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University Library Collaboration in Belgium: Successes and Obstacles

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Abstract: The paper starts with a description of the complexity of the Belgian nation and an overview of its universities. During the term of the authors' librarianship at their university, there were regular meetings with their colleagues from the other universities, both at a national and a Flemish level. For both, a brief description is given of the actions originating from these collaborations. Nevertheless, these collaborations were also influenced negatively by the existing competitiveness between their universities. At a national level, this led to a failure of the dream of installing a unified library management system. At a Flemish level, resentments were raised by the discussion on how to divide the funding that the Ministry of Education had allocated for the acquisition of digital journals.

Keywords: Libraries; collaboration; obstacles; Belgium

Zusammenarbeit von Universitätsbibliotheken in Belgien: Erfolge und Hindernisse

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag beginnt mit der Beschreibung der Komplexität der Belgischen Nation und einem Überblick über seine Universitäten. Während der Amtszeit der Autoren als Bibliothekare ihrer Universität gab es regelmäßige Treffen mit den Kollegen der anderen Universitäten, sowohl auf nationaler als auch auf flämischer Ebene. Für beide wird eine kurze Beschreibung der Maßnahmen gegeben, die aus diesen Kooperationen hervorgegangen sind. Diese wurden allerdings auch durch den bestehenden Wettbewerb zwischen ihren Universitäten negativ beeinflusst. Auf nationaler Ebene führte dies dazu, dass der Traum von der Installation eines einheitlichen Bibliothekverwaltungssystems scheiterte. Auf flämischer Ebene sorgte die Diskussion über die Aufteilung der Gelder, die das Bildungsministerium für die Anschaffung digitaler Zeitschriften bereitstellte, für einige Probleme.

Schlüsselwörter: Bibliotheken in Belgien; Bibliotheks-kooperation; Erfolge und Hindernisse

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1 Introduction

During their terms as library directors, the authors witnessed both the financial problems caused by rising journal subscription prices and the transition to digital journals. These circumstances created an atmosphere in which collaboration between libraries could lead to great benefit for all the partners involved. And indeed: they did. Nevertheless, universities do not always behave as cosy colleagues, but they are also competitors. Financial support from government is provided on the basis of the number of students and on the quality and quantity of scientific output (in terms of published papers and their impact factor) and it is clear that this can often cast a cloud over their collaboration.

Although the historical events in Germany in 1989 (about which we were very happy) had no direct influence on our activities, unconsciously they may have strengthened our belief in the advantage of collaborating instead of opposing each other.

In section 2 we give an overview of the complex structure of the Belgian nation and its diversity of institutes for higher education. Sections 3 and 4¹ describe the collaboration among libraries around the Millennium, and the difficulties that sometimes hampered their success. Section 5² describes their collaboration in the last decades.

2 Complexity of the Belgium Nation

It is well known that the government structure of the Belgium nation is rather complex. The country is divided into three regions: Flanders in the North, Wallonia in the South, and the central Brussels region. Apart from the national government, each region has its own governance body. For cultural and educational matters, however, the nation is divided into three communities: the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) community, the French-speaking commu-

1 Sections 3 and 4 were written by the first author (RD), who was Library Director of the KU Leuven from 1976 to 2004.

2 Section 5 was written by the second author (HVK), who is the present Library Director of the KU Leuven.

nity, and a small German-speaking community. Again, each community has its own government body.

Whereas the German-speaking community does not have a university, in the other communities we have the following universities:

- Two state universities: UGent (Rijksuniversiteit Gent, Flemish University in Ghent) and ULg (Université de Liège, French-speaking university in Liège)
- Two Catholic universities: KU Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Flemish in Leuven) and UC Louvain (Université catholique de Louvain, French-speaking in Louvain-la-Neuve)
- Two ‘free’ universities in the Brussels region: the Flemish VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and the French-speaking ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles)
- A series of smaller (and younger) universities. The most important ones are the Universities of Antwerp (UA) and Hasselt (UHasselt) in the Flemish region, and Namur and Mons in the Walloon region. But there are also several smaller technical high schools where bachelor’s degrees can be obtained (there is also a similar school in the German-speaking community).

There are large differences in student numbers between these universities. As a typical example, the number of registered students on 31/10/2022 in the Flemish universities was 49 605 at KU Leuven, 42 709 at UGent, 16 199 at ULB, 18 061 at Antwerp and only 3 864 at Hasselt. As will be explained further on, this can cause problems for smooth collaboration. As far as scientific libraries are concerned, there is also a long list of university independent research libraries: the largest one is the Royal Library in Brussels, but there are several other institutions with their own collections.

3 Library Collaboration at a National Level

Even before a formal organisation for library collaboration was set up, the growing necessity for digitisation of library services had led to some sporadic joint activities. In 1973, the KUL libraries set up LIBIS, a special organisation for delivering support for the digital activities of the central and departmental libraries in the University. In collaboration with IBM and the University of Dortmund, DOBIS/LIBIS was developed as a software package for the digital catalogue. The expertise achieved in the LIBIS organisation led to requests for help from other libraries. In order to accommodate these requests, LIBISnet was set up, in which external

income was to be generated by delivering digital services. In principle, such a system could have led to an outstanding nationwide collaboration. If all universities would agree to input their complete collection of books into this central system, this would lead to the great tool of a union catalogue for all universities. The workload of converting the collection would be minimised by the possibility of adding only extra copy information to a record already entered by another library.

