

SVAG : SCOTTISH VISUAL ARTS GROUP

UCABLIS WORKING GROUP

PROGRESS REPORT TO SVAG MEETING, 24TH JUNE 2003

The UCABLIS Working Group consists of: Richard Bapty, Glasgow University; Louisa Coles, RGU; Jane Furness, National Galleries of Scotland; Wilson Smith, Edinburgh College of Art; and Hil Williamson, Edinburgh City Libraries. The group has held an additional two times since the November SVAG meeting. In addition, Working Group members have carried out further inquiries with SVAG member libraries. Advice has been sought from Dennis Nicholson, Director of the Centre for Digital Library Research, Strathclyde University; Graeme Forbes, Head of Bibliographic Services, NLS; Michael Day, Research Officer, UKOLN; and Cate Newton, Director of General Collections, NLS and Secretary to SCURL..

Towards a distributed UCABLIS: CAIRNS and SPEIR

Discussions with Dennis Nicholson raised the possibility that an evolutionary approach could be taken to the development of UCABLIS on a distributed basis, in the context of the SPEIR (Scottish Portals for Education, Information and Research) project. SPEIR involves cross-sectoral development within the existing COSMiC (Confederation of Scottish Mini-Clumps) framework.

As SPEIR develops, existing resources could be used to create a CAIRNS miniclump of the catalogues of SVAG members who are either existing CAIRNS participants, or who can be brought up to CAIRNS compatibility using existing resources. Allowance would have to be made for any additional configuration work required on the SVAG members' side.

The resulting product would be a SVAG members' miniclump rather than a true distributed UCABLIS. It could act as a "demonstrator" for the UCABLIS project, but could well be of considerable use itself. Assessment of this utility would be part of the project.

Further problems

The SVAG miniclump concept would be reasonably straightforward to implement, but would leave two problems outstanding:

- Inclusion of non-subject specific material from the general collections of the larger libraries, generating false hits in searching.

The solution here is to create Z39.50 indexes restricting searches to material relevant to UCABLIS on an institution-by-institution basis. While exact specification of the index would be up to each individual institution, examination of the larger SVAG libraries confirms that in most cases the classification scheme would be the key to search refinement and that the envisaged UCABLIS indexes could most easily be based on class number ranges. However, it has to be noted that the NLS poses a problem to this approach as its collection is not classified.

Index construction will cost money, although additional indexes can be specified for replacement management systems - sometimes at little or no extra cost.

- Exclusion of holdings of SVAG members who are cannot be included in CAIRNS for technical or other reasons.

Two solutions have been proposed here: in the short term, to add these members at collection-level via SCONE; in the longer term, to include these members as and when they install new systems which will allow CAIRNS participation.

Many of the smaller SVAG members do not have online catalogues and our investigations have revealed that many are not likely to have them in the future; these libraries are often the ones considered to have most research potential. The usefulness of collection level descriptions is limited – a “directory” approach is not as good as direct access to records.

Investigations also reveal that some smaller libraries may have reservations about allowing direct access to their catalogues, in case this resulted in an unmanageable increase in outside visitors. It seems that reporting to the traditional UCABLIS merged database doesn't raise these issues to the same extent. A disclaimer or clear statement of access restrictions would be necessary to allay these reservations.

Existing UCABLIS data

The existing UCABLIS sheaf binders which predated the online database are now so out of date as to be of very questionable use.

The online data currently hosted by the NLS Voyager system has not been added to or maintained for several years, and a health warning to this effect is prominently displayed on the NLS OPAC. However, some of the existing UCABLIS records may have a value; the data includes a subset of the NLS records of interest to UCABLIS, and some machine-readable records contributed by non-CAIRNS compliant reporting libraries. The exact extent of both of these remains to be examined.

Cate Newton indicates that the online UCABLIS data will continue to be hosted by NLS until an alternative strategy is developed; although continuing public access to an ageing database will cease to be desirable at some point.

Examination of the existing UCABLIS data might suggest the strategy of maintaining a “lite” version of the classic UCABLIS database to include say NLS records and reported records from non Z39.50-compliant libraries. Ongoing costs of data preparation and maintenance, and the costs of hosting the data, would have to be carefully estimated.

BOOKHAD: an exemplar?

Graeme Forbes directed our attention to BOOKHAD, an RSLP project in which he had been involved, at <http://www.bookhad.ac.uk>

BOOKHAD is a subject resource for book history and book design incorporating a distributed search across the catalogues of its member libraries; collection descriptions are also included. The Working Group was impressed with this as a possible model for UCABLIS.

ACTION POINTS:

SPEIR: Confirm our interest in the SPEIR route; seek advice from Dennis Nicholson on the next steps to participation; nominate a SVAG representative to attend SPEIR management committee meetings.

Project funding: After further consultation, draw up a specification for a project to create an UCABLIS product with exit strategy for continuing maintenance and development; identify and apply to possible funding bodies.

SCURL: Present this report to SCURL Business Committee (next meeting 26th June) for information.