

## USER RESEARCH FOR THE NATIONAL REFERENCE LIBRARY FOR SCIENCE AND INVENTION

By SIR FRANK FRANCIS, K.C.B.

Director and Principal Librarian, British Museum, London, W.C.1

AN editorial in *Nature* of July 1, 1961, p. 1, subjected the proposal for "The National Reference Library for Science and Technology" (as it was called) to a searching scrutiny, and voiced the anxiety of scientists that the services available in the new Library should be as complete as possible.

Both the British Museum and the Patent Office, the future and present parent organizations of the new Library respectively, are fully aware of the complexities and of the opportunities which the change-over offers. The librarian of the Patent Office, Miss Maysie Webb, who was referred to in the article, is most concerned of all, since she has the task of running the day-to-day machine while at the same time overhauling it and planning its conversion to new, expanded and, it is hoped, even more efficient uses. The Trustees of the British Museum, who have been charged with the control and the administration of the new Library, look on their task as a great opportunity to provide an exemplary kind of library service for special classes of users.

There are, however, some questions of general importance which should be answered so far as possible before more detailed planning takes place. These concern the nature of the service to be provided by the new Library, and it is felt that detailed research into the use which is made of the present Library is needed to provide the essential basis for this future planning. The free access which has always been permitted in the Patent Office Library has, by its nature, precluded any systematic study being made hitherto, and there are few relevant facts or figures to guide us. Briefly, we need to be told or to be able to deduce: (a) the degree of 'professionalism' or system shown by the readers in their use of the library and whether there is a pattern, or patterns, in their approach; (b) the tools they use in their approach to the literature; (c) whether the present acquisitions policy reflects the needs of present and future users; (d) the length of active life of the material in the Library.

Research into these questions has, so far as I am aware, never been undertaken on a large scale in this or in any other library. It has now been made possible for us, however, with funds generously placed at our disposal by the Goldsmiths Company, to put in hand such an organized study, and we intend, with the full agreement of the Patent Office, to employ for one year special staff to study the present usage of the Patent Office Library and to investigate so far as possible its likely future requirements, and thus to secure information on which the services of the new Library can be soundly planned.

It is intended to begin by making a broad survey of the categories into which readers fall and of their use of the library and to go on from there to make a much more detailed survey based on a valid statistical sample.

The programme we have outlined for this purpose is as follows:

- (1) *Broad survey*
  - Categories of readers :
    - Their profession (patent agents ; information officers ; research workers ; translators ; etc.)
    - Their purpose (rigorous subject search ; specific documents ; inventive novelty ; browsing ; etc.)
- (2) (Based on (1)) What is a valid statistical sample for deeper survey ? How best to take it ?
- (3) *Deep survey*
  - (a) Frequency of visits ; time spent ; distance travelled.
  - (b) Foreign language usage :
    - Can they read foreign languages ?
    - Do they ?
    - Will they later ?
- (c) Readers coming to consult specific documents :
  - How many did they inspect ?
  - Categories (that is, books, periodicals, etc.)
  - What percentage was not examined and why ?
- (d) Readers coming to carry out a subject search :
  - Which sources did they use ?
    - Library catalogue
    - Library indexes
    - Abstracting Journals
    - Book references
    - Journal indexes
    - Other
  - What did they examine (categories) ?
  - What percentage was useful ?
  - What percentage of references was not examined and why (not in library ; language difficulty ; doubtful subject value) ?
- (e) Specific items examined (dates and titles)
- (f) Use of catalogues :
  - Author catalogue      How many items were sought ?  
How many were found ?
  - Classified catalogue    Did it lead to useful specific material ?  
Difficulties ?
  - Special indexes        Which was used ? Did it lead to  
useful specific material ?  
Difficulties ?

Connected with this research into the use of the present Library and the likely use of the new Library, we propose to investigate the present scheme of classification and to see whether it should be replaced. To do this we expect that existing scientific literature classifications will be critically examined and evaluated in relation to the details we discover about the present use of the Library.

The Trustees of the British Museum have appointed Miss Barbara Kyle to carry out this work, and they plan to appoint, to work with her, a full-time science graduate and to call on the services of statisticians and other specialists as required. With the advice of these specialists it is hoped that questionnaires of the highest degree of practicality and significance can be designed and the results usefully assessed.

The editorial in *Nature*, to which I have already referred, stresses the importance of the co-operation of users in seeing that the needs of the new Library are clearly and continuously presented. We need the co-operation of present and potential users of the Library's services in our inquiry, and it is our earnest hope that they will be willing to respond generously to the calls we shall make on them and on their time.

We shall be glad to hear from any who are interested. Letters should be addressed to me, or to Miss Webb or Miss Kyle at the Patent Office Library, 25 Southampton Buildings, London, W.C.2. It is then hoped to make progress reports on our survey in *Nature* from time to time.