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SPEAKING VOLUMES: THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S LIBRARIES

By Dr Lee Rotherham

With ordinary families tightening their belts in the recession, the EU institutions need to play their part and cut unnecessary costs. The European Commission's libraries have frequently been criticised as a waste of resources. This paper shows that the extravagance of these underused assets stretches far further than was previously thought. This is particularly inappropriate when many public libraries in the UK are under threat of closure.

Key points

This short paper explores the current status of the central libraries of the European Commission in Brussels and Luxembourg. It reveals that;

- Despite coming under criticism several years ago for funding such underused assets, taxpayers' money continues to be used to support these two ghost libraries.
- The main building is a former convent that cost over **£16 million** (€20.7 million).
- Each **book loan** works out as costing around **£570** (€711.38).
- Each **visitor** works out as costing **£580** (€722.29).
- At any given moment in time, either library on average will likely have **two people visiting it**.
- The Commission meanwhile simultaneously spends considerable sums on expanding its 'electronic library', and makes great play of this investment in remote access.
- Other EU institutions and Commission DGs have their own libraries, some a few hundred yards away. There are **52 EU libraries** in total, servicing the Eurocrats.
- Meanwhile in Britain, many community libraries are under threat.

Dr Lee Rotherham, leading EU expert, said:

"It is wrong that while community libraries in Britain are closing for lack of funds, MEPs and Eurocrats are spending millions on huge libraries that hardly anyone uses. There is no way that taxpayers' money should be poured down the drain like this. The EU institutions are addicted to squandering money on grand facilities that bring no benefit to ordinary people."

About the author:

Dr Lee Rotherham is a graduate of the University of London and holds an MPhil and PhD from the University of Birmingham. Dr Rotherham is one of the most experienced analysts of EU issues working in British politics, having been a researcher for the "Westminster Group of Eight" Eurorebels and an adviser to three successive Shadow Foreign Secretaries, a role part based within the European Parliament. This expertise led to his appointment as Chief of Staff to the Rt Hon David Heathcoat-Amory MP, British parliamentary delegate to the Convention on the Future of Europe. Dr Rotherham played a central role assisting delegates opposing the European Constitution, and the drafters of the Minority Report. A reservist with service in both Iraq and Afghanistan, he has been extensively published internationally.

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1. Introduction to the Central Libraries

The European Commission's Central Library was founded in 1958. Because of the dispersed nature of the European institutions, it has two main outlets.

The main building is in Brussels at 18, rue van Maerlant. This is a former convent and the only pre-Second World War building in the vicinity left standing after the arrival of the EEC. It has a reading room (with 28 places), a catalogue room, and four storage areas holding 101,500 volumes, perhaps around the same as a small university or college. Since 2000, the Library has been operating from this building on a long lease with an option to purchase. It cost over £16 million (€20.7 million).

The Luxembourg asset meanwhile is in a shared block (the Joseph Bech building). It has a reading room on two levels, with 63 seats. This hosts 528,000 volumes, also located in one additional underground storage location and one 'offshore site'. This is about the same volume of material in storage at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.¹

2. Costs

Acquisitions

There is a designated €2.7 million for the two libraries to spend on acquisitions – around one third on books and the remainder on "acquisitions of data".²

In 2007, this was spent in the following way;

Location	Acquisitions	Newspapers	Periodicals
Brussels site (CLB)	5,890	1718 copies of 239 titles	1961 copies of 1535 titles
Lux. site (CLL)	484	88 copies of 51 titles	124 titles

The end destination of so many newspapers is not known. The suspicion is that many circulate within the Commission's cafeterias. The Luxembourg library meanwhile receives 2000 titles in exchange for handing over EU publications (this is therefore not entirely gratis, as these have been printed at public expense).

¹ Such data as is in the public domain can be found in the Central Library's *Activity Report 2007*

² We assume that this is budget line 15 01 60 01

Salaries

As at the start of 2008, the Brussels location employed three members of senior management, and fifty others. The Head of Unit can expect to be on a basic salary of anywhere between €73,200 and €157,200, plus perks.

