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Microcomputer Use in the Humanities and Social Sciences: a United Kingdom Survey

R. Hirschheim, S. Smithon and D. Whitehouse

1. Introduction

This short paper summarises the major findings of a questionnaire survey of the use of microcomputers in university departments in a selection of humanities, arts and social science disciplines in the United Kingdom. A more detailed presentation of the results and the research methodology can be found elsewhere [Hirschheim, R., Smithon, S. and Whitehouse, D., »A survey of microcomputer use in the humanities and social sciences: A UK university study«, Submitted for publication.] The survey was sponsored by IBM (UK) Ltd.

According to their supporters, microcomputers offer the humanities a relatively inexpensive tool which can provide improvements in research, teaching, presentation and administration. It was not known to what extent the recent signs of interest in microcomputing, as evinced by the number of articles in the literature, were the voices of a few isolated enthusiasts, or whether there was a more general growth of interest in microcomputing in the humanities.

Although a few surveys on the use of microcomputers had been carried out on individual disciplines, little was known about what was happening in UK university humanities departments in general terms. Katzen's wide-ranging study, carried out in 1983 [Katzen, M. (1985), Technology and Communication in the Humanities, Library and Information Research Report No. 32, British Library] surveyed departments of all the humanities in UK universities and polytechnics, and their associated computers (mainframe and microcomputers) constituted only part of her survey. We wished to provide an up-to-date, fairly detailed description, in quantitative and qualitative terms, of the introduction of microcomputers.

A comprehensive survey of all humanities departments in UK universities was ruled out because of the size of the task compared to the resour-

ces available. Accordingly, the authors selected ten disciplines, ranging from the more traditional ones, such as classics and English language, to those, such as psychology and geography, that have aspects which, in method or philosophy, seem closer to the physical sciences. The disciplines chosen were:

- Archaeology
- Classics
- English language and literature
- Geography
- History
- Law
- Linguistics
- Modern languages
- Psychology
- Sociology.

The questionnaire, circulated to Heads of Department during the summer of 1986, consisted of seventy questions, some of which involved multiple answers, and was divided into five sections:

- a) background information
- b) current provision and use of microcomputers
- c) future plans with regard to microcomputers
- e) other computing facilities
- f) provision of computing courses to students.

2. Main Results

Of the 612 originally circulated questionnaires, 236 (38%) were completed and returned. Whilst the responses to the questions were very mixed, reflecting the particular experiences of the individual departments, a number of threads are clearly discernible:

- a) Increased provision of microcomputers

This survey indicates an increased provision of microcomputers in humanities departments in the three years since Katzen's study. In 1983, only 21% of departments had access to microcomputers compared to the 88% indicated by our respondents. Departmental »ownership« of microcomputers has increased from 11% in 1983 to 79.7% in 1986.

- b) Considerable differences in usage between disciplines

This was seen in the numbers of departmental machines, the proportion of users within departments and the range of applications. Clearly, psychology and geography were the heaviest user disciplines, across nearly all departments, with considerable experience, large numbers of microcomputers and a wide range of usage. Archaeology and linguistics seem to be

fairly intense users, with sociology and modern languages both well established. There was evidence that many modern language departments were eager to expand their usage. In the other disciplines surveyed; classics, English, history and law; the picture was one of a small number of departments using microcomputers extensively, in a pioneering fashion, while in the majority of departments usage was much more limited in both scale and scope.

c) A relatively favourable disposition towards microcomputers

Few respondents displayed outright hostility to microcomputers but many expressed a degree of scepticism over their supposed benefits. However, in many departments, there is evidence of a fairly intensive and enthusiastic use of microcomputers. Academics generally appeared sympathetic towards the future use of microcomputers, and seemed eager to help resolve problems which might stand in their way. Whereas the respondents were aware of a variety of problems, there seemed to be an overwhelming desire to see increased microcomputers facilities: 95% of the respondents favoured at least some increase.

d) Uncertainty over the benefits for teaching

The survey did not include an assessment of student opinion towards microcomputing but our respondents appeared noticeably uncertain of the benefits in teaching as compared to those gains apparent in research or administration. The current University Grants Committee/Computer Board Joint Computers in Teaching Initiative, which has provided funding for projects in teaching, may provide evidence to alleviate this uncertainty.

e) Finance as a constraint to growth

Currently, the main constraint to future growth is considered, above all, to be that of finance. However, funding should not be seen as a panacea; should sufficient money be provided, by Government funding or other means, there are a number of dark clouds on the horizon. This survey shows clearly a high proportion of cases where the reluctance of potential users has been a problem, and the majority feeling that humanities academics are not particularly well-informed about microcomputers, is worthy of note.

3. Recommendations

In the absence of large-scale government financing of microcomputing for the humanities, the authors feel that the emphasis should be on providing heads of department with firmer information on the likely costs and benefits of computerisation. This could be achieved by a number of means:

- a) the funding of chairs and fellowships in the humanities with specific reference to microcomputing;
- b) the funding of posts for »bridgebuilders«, academics who would make the practical links, through teaching and research, between computing and the humanities;
- c) support for traditional means of spreading information, such as seminars, conferences and journal articles;
- d) increased availability of trial equipment for loan;
- e) support for courses in computing for humanities staff and students;
- f) support for user groups and the continued support of networks such as JANET;
- g) the development of more demonstrator projects.

Furthermore, the authors feel, on the evidence of the survey, that there is a need for the formulation of general guidelines to help in the planning, acquisition and use of microcomputers in the humanities. In general, additional research at all levels, from case studies of the experiences of individual departments to surveys and comparisons between, and within, disciplines would provide further useful information. These could be directed at assessing evolving computer usage in the more longstanding user disciplines, such as geography or psychology, as well as examining the experiences of the more recent user departments, such as classics, modern languages or English.

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