

# **M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries – Library Co-operation in the South East of England.**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper will consider the development of a regional consortium of academic libraries (the M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries) in the South East of England, UK. It will begin by examining the reasons for inaugurating the consortium in 1993, chart its history since that date, and discuss its governance and financing model. It will then examine the role of the M25 Consortium in supporting its member libraries by offering advocacy services to relevant regional and national bodies, providing staff training and development opportunities, and other mutual services such as disaster preparedness and provision of services to users with special needs. It will go on to examine the work of the M25 Consortium in facilitating user services such as pan-regional finding aids and access to individual members' collections. It will discuss successes and problems in moving outside defined regional areas and library domains. It will examine the impact of the M25 Consortium on the development of other library consortia and national UK academic and public library responses to collection development access issues. It will conclude by discussing the options facing the M25 Consortium in the future and the role of consortia in the UK library scene.

## **Keywords:**

Academic Libraries; Advocacy; Consortia; Mutual Services; Regional Collaboration; Resource Discovery; Staff Development

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## **Background**

The M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries was established in 1993. It has 52 members originally located within London's orbital motorway (from which it takes its name) and now includes a growing number outside. The region encompasses a large number of institutions engaged in higher education and related activities, the largest concentration in the UK. Originally founded as the M25 Consortium of Higher Education Libraries, the name change in 2002 reflected the fact that it is not only universities with similar collections and missions which support learners and researchers. The Consortium was established to facilitate universities and others in London to work together to provide services to their users and to support each other.

The federal University of London dominates academic work in London with many large colleges such as King's College, Imperial College and Royal Holloway. Established in 1826 the University awards degrees but otherwise leaves the organisation of academic life to its individual members. This includes the provision of library services and each constituent member of the University has its own library. A University of London Research Library also exists which has holdings in the broad arts, humanities, and social sciences (as well as early printed and archival material on the history of science).

Although there has been a long tradition of the libraries of the constituent Colleges of the University working together, though often in bilateral or small local agreements, no provision existed for collaborative work outside the bounds of the University.

Until 1992 a binary divide existed in higher education provision in the UK. Until this date Polytechnics existed and provided largely vocational tertiary education alongside universities. Polytechnic degrees were awarded through a single national body whilst Universities had either their own individual degree-awarding powers or were part of a federal arrangement. This divide was removed in 1992 and the Polytechnics were allowed to award degrees in their own names and were given University titles. As higher education became harmonised in the capital, it seemed appropriate for the various colleges of the University of London to work with the new universities and indeed with those institutions which were already universities but not part of the University of London. Clearly a new structure was needed to facilitate this.

The M25 Consortium was duly established and included in its membership both Colleges of the University of London and newly created Universities with the explicit remit to encourage co-operation between pre- and post-1992 universities. The Consortium has grown steadily since this date and by the mid-1990s included all the higher education institutions within the capital. Perceiving the benefits of membership of the Consortium, approaches were made from institutions outside the capital but with close proximity to the M25. These institutions included the University of Surrey, University of Kent at Canterbury and Hertfordshire University. In 2003 institutions such as the University of Sussex and Anglia Polytechnic University applied for membership. These universities are some fifty miles from the capital. Growth has also included non-University members such as learned societies, the British Museum Library, the National Art Library and the libraries of the Imperial War Museum and the Natural History Museum. As indicated earlier, the name change to Academic Libraries was made to reflect the membership of these organisations.

### **Governance and Finance**

The M25 Consortium is a membership organisation which draws heavily on its members for its activities. There is no paid secretariat or other directly employed staff managing the main business of the Consortium, although there is a full time administrator specifically for the staff development work and a small systems team. This arrangement has both benefits and disadvantages. The benefits include the ability of staff in constituent libraries to become involved in consortial activities and in excess of one hundred staff from member libraries are engaged in working groups, and other activities. This has important staff development benefits for individuals and ensures that the Consortium is able to reflect the true needs of its members. The disadvantages are perhaps obvious – the range of activities in which the Consortium is engaged and the number of members that it now has mean that ensuring that the Consortium works efficiently is a large undertaking and one which rests on the good-will of elected officers who are also Directors of Library Services in member organisations.

A Steering Group comprising a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer oversees the work of the Consortium, plus six further members elected by the membership for a period of two-years with an option for a further two years. Chairs of the various working groups are also co-opted onto the Steering Group. This ensures some stability but also the opportunity for new members to join the Steering Group. An Annual General Meeting in the summer is the time when the Consortium's officers are elected. This and the winter meeting are the two main events for members. As well as business meetings, these events are usually accompanied by presentations on regional and other topical developments.