The Luxembourg location has a staff of eleven.

We can anticipate a wage bill, including pension liabilities, easily in the order of €2 million per year for Brussels and €350,000 for Luxembourg.³

These costs exclude certain peripherals. For instance, staff are known in 2007 to have attended conferences in Milan, the Azores, Potsdam, London, Brno, and Maastricht.

Office Costs

Additional running costs cannot be quantified accurately due to an absence of data, as these are rolled into general budget lines with other buildings occupied by the European Commission. There is for example a small portion of the security budget (which across the Commission is a major budget line), services, rates, and maintenance costs. A best estimate for these bills runs in the order of perhaps €100,000.

Total

The total cost for the Central Libraries is correspondingly assessed to be €5.25 million annually.

Use

The total figure for the number of visitors to the Brussels site for 2007 is given as 4,158. The library estimates this as an average rate of 20-25 visitors a day.

However, this figure includes 270 students and 128 professionals from outside of the Commission (presumably including lobbyists). More to the point, 623 are identified as "group visitors". This appears to mean tourists. The Brussels library hosts open days to flag up its role, with tours that are reasonably well attended.

Excluding those who visit without using the facilities, but including those from outside the Commission who use it as a sort of public library, this suggests a more accurate picture of usage of 3,535 visitors. This compares

³ *Activity Report 2007*



with the figures for visitors to the Luxembourg site, at 3,263 an average cited by the library of 16 visitors a day.

Of course, in addition to reference use in location, there is the takeaway service.

The statistics here for 2007 are equally not impressive;

Location	Visitors	Loans	Renewals	Photocopy requests
Brussels site (CLB)	3,535	6,671	1,501	4,225
Luxembourg site (CLL)	3,263	709	135	63

On a positive note, the number of loans made by the Central Library in Brussels rose by around 18 per cent compared to 2006, and the number of loans made by the CLL in 2007 was up 112 per cent on the previous year. This is to be applauded. It followed a special information campaign with new leaflets, presentations of the new catalogue, and promotional articles published internally and externally.

But even this increase (following an advertising campaign whose cost is unknown) sees these assets still greatly underused.

Cost-effectiveness

To put it another way;

- Each book loan costs around £570 (€711.38).
- Each visitor costs £580 (€722.29).
- At any given moment in time, either library on average will have two people visiting it (assuming an average stay of an hour per visitor).
- At the Brussels library, there is a ratio of one member of staff to every 67 visitors over the course of a year. Effectively, you could visit for a week and have a member of staff dedicated just for you.
- At the Luxembourg library, hot seating is not an issue; over a four day period, there is enough space for each new visitor to sit on a different chair.

3. Other EU Libraries

Part of the explanation for this underuse appears to lie in a proliferation of resources. *RéseauBib* is the network of European Commission libraries, made up as follows;

Location	Asset ⁴
DG Agriculture Library	Documentation Centre
DG Budget	Document Administration Unit (U.A.D)
DG Communication	Documentation
DG Development	Library / Documentation
DG Economic and Financial Affairs	Library / Documentation
DG Education and Culture	Documentation Centre
DG Employment and Social Affairs	Library / Documentation
DG Energy and Transport	Library
DG Enterprise and Industry	Documentation Centre
DG External Relations Library	Documentation
DG Fisheries	Library
DG Health and Consumer Protection	Library / Documentation
DG Information Society and Media	Library
DG Regional Policy	Inforegio Library / Documentation
DG Research	Library
DG Trade	Archives
DG Translation	DGT Library Brussels DGT Library Luxembourg
EuropeAid	Co-operation Office Library / Documentation
Humanitarian Aid Office	ECHO Library / Documentation
Informatics Directorate	Technical library, Brussels Technical Library, Luxembourg
Internal Audit Service	Library
Legal Service	Library

This is not all. There is also the *Eurolib* network, which helps to link key institutional libraries with a “particular vocation to support European integration”. The list of participating members demonstrates the extensive library resources being supported by the EU budget beyond the Central Library;

- Academy of European Law
- College of Europe Bruges Campus
- College of Europe Natolin

⁴ We exclude ‘information units’ as these fall short of being full libraries.

