

The long road to becoming a "Consortium of Swiss University Libraries"

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Neubauer, Wolfram  Piguet, Arlette

Publication date:

2001-07-14

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000018575>

Rights / license:

[Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#)

Originally published in:

LIBER Quarterly 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.18352/lq.7634>

The Long Road to Becoming a „Consortium of Swiss University Libraries“

by WOLFRAM NEUBAUER & ARLETTE PIGUET

FOREWORD

Although the idea that co-operative licensing of electronically researchable information products would bring positive benefits for academic libraries has probably been grasped by libraries in general, what is often lacking is a high-performance infrastructure, which would ensure its complicated management and extend the consortium in the medium term. This leads to the conclusion that the benefits of consortium-based solutions are relatively easy to present¹ and would easily be accepted by those „affected“.

On the other hand, the concrete workload often falls upon a few enthusiastic librarians. Up to a few months ago, the situation in Switzerland was no different, whereby in this country, the complex underlying political conditions² made the situation particularly difficult for academic libraries³. In the meantime, a consortium has managed to establish itself on a national level and the first products licenced in co-operation are in use.

The following exposition gives a brief introduction to Switzerland's specific situation and also sketches the basic structures of this co-operation model.

SPECIAL ASPECTS OF LIBRARY WORK IN SWITZERLAND

Founding and expanding a national consortium of libraries must of course be regarded with the relevant underlying social conditions and conditions in science policies in mind. In the case of Switzerland, this means the state's highly federal structure, which greatly influences and/or hinders all co-operation activity. Thus, the general division of Switzerland into a German-speaking and a French-speaking region, and the political sub-division into 26 cantons and sub-cantons, make national solutions difficult to achieve. Even in the age of global networks, linguistic and cultural barriers still characterise political and cultural life in the Swiss Confederation. This naturally has an

effect on research and the academic sector, on universities and research centres, and therefore on academic libraries.

In this context, one should remember that the country's universities are local canton institutions, both Technical Universities are run by the Swiss Confederation (the „Bund“), the National Library (Schweizerische Landesbibliothek) is also a federal institution, and the newly founded universities of applied sciences are inter-canton bodies. Naturally, the library administration is accordingly complex, since a large number of university libraries must also take over regional and local tasks going beyond this multi-layered system⁴.

Roughly following language boundaries, two major library associations have established themselves on a national level, with differing IT-platforms (despite all efforts). A large part of the libraries in the western French-speaking region of Switzerland have combined to form the association known as RERO⁵ and administrate their stock using the VTLS system⁶. Since late 1999, libraries in the German-speaking region of the country⁷ have jointly invested in the widespread system called Aleph 500, produced by the company ExLibris.

Even these few facts clarify why the successful formation of a national consortium amongst Swiss university libraries was anything but a foregone conclusion.

Initiatives and triggers for the establishment of a nationwide solution were originally produced by individuals and work groups who introduced the debate concerning a new quality of collaboration in acquiring electronic media and services, and paved the way for the first regional or departmental consortiums.

At this point, it is also important to note that the situation in Switzerland is also striking in the sense that the number of potential licensees for electronic information products is relatively small. On an international scale, the number of potential users per Site is also relatively limited.⁸

The mainly double-layered library systems at Swiss universities are a particular hindrance to building up concrete journal consortiums, since a sensible structure and financing for a centrally provided electronic service urgently require well-planned co-ordination between main libraries and decentralised institutions. This, however, could only be achieved in rare exceptions.

PILOT PROJECTS IN SWITZERLAND

As mentioned above, due to the cultural and political conditions, all efforts in support of co-operative collaboration are difficult. Thus, it is no surprise that joint licensing of information products began on a limited scale.

Since the mid-1990s, the ETH-Bibliothek has worked on large-scale use of electronically available, campus-wide services. The development of the library's own server for products from the company SilverPlatter (ERL-Server) and the great interest it created amongst users, inspired a number of other libraries to consider accessing the service offered by the ETH-Bibliothek.

At that time, the range of products included the databases Current Contents, Medline, Inspec and SwetsNet.

