the achievements are remarkable. The best known example is the cooperation in the field of library automation. All Finnish university libraries are sharing the same software and their local installations are interconnected with each other with the help of common services such as a union catalogue and a shared development unit. No formal contracts have, so far, been necessary for that purpose. Nor has the word „consortium” been used. The situation is, however, changing.

Next following I will discuss the development of organized consortia, which are based on a charter or a written contract. I will also deal with some issues related to the organization of the consortia. I would already here like to stress, that if a consortium wants to achieve results it, in addition to a charter or a contract, also needs an executive body that carries out the work and makes sure that the plans and decisions are not only prepared but also put into practice. One of the main weaknesses of many cooperative arrangements between libraries has been the absence of a common executive not only taking care of the practicalities but also safeguarding the continuity. A committee can

never fulfill the tasks of an executive body because running a consortium successfully requires much more effort than what is normally anticipated.

In Finland the National Library has been given the task to enhance the cooperation between the research libraries of the country and to support their consortia. According to the National Library Strategy (adopted in November 1999) the Library is functioning as a common resource of the country's research libraries. In this capacity it has been instrumental in creating the comprehensive consortia described below and is also responsible for running their daily business. It is possible that an arrangement of this kind is more typical for a small country than for a bigger one.

THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONSORTIA

For the time being two major consortia are being set up. Both of them have the task to develop networked electronic services. The first one is dealing with the common library automation services, the second one with purchasing licences for electronic resources and improving the access to them.

The Finnish universities have signed a contract to purchase a new library automation system and to mount their local installations on a common server the maintenance of which has been outsourced. To administer the shared database server a formally organized consortium, called the „Linnea2 Consortium”, was created. It was the first of its kind for the Finnish universities which can be understood as a sign of libraries being in the forefront of the development of cooperation between the universities. Since then a second consortium dealing with the development of a virtual university has been set up. Being the first of its kind the contract and the rules of the consortium required some time to be prepared.

The Linnea2 Consortium was established jointly by the universities (and two other institutions) and the decision power lies ultimately on the founding organizations. A formal contract followed by detailed rules lays the foundation of the consortium, spells out the rights and duties of the members, and specifies the decision-making procedure including the National Library's position as the executive. Therefore, the National Library's role is formally depending on the decision made by the universities. But being the executive the Library, of course, not only carries a responsibility for the success of the consortium but also has good possibilities to influence the policy-making within the consortium because it is the organization which makes available the staff resources needed for running the common services.

The Ministry of Education in 1997 launched a new programme of a National Electronic Library (FinELib) for purchasing licences for electronic journals. In that connection the term consortium appeared for the first time in the vocabulary of the Finnish research libraries. In spite of the central financing paid out of a common grant individual libraries (or universities) wanting to join the licenses have to share the costs and, therefore, accept every accession. Until now this was made without many formalities. The libraries or universities have accepted their duties, paid the bills and signed an agreement on the conditions of the licensing agreements. The group of the licensees is called „consortium” also in the contracts although no formal organization has, so far, existed. Today, steps are taken to introduce a more formalized contract-based arrangement. The rules have been developed along with gaining more practical experience and discussed in detail together with the libraries and the universities.

During the period 1997-1999 the National Electronic Library Programme was run as a project. From the beginning of 2000 its status has been stabilized and it is now also formally one of the tasks of the National Library. The central grant is part of the Library's recurrent grant. Legally, the Library is, therefore, not only the executive but it also has a strong formal position given to it by the Ministry of Education and the state budget approved by the Parliament. However, the programme is being developed as a cooperative enterprise and the National Library wants to make sure that due attention is paid to the needs of the libraries.

THE LINNEA2 CONSORTIUM

Having established the need of replacing the present computer system with a new one the university libraries as well as the universities wanted to safeguard the advantages of an efficient and unified computer network. All university libraries have since the beginning of the 1990's had the same library system and since 1993 the National Library has offered centralized support and development services. Due to the current stage of the standardization it was felt that the most secure way to proceed was that all participating libraries share the same library system. There were, of course, also other factors speaking for this kind of decision, such as e.g. obvious economic advantages. In addition to this, many libraries would hardly have had any possibilities to start purchasing a new library system without the help of the National Library. Universities and their libraries have allocated only a limited amount of staff resources for library automation. Because there was no extra grant from the Ministry of Education available, as was the case during the first Linnea

project, every university had to finance its share of the costs out of its regular budget. But nevertheless, the advantages of a common solution were obviously regarded that great that nobody really wanted to question them although much arguing took place.

After a careful selection process in which all university libraries participated, a decision was made to purchase the Voyager software of Endeavor Information Systems Inc. The universities (and two other institutions) authorized the National Library to sign a contract with the supplier. In the contract the participating institutions together are regarded as a consortium. But at that stage no organization was yet set up. Only the role of the National Library in relationship to the participating institutions was fixed. The reason was that the number of the necessary consortia was not yet known at that time. The question about the number of servers had first to be solved. At a very early stage a great number of libraries were inclined to choose a common server whereas a couple of other libraries, or rather universities, obviously preferred having servers of their own. Therefore, it was seen possible that at least two different consortia could have been needed, one for the common software and one for the common server, both consortia having a different number of members.

The process continued. I have the feeling that an acquisition of a server very seldom has been prepared as carefully and thoroughly as in this case. The overwhelming majority of the library directors wanted to get rid of running and managing a server of their own while some directors of computing centres possibly would have had nothing against it. Anyway, when the results of the bidding and the comparison of different alternatives were presented to the rectors of the universities no single rector was in favour of purchasing a computer of their own. The figures showing the advantages of a common approach were so convincing. The National Library was authorized to sign a contract with the company SUN Microcomputers on purchasing a powerful Sun E10000 computer. At the same time the maintenance organization was also chosen. The maintenance was outsourced to the company CSC owned by the Ministry of Education. The same company is running the academic data transmission network FUNET and hosting a number of supercomputers.