- Committee of the Regions of the EU
- Council of the European Union
- Court of Justice of the European Communities
- EUROCONTROL Institute of Air Navigation Services Library
- European Central Bank – Library
- European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
- European Commission - Joint Research Centre - Ispra site Central Library
- European Court of Auditors: Library
- European Economic and Social Committee
- European Environment Agency
- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
- European Institute of Public Administration: Information and Documentation Services
- European Investment Bank - Library and Documentation
- European Medicines Agency
- European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
- European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia
- European Parliament Library
- European Training Foundation
- European University Institute
- Europol
- EURYDICE - The Information Network on Education in Europe - EACEA
- Office for Official Publications of the European Communities
- Office for the Harmonization in the Internal Market

We count therefore 52 libraries in total that are either part of the EU structures, or in receipt of major funding and form part of the EU library network.⁵ This figure excludes the various historical archives in Florence. It also excludes the scores of holdings in national public libraries funded by the EU and about the EU.

⁵ We have excluded from the above list the Institute for Security Studies, and the Council of Europe's Information Life Cycle Division, Information Technology Department. These are part of the network but not apparently in receipt of significant EU funds.

4. E-Library Spending

These libraries are being supported notwithstanding a decision by the Commission to put considerable resources into funding remote access activity. Tens of millions of pounds were spent on developing the *Europa* system, putting documents quite successfully on line, though at a high cost. DG Communication today maintains the top levels of the system, with separate DGs responsible for their own elements of it. Merely managing this level of the site occupies 12 full-time equivalent posts, costs €5 million to produce and maintain in terms of content, and another €3 million for infrastructure.⁶

This already affects the way the Central Library itself is run. In 2007, around 1 800 periodical titles were available on-line to European Commission staff in full-text format. Half of these titles were commercial subscription titles, while the other half were international and EU publications. 33,437 articles were downloaded from the paid subscriptions in 2007: an increase of 52 per cent on the previous year. A new ECLAS catalogue, for external readers, was launched in February 2007.

The consequence, the Central Library itself acknowledges, is that, "The number of internal readers is steadily declining, as most of the Library's services [...] are now available on-line for Commission staff."

At the same time, a further 13 million pages of documents are currently being scanned in, to be concluded by October 2009. There is also the EU Internet library system called 'Europeana', which embarrassingly crashed on launch in November 2008 and is being rescheduled. This gives access to hundreds of thousands of books, many of which are rare or out-of-print. 'Europeana' is 80 per cent funded from the EU budget, to the tune of €2 million. On a wider perspective, €69 million of EU funding will be allocated to research on digital libraries from 2009-2010.

This raises the question as to whether a Central Library is the right structure to service the Commission for the twenty first century.

⁶ Source: Europa Direct help desk

5. Library Closures in Britain

The level of funding available for these 52 libraries contrasts with conditions in Britain. Forty libraries were closed in the UK in 2007. Some examples of current controversial cases include;

- Wirral Council plans to close 11 of 24 libraries.⁷
- Four libraries under threat in Renfrewshire.⁸
- Libraries in Swindon.⁹
- One of Newport's libraries.¹⁰
- A temporary reprieve only for several Dorset libraries.¹¹

⁷ <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-news/regional-news/2009/02/05/mp-s-ombudsman-threat-over-wirral-library-closures-64375-22859251/>

⁸ http://www.paisleydailyexpress.co.uk/tm_headline=battle-to-save-four-libraries-gathers-pace&method=full&objectid=20536306&siteid=63858-name_page.html

⁹ http://www.thisiswiltshire.co.uk/news/headlines/4143745.Library_closure_is_a_tough_decision/

¹⁰ http://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/4168310.One_Newport_library_may_have_to_close/

¹¹ http://www.purbeck.gov.uk/parish_council/lytchett_matravers_parish_coun/lytchett_link.aspx