The first co-operation project between libraries began in January 1998, with the launch of the „Konsortium gesamter ETH-Bereich“ („Overall FIT Domain Consortium“).⁹ During the course of that year, interest grew and spread to the other university libraries in the country. It is notable in this context that the ETH-Bibliothek, as the leader of the consortium, behaved very pragmatically during the closure of further consortial contracts. Other university libraries were given the relatively unbureaucratic opportunity of providing existing individual contracts, so that additional services were also made available to other consortial partners (Biosis, Georef, Web of Science, JCR).

Simultaneous with these developments in the field of databases, the range of electronic journals was built up and extended in several university libraries.

In this way, the ETH-Bibliothek could increase its „stock“ to about 1,200 titles by the end of 1999.¹⁰ In order to gather experience in building up a consortium in the field of journals, the ETH-Bibliothek launched the project *Springer LINK* in January 1999, in anticipation of national collaboration. The test installation was initially limited to a period of one year and gave a series of university libraries, research centres and university hospitals online access to almost 400 titles by the publisher Springer. The great interest in this first all-Swiss licensing project for electronic journals clearly showed that there was a set demand for the formation of consortial alliances.

Simultaneous with these developments stemming from the ETH-Bibliothek, chemists and chemistry institutes from several Swiss university libraries had also made efforts to conclude consortial contracts for selected chemical databases.

Moreover, the „Arbeitskreis Neue Medien“ („Working Group on New Media“)¹¹ had also encouraged the conclusion of license agreements on a co-operative basis.

The development of the first consortiums in Switzerland mainly benefited users at the major universities, particularly in the German-speaking region. Since the development and supervision of a quality-performance electronic information portfolio requires both financial resources and know-how during contractual negotiations with providers, not to mention the paramount importance of the relevant IT-experience, it is hardly surprising that above all smaller libraries would be unable to fulfil the increased demand for access to databases and electronic journals on their own without additional support. Experiences of the ETH-Bibliothek showed that considerable means must be invested to organise and run even a small consortial project, and that this cannot be run for any length of time more or less on the sidelines without an appropriate organisational and financial structure.

In view of the underlying conditions, the Swiss University Conference (Schweizerische Hochschulkonferenz - SHK)¹² worked on the question of a possible national library consortium more intensively from 1998 onwards. The first step was to commission a project study in the autumn of that year, which was to clarify the underlying conditions, possible products, financing volume and organisational questions it entailed.¹³

PROJECT STUDY, DETAIL CONCEPT AND FINANCIAL APPLICATION

Whilst the project study „Konsortium der Schweizer Hochschulbibliotheken“ („Consortium of Swiss University Libraries“)¹³ naturally concentrated on the consortium's underlying aspects, the detailed concept produced a year later represented an extensive planning instrument for the concrete foundation of a consortium of Swiss university libraries.¹⁴ Developed on the basis of the project study, it contained concrete suggestions regarding a product portfolio, costing models, cost allocation, possible timetables and technical infrastructure etc.

Building on the status quo in Swiss university libraries and the given underlying conditions at the time (increased offers, rising prices and demand, limited acquisition funds), the urgency for a new quality of co-operation in acquiring databases and electronic journals was evident.

In the context of specific underlying political conditions within Switzerland, the planned schemes for a national consortium presumed that firstly, certain services and data would be financed by special project-related federal

funding, and that secondly, libraries would fulfil the organisational requirements themselves. In effect, this meant that the participating libraries and other project-members would have to contribute 50% of the running subscription charges. The size of the absolute contribution for each library depended on the developed cost allocation key. Using this detailed financing model, universities were not to become too dependent on special funding.

Since a state-organised principle of all-round indiscriminate distribution faced general resistance in the Swiss academic world, the co-operation was designed as an incentive programme from the very beginning, in which libraries had to invest a substantial amount of their own means and increase their share of the overall project costs year-by-year.

After the concept's approval and adoption by the Council of the Swiss University Conference (Rat der Schweizerischen Universitätskonferenz - SUK) in the summer of 2000, the project has meanwhile been launched.

For the period between 2000 and 2003, the (canton) universities will receive the sum of 7 million Swiss Francs according to the University Subsidising Law (Universitätsförderungsgesetz - UFG), whilst an appropriate arrangement will also apply to universities of applied sciences following an interim period.¹⁵ The two other co-operation partners, i.e. institutions in the ETH and the Swiss National Library, finance 100% of their project costs themselves.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Their own experiences and those of foreign consortiums clearly showed that the complex administration and negotiation tasks in a consortium could only be fulfilled within a high-performance organisational structure (Fig. 1).