The Consortium's finances rest on membership subscriptions. These in turn are based on a formula which reflects the banding arrangements applied by the UK's Joint Information Services Committee (the JISC) when calculating the charges for electronic resources. Formerly based on a formula which took into account the number of students and library budget, the JISC banding arrangements allow for greater transparency and ease of calculation. The Consortium has also been successful in attracting some sponsorship from library management system suppliers who advertise their products and network with customers, and potential customers, at meetings. To reflect its size, and to enable the Consortium to benefit from various UK tax law provisions, an application has been made to the Charity Commissioners for registration of the Consortium as a Charity.

The subscriptions are calculated based on the financial requirements of the Consortium. These are in large measure running costs of the various groups, the work of the Consortium's Systems' Team, plus some extra for the central activities. These are derived from the business plan which the Consortium prepares each year and is presented to the full membership by the Steering Group for approval during the AGM. Currently the Consortium raises around £100,000 to support its activities. Considering the range of activities in which it is engaged, this is a comparatively small sum, and represents good value for money for the members.

## **M25 Consortium Activities for Libraries Services and Library Staff**

### *Collaboration and Partnership*

Library provision in London is particularly complex and multi-sectoral and it is important that the Consortium is able to work with relevant groups and have input into capital-wide initiatives and developments. The Collaboration and Partnership Group identifies strategic areas for collaboration by mapping the Consortium's business plan to those of its main strategic partners taking into account the national and regional agendas for higher education. These partners include public libraries and the British Library, government libraries and health libraries. On behalf of the Consortium this Group establishes working relationships with appropriate partner organisations in order to progress this collaboration, including the London Libraries Development Agency and Archives, Libraries, Museums London.

### *Continuing Professional Development - CPD25*

CPD25 grew out of the University of London Staff Development Group and a similar existing organisation within the Consortium which offered a limited range of staff development. It was felt that an important strand of consortial activity was in training and developing library staff and this group came into being in early 2003. Following the pattern of other consortial activity, it is organised into six task groups which commission seminars, workshops and other events. These groups span personal development such as career development and personal effectiveness, to service issues such as operational management, user resources and legal compliance. The group has proved highly successful and has organised over 100 events in its first year of existence. To access training events members pay an annual corporate subscription and a small fee for each person who attends.

### *Disaster Planning*

As part of its mission to support members, a Group was established to help libraries identify any risks which could affect their service delivery, plan for the aftermath of a disaster such as fire or flood by promoting best practice. The Group has helped raise awareness of the issue for academic libraries via various events. A highly usable and

successful online template has been devised to help libraries work through these issues and prepare themselves for such eventualities. This website was short-listed for a national IT award. An extension to this work has been to establish arrangements for libraries to aid each other in the event of a disaster, including allowing students from the affected library to have access to others' collections and services.

#### *Disabled and Special Needs Support*

Following the introduction of legislation covering higher education for those with disabilities and special or additional needs, a Group was established to disseminate best practice in this area. This group has helped raise awareness of the legislation for academic libraries and has held various events to raise awareness of the provisions of the legislation and to highlight the ways in which academic libraries should respond to it.

### **M25 Consortium Activities for Library Users**

#### *Inform25*

One of the first activities that the Consortium engaged in was the provision of a joint virtual catalogue of its members. This was undertaken under the aegis of the UK's *elib* programme in the early 1990s which sought to apply a range of IT solutions to the development of library services. Inform25 – originally called the M25 Link Project – was established as part of the Clumps strand which included other virtual catalogues. Based around the z39.50 protocol, it enabled the simultaneous cross searching of a range of catalogues which produced a single hit list. The Inform25 service now includes information about individual libraries and their collections (both by subject and geographic location), opening hours and access arrangements <http://www.m25lib.ac.uk/>. Funding from the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) has enabled the development of a scaleable tool which will help users to find the most appropriate library for their needs and to obtain information about how to access those libraries. A subset of libraries has also made their serials collections simultaneously searchable.

Work has also been undertaken to map access to special collections in Consortium libraries and public libraries (MASC25 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/masc25.htm>), and to provide a simultaneous search engine for archives within both M25 libraries and archives and museums (AIM25 <http://www.aim25.ac.uk/index.stm>). The latter project again receiving funding from the RSLP.

#### *Access to libraries*

These 'resource discovery' projects are all underpinned by a number of reciprocal access schemes. A Consortium scheme which gave staff and researchers physical access to libraries within the Consortium and allowed them to borrow material, has now become a national initiative called SCOUNL Research Extra. Likewise, a co-operative venture between Consortium libraries which permitted access and borrowing facilities for part-time, distance, and placement students as well as provision for full-time students and staff to use other libraries on a reference only basis has now become a national initiative under the badge UK Libraries Plus. A third Consortium arrangement fast-tracked taught undergraduate students into the British Library – this has been picked up by a national scheme called 'Inspire'.