As a result only one consortium was needed. Its membership consists of twenty universities plus the Library of the Parliament and the National Repository Library. The consortium has a Steering Group with seven members. Five of them are elected by the General Council of the consortium, one by the National Library, and one by the directors of the computing centres of the member universities. The National Library is the executive body

and it represents the consortium towards third parties, such as the software supplier, the vendor, and the maintenance organization of the server.

Because the consortium as a formally established organization was the first of its kind in the Finnish university world much attention was paid to the principles of decision-making. Regarding the most important issues the universities were not prepared to be overruled by any majority decisions. Therefore, the consortium is not functioning like an independent legal body the members of which have to accept decisions made by the governing bodies of the consortium. The power of the Steering Group is somewhat limited and the decisions of the General Council have to be based on consensus with the exception of the elections. As a matter of fact the model is based on the practical experiences from the present cooperation for running the Linnea network. There is plenty of experience about how to reach a consensus even on difficult issues.

A question has already arisen whether to accept new members to the consortium. A number of individual institutions outside the universities are interested in joining the consortium. The same applies to a major group of polytechnics. According to the present policy new institutions can be adopted as associated members who, as a matter of fact, can buy services from the consortium. In the long run the polytechnics possibly have to establish a consortium of their own and to purchase their own server. Even in that case they can participate in the same union catalogue as the university libraries and buy support services from the National Library.

In addition to the governing bodies the consortium will also have a number of Working Groups needed for running the practical services. Due to the impressive record of cooperation thus far, I am convinced that the consortium will be a successful enterprise.

THE NATIONAL ELECTRONIC LIBRARY (FINELIB)

As mentioned above the FinELib consortium did in the beginning have no formal charter nor a contract as the basis of its existence. The constellation was rather simple. The Ministry of Education granted money for the programme out of the research budget which was meant for the universities. All participating libraries were university libraries. Since then the circle of participating institutions has been extended beyond the original group of universities and a need has been felt to formulate distinct rules for the consortium. Outside the universities there are more than 70 other members such as research

institutions, polytechnics and public libraries. All of them have signed a Memorandum of Understanding defining the rights and obligations of the members. A similar document will soon be signed also by the universities.

The present organization of the FinELib consortium was introduced in 2000 and it has two different levels. The main consortium covers all institutions which are willing to become members. Among the members a kind of sub-consortia are created each time a licence is being signed, because all members do not necessarily want to subscribe to all licences. Consequently, there is a main consortium and a number of purchase consortia.

Only the main consortium has a Steering Group where all types of members are represented. Unlike the Linnea2 Consortium the Steering Group is appointed by the Board of the National Library because no formal general council exists. The Steering Group, consisting largely of the representatives of the users and led by a university rector, deals mainly with policy issues.

For the operational purposes a so-called Consortium Group, consisting mainly of library representatives, has been established. It monitors the practical work and prepares issues for decision-making. The group can submit proposals both to the Steering Group and the National Library. Its members are elected by the Council of Finnish University Libraries, the Council of the Rectors of the Polytechnics as well as research institutions and public libraries.

In addition to the above-mentioned bodies a number of expert groups in the main fields of science and research are preparing a selection of materials to be purchased through licencing.

As mentioned already the National Library has a rather strong position within this consortium. The main part of the decisions are formally made by the National Library and it is also responsible for the use of the main grant. But because the programme is being run as a cooperative enterprise the National Library makes every effort to draw all members concerned into the decision-making process and to ensure that the interests of the members are duly observed. In other words, the decisions have usually been prepared in co-operation with the members of the main consortium. Of course, every institution makes its own decision whether or not to join new purchase consortia.

The expansion of the consortium beyond the universities has required some additional arrangements caused by the increased workload for the National Library. All parties prefer concentrating, e.g. the licence negotiations, in the

same hands because it helps accumulating both the expertise and experience which again creates synergy. Therefore, it has been agreed that the relevant departments of the Ministry of Education pay the staff costs on behalf of the polytechnics and public libraries. In this way the National Electronic Library Programme is developing towards a real national programme serving all types of institutions and ensuring all interested parties a speedy access to information. Such a consortium can also offer a number of other services.

It goes without saying that a consortium offers a number of benefits, the most obvious being its purchasing power. A consortium representing a large number of institutions, in some cases even more than 90, can more easily achieve more favourable conditions than individual institutions on their own.

CONCLUSION

Besides all types of cooperative arrangements two real consortia with a comprehensive coverage have been set up for research library purposes in Finland. Because the libraries are not legal entities the formal contracts have been signed by the universities.

The experience shows that cooperative arrangements on a large scale need an executive body which is strong enough to take care of the practical responsibilities. In Finland the position of the National Library has been developed to enable the Library to assume such a responsibility.

Due to the development of the networked environment borderlines between various types of libraries and other institutions should not be a hindrance for developing common approaches. The FinELib Consortium described above is a typical effort to overcome such borderlines and to develop a service covering all relevant parties. Special arrangements for solving the economical issues have, therefore, been necessary because the state budget system does not automatically support cross-border approaches.

The two consortia which have been discussed above represent two different models. Originally, the consortium of the National Electronic Library (FinELib) was *de facto* set up by the Ministry of Education. The Linnea2 Consortium has been established by its members without any initiative nor any funding from the Ministry. Consequently, the position of the executive body, the National Library, is also different. But both models are based on close cooperation between the participating institutions.