This was indeed what happened initially, albeit on a rather modest scale. But it soon became clear that each university wanted to acquire its own digital expertise (and who can blame them for this?). After a few years, every university library had acquired its own digital experts, and its own digital catalogue system. At present, LIBISnet³ is still flourishing, but with a large group of smaller libraries (among them, that of the Flemish Parliament, the KBC Bank, etc). The software has changed via Amicus and Aleph and at present Alma is in use.

The most important collaboration at a national level was the setting up of UniCat, the Union Catalogue of Belgian Libraries. Each university, however, retains its own cataloguing system, but inputs a copy of all its records into UniCat.⁴

4 Library Collaboration at a Regional Level

Also, at regional level a special contact organisation VOWB (Vlaams Overlegorgaan inzake Wetenschappelijk Bibliotheekwerk) was set up in 1992 for collaboration among the library directors of Flemish universities. In 2003, its activities were also extended to high schools. One of the success stories was the organisation of an interlibrary loan service resulting in weekly meetings on the Brussels University campus of vans from the various Flemish universities, where the books requested for loan were exchanged. The University of Antwerp took care of the financial aspects of the system and publicity to the various universities.

Other activities undertaken by VOWB were gathering information about legal aspects of author rights (and their restrictions for research and education), maintenance of a catalogue of current journal subscriptions (“Antilope”, in collaboration with libraries in the Netherlands), arranging a fixed lump sum per student with Reprobel for copyright required for document copies made in the library, and discus-

³ <https://bib.kuleuven.be/english/libis/libisnet>.

⁴ <https://www.unicat.be>.

sions about training (especially on digitisation!) of library staff members. In collaboration with libraries in the Netherlands, the Short Title Catalogus Vlaanderen (STCV) was set up as a database of all publications in the Netherlands and Flanders in the period from 1601 to 1800.

The financial problems arising from the digitisation of scientific journals, however, brought us into a very problematic situation. All libraries were confronted with the rising cost of subscription prices for these journals, and the question was brought to the attention of the Ministry of Education. In order to alleviate this problem, a special annual sum (around 2 million Euro) was provided, and “Elektron” was set up as a special committee to discuss how the funds should be divided among the universities.

Since part of the grant universities receive from the Flemish Government is based on their scientific output, librarians were subject to some pressure to apply similar rules for the division of grants for digital journals. As could have been expected, this led to a very problematic discussion. Since publishers charged each university the same subscription price for their digital journals, independent of the number of students, the smaller institutions suggested dividing this sum into equal parts. Larger universities, however, argued that an optimal usage of this grant could be obtained by giving more money to the larger universities: in this way the average number of accessible journals per student would be maximised. The discussions were rather tough. The larger universities were accused of denying the smaller ones the required essential building blocks for their scientific research, and the smaller universities were blamed for unnecessary wasting of precious money.

In the end, some relief was found by some publishers offering to give all universities equal access to journals subscribed to somewhere in the region, on the condition that no institution cancelled any subscriptions. The Elektron working group then focused on establishing deals with the publishers, in which access to their journals was given to all universities together (and often also to high schools) and for a total amount. This avoided specifying the cost for each individual university.

Nevertheless, these discussions proved that, despite a high measure of good will for friendly collaboration, financial inequalities can lead to very disturbing tensions ...

5 Recent Changes in Belgium

In Flanders VOWB and Elektron became competitors in negotiating licenses and the situation became quite unclear. In 2015, VOWB was dismantled and OWB (Overlegorgaan

Wetenschappelijke Bibliotheken = consultative body for scientific libraries) was created. It contained the same members as VOWB, but the focus was strictly on collaboration through projects. To make sure that at least one paper copy was kept in a scientific library but also to accommodate libraries in reusing collection spaces for student learning capacity, depot projects for biomedical sciences and for bio-engineers were started in Flanders. On the Walloon side, a similar evolution took place with another two depot projects currently in place. Since the Royal Library was included in all of the depot projects on both sides of the language border, it seemed logical to try out a national depot project. Ideas are currently being tested in the Peribel project.

Elektron VZW on the Flemish side had a restart with new statutes and a financial model including the rule that none of the participating libraries should pay more than 90 % of what they would pay on their own; a rule quite important in a small region with only five university libraries of very different scales as described above.

Another project, which started within VOWB and moved on to OWB, is the Okapi statistics.⁵ This project started within KU Leuven, was extended to the Association KU Leuven and later to all the Flemish Scientific Libraries (Okapi2). Currently we see the start of Okapi3, including the Walloon university libraries, so for the first time since the end of the LIBECON project we will be able to see Belgian library statistics and benchmark our services with other European libraries.

In 2018, we realized that a meeting of all the Belgian university librarians, including the Royal Library, would be beneficial for all of us; and currently twice or three times a year we have these meetings, which serve all of us as a valuable platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Within scientific libraries a strong focus has recently been on supporting research data management. The Flemish government supports this through the funding of both data stewards and a small amount for infrastructure. Each university or institution has set up its own infrastructure and support but the training of data stewards and exchange of expertise benefits from the structure created by the Flemish Open Science Board.

To conclude: although we are competitors at many levels, all Belgian scientific librarians appreciate the exchange of expertise and knowledge we currently have through these different platforms.

⁵ <https://www.vvbad.be/okapi2-benchmarking-van-vlaamse-wetenschappelijke-bibliotheken>.

6 Conclusion

Competition of any kind is well known to enhance the quality of activities and to improve performance. Nevertheless, it can also be at odds with a readiness to co-operate. We have witnessed two examples of this in the collaboration among university libraries in Belgium. However useful the collaboration between university libraries may be, the competition between the universities can lead to serious problems and may have a negative effect on this collaboration.

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