### **Successes and Problems**

From the above, I think it can be agreed that the M25 Consortium can be judged to have been successful on many levels. It has a high level of participation in its area; it has a national profile and widespread respect for its work.

However it has a problem with its definition as a regional Consortium since it allows in members from outside the politically drawn boundaries. There is an increasing regional agenda within the UK and this has led to devolution for the home countries of Scotland and Wales and a regional awareness in some parts of England such as London and the North East. As an essentially regionally based group, the M25 Consortium has established links with the various educational and cultural agencies in the capital and its Advocacy Group promotes the Consortium to these bodies. The area outside London is generally referred to as the South East and has various regional bodies, but lacks a strong regional identity because of the presence of London in its midst. This lack of identity has been felt in the academic library sector too and many university libraries have requested to join the M25 Consortium, as there is not an equivalent Consortium in this area. The Consortium policy continues to be that advocacy work will be confined to the London agencies and not to the wider south-east. A group has now been established (South East University Libraries) to work with the south-east agencies, but its membership is wider than the M25 Consortium members outside London and it could pursue agendas that are at variance with those of the M25 Consortium. The challenge will be to try and join this regional work together to the benefit of library users.

A further potential problem for the Consortium is its lack of paid secretarial assistance or other dedicated management infrastructure. Currently the burden of work falls upon it's – albeit willing – members. With a large and increasing range of activities, this will become unsustainable into the longer term and will need to be addressed if major new developments are to take place.

### **Impact of the M25 Consortium**

The success of the pan-regional finding aid, InforM25, has led to the development of a similar tool for the public library service in the London boroughs. London public libraries offer over 18 million books, CDs, audio books, DVDs, videos and computer games, as well as a wealth of community information on clubs, services and events. Each of the 33 boroughs has its own library service and prior to 2003 their catalogues could not be cross-searched simultaneously. With assistance from the M25 Systems Team, a project has been undertaken to allow this to happen. Called 'What's in London's Libraries' or WiLL, there is now a selection of borough libraries' catalogues available for cross-searching <http://www.londonlibraries.org.uk/will/>

As a large grouping of libraries in London, the M25 Consortium has been a key player in other initiatives in the capital and has brought its expertise and know-how to them. These have included Find it in London's Libraries (collections level descriptions for libraries, archives and museums across a variety of sectors <http://www.fiil.org.uk/>) and Libraries and Learners in London (which has developed reference-only access arrangements for users regardless of their formal learning status <http://www.londonlibraries.org.uk/servlets/lil/home>).

As has already been noted, the M25 Consortium's work in developing and negotiating access schemes in the capital has been adopted nationally in a number of schemes such as SCOUNL Research Extra, Inspire and UK Libraries Plus.

### **Future Developments**

The M25 Consortium now has in membership the major academic libraries in and around London and a number from rather further away. It is unlikely, therefore that it will grow considerably in size, although applications from smaller specialist libraries are being received.

However the range of services that the Consortium provides is set to expand. Proposals to establish a new Group investigating quality issues have been approved by the Steering Group and this Group will look at best practice and help members with surveys and evaluating their services. Likewise a student centred Group has been established to look at developing services for postgraduate and undergraduate taught students. This appears to be the last major – albeit very large – stakeholder whose needs have not been specifically addressed by the Consortium.

The advantages of being in membership of a Consortium appear to be very attractive to academic libraries. The UK political impetus in higher education is for universities to work together where possible, and this is reflected in the work that libraries undertake. This is one reason why membership of the M25 Consortium is high and its work is appreciated.

It is very unlikely that the Consortium will enter into the field of procurement at the present time. Unlike many Consortia in other countries, the M25 Consortium does not broker deals with publishers or other suppliers leaving this to national bodies such as JISC or to local purchasing consortia who act on behalf of groups of Universities in procuring a range of goods and services, of which information products are only one.

### **Conclusion**

The role of the M25 Consortium is now well established and its geographical focus has been important in this success. The relatively close proximity of most of its members was important, particularly in its formative years, in helping foster a spirit of collaboration and mutual benefit. Moving outside the geographical boundaries has posed some challenges, but these should not be insurmountable. The Consortium has provided a range of services for its members which are provided cost-effectively and collaboratively and it has also established itself as an important voice with the cultural and educational policy players in the capital and on the national scene.