Guest Editorial

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These are difficult times. Economic and political circumstances militate against the public sector. Public services are under pressure as country after country sees its tax base decrease in the face of rising unemployment, a growing number of people entitled to social welfare benefits, and the near collapse of important parts of the financial services sector and consequent loss of both private investment income and public revenue. In such a climate, education and all those things associated with it – including libraries and research – are inevitably in the firing line for restraint and perhaps even for cut-backs. No doubt the worst of these economic difficulties are (relatively) temporary, although their effects will be felt for many years to come. It is less easy to see a resolution of some of our political difficulties. Instability – or the threat of instability or even the perception of the threat of instability – lead inevitably to a political discourse which focuses on security rather than on progressive social and educational policies. All of this has an impact on libraries, of which the vast majority throughout the world are dependent on public funds for most of their income.

However, all need not be gloom. The profound changes in librarianship and information work which were discussed at the PLA Conference in 2008 are opening up new methods of information transfer and offering new means for serving users. The LIS profession can find ways to exploit ICT which will circumvent and perhaps even overcome straightened economic circumstances and a difficult political position. In higher education,

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students and academic staff alike are using libraries in new and different ways. Certainly for most students of the 'Google generation' – IT literate, media savvy and comfortable in an electronic environment – the library is only one of many channels through which they access information. Satellite television opens up a whole world (literally) of infotainment. Search engines can lead us to a range of resources which is incomparably greater than those to be found in any library. This has its dangers for students if they do not learn how to assess and evaluate the sources which they find, but access itself is – at worst – a marginal problem. For both academics and librarians, however, the growing preference of students for electronic access to information and electronic communications presents its own challenges.

A full appreciation of the implications of more or less unrestricted access to the Web is essential for librarians and academics alike. The conventional text book, and the conventional lecture which it accompanied, are effectively outmoded. Face-to-face contact between student and teacher will always be valuable – indeed essential – but the time available for it can be much better used if the student is encouraged to be a learner rather than merely a passive recipient of teaching. It is in this respect that the librarian has a key role to play in the educational process itself. What we used to call 'user education' was, in practice, often little more than showing students how to use the library at a very basic level. Indeed, the more traditional teachers - and perhaps even some librarians – almost discouraged library use because it would lead students away from safely predetermined paths of instruction. Such constraints can no longer be imposed on those with even the most basic ICT skills and access to the Internet. Rather than lament this change, the best universities throughout the world are enthusiastically embracing it, and in doing so forging a new partnership between academics and librarians to underpin student learning.

The development of Virtual Learning Environments has effectively created a new common ground for all the partners in

the educational process in universities. Well structured VLEs provide students with access to a wide range of resources, some created for the course (the equivalent of the old-fashioned 'hand-outs'), and some identified by the teacher (the equivalent of the reading list). But the VLE can also lead to portals through which students can explore a subject for themselves. Some might see the portal as the equivalent of the library; if that is so, it is a much better resourced library than any that students could previously have used. To make educationally effective use of these facilities, however, students need to acquire certain skills, and these include skills in information evaluation. Teaching students how to evaluate what they learn (and what they are told) is at the heart of a true higher education today. In a rapidly changing world, it is no longer possible to envisage someone emerging from university at the age of 23 or 24 equipped with the knowledge and skills which they will need to carry them through a whole career over the next 40 years. The core skills of any 21st-century professional in any sphere and in any country will include the ability to seek, find and evaluate information and to learn and re-learn continuously throughout life.

Is it possible to promote such radical change (for it is radical) in a time of economic constraint? Ultimately the answer to that question is political rather than economic. Will the founders of libraries and universities – in almost all cases the state – be willing to invest in libraries at the expense of other priorities? The argument can only be framed in terms of the future, but it is precisely at times of great difficulty that governments should be looking forwards. Economic and political instability are rooted not only in discontent with the present but also in fear for the future. The mere promise of better things to come does not address the problem. Governments have to demonstrate their intentions rather than merely articulate their good will. One certain way in which we will prolong our current economic and political difficulties is by not investing in the education of the young and providing educational opportunities for everyone throughout their lives. Libraries and librarians lie at the heart of this investment, but we, as a profession, also have to be able to show and to articulate what

contribution we can make, and what we can bring to future success.

This has very often been a problem. There have always been politicians and indeed Vice-Chancellors who have seen librarians as little more than the custodians of collections of books. And all too often this has been true. When I first visited Pakistan nearly 30 years ago, there were some university and college 'libraries' which were little more than dusty assemblages of out-of-date books and incomplete runs of journals. Of course there were reasons for this – financial, political and cultural. And there have been great changes since then as a new generation of librarians have proved their worth to the authorities. But there is no room for complacency. Difficult times lead people to seek easy and familiar solutions. Librarians throughout the world have an obligation to their profession – and perhaps more importantly to their clients – to make the case for libraries. It must, however, be the real case for libraries which is based not in sentiment and nostalgia but in an appreciation of the potential of contemporary information media and technologies to deliver services which can underpin both social and economic development for the country and for individual citizens.

It has always been difficult to translate the educational, social and cultural case for libraries into economic terms. Despite the pioneering work of Machlup and Porat in the 1960s and 1970s, and the more recent contributions of such scholars as Robert D Hayes and John Sumsion, it remains true that the economics of information and of library services is still seen as a slightly esoteric specialism. Some LIS professionals may even find it distasteful. Yet it is central to developing an argument which will persuade the politicians who ultimately control the fate of university and public libraries alike. It is not merely a matter of providing good libraries or high-quality and accessible ICT, essential as both of those are. Services are only as good as those who provide them, which puts the ball firmly in the court of the library profession itself. The profession rightly prides itself on its political neutrality, but that

does not give it a license to be politically impotent or naïve, or economically ignorant. Arguments for library development will be credible only if they are framed in terms of contemporary political and economic reality. Such an argument will show how access to, and understanding of, information is at the heart of a modern education, and how no country can flourish without a well-educated citizenry. The profession needs to be active in promoting the practical need for good library and information services in schools, colleges and universities and in the wider community not for their own sake – because they are an indefinable 'good thing' – but because such services and the ability to use them are fundamental to a 21st-century state.