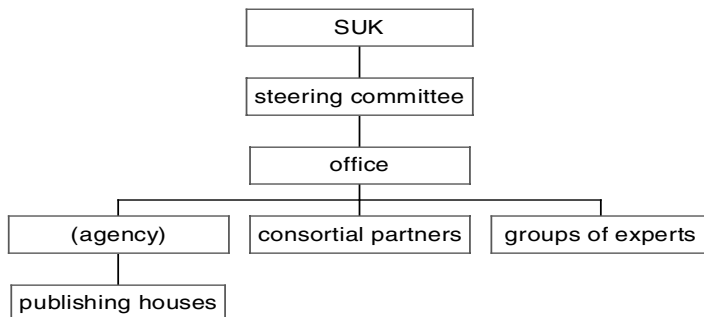


Figure 1: Organizational structures of the Swiss consortium (SUK = Swiss University Conference)

The Long Road to Becoming a „Consortium of Swiss University Libraries“

The consortium's central office acts as an interface between all participants working towards the project's implementation. It is the contact for individual partner-libraries and is responsible for the overall operational business. It is supervised by a steering committee which is responsible for the consortium's strategic policies and is appointed by the project sponsor (the Swiss University Conference). Various types of libraries and universities, as well as federal and regional political sponsoring bodies, are represented in the body. Expert teams related to specific products and fields, whose members are recruited from specialists in the area of library management and academic research, act as an advisory body towards both the central office and the steering committee. From the very beginning, it was planned that part of the negotiation and organisation tasks would be passed on to an agency specialising in electronic information products.

Until the possible definition of an independent legal person for the consortium, a provisionally valid set of organisational regulations is being used.

TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In principle, the technical preconditions for introducing a comprehensive, electronic information service at Swiss universities are favourable. All universities are linked to the national university and research network SWITCH¹⁶, which is based on ATM technology.

The currently distributed control of access to information products via IP-addresses is very convenient and secure both for providers and users, but requires setting up clearly defined Sites. This is no problem for universities, but is more difficult at universities of applied sciences. The seven institutions which are still being built stemmed from more than 60 previous organisations which have still not managed to pool their widely spread IP-address fields. In effect, this means that on January 1st, 2001, a comprehensive product could still not be introduced, although this problem should be solved by the end of this year.

Depending on the interests of different science fields, two competing systems have established themselves for local and campus-wide (CD-ROM) databases at Swiss university libraries, namely SilverPlatter and OVID. Even the detailed concept envisaged supporting both platforms in a future consortium.

Today, SilverPlatter databases are provided by the ERL-servers which have been employed since 1998 by the ETH-Bibliothek. Since no university ran a sufficiently powerful OVID server, and the development of a new system was

regarded as too expensive, access to the OVID databases offered in the consortium runs via the US provider's server without any notable difficulties.

In taking this decision, the fact that individual publishers and providers are increasingly offering electronic products via their own servers and using their own search interfaces was taken into account.

ISSUING THE FIRST NATIONAL LICENSES

The national consortium's central office, which is situated at the ETH-Bibliothek, could begin operations on September 1st of last year and managed to issue licenses to the first project partners before the end of the year despite the extremely tight schedule.¹⁷ Since the beginning of the current year, access to ten bibliographical databases and electronic editions of journals published by Springer and Academic Press (Fig. 2) is possible. For the aforementioned reasons, this service will be introduced to universities of applied sciences after a certain delay.

In choosing products, efforts initially concentrated on databases, since unlike electronic journals, license contracts for these can be concluded much more simply. All academic fields were sufficiently taken into account in selecting the products, as stipulated in the detailed concept.

Before the individual libraries were required to decide to participate in a license agreement, they had the chance of testing the selection of current product campus-wide for four weeks. It became clear in the course of contractual negotiations that one significant problem was the fact that providers and publishers emphasised specifically national qualities too strongly. They generally had a policy of applying standard solutions to all contractual negotiations. Although the Swiss conditions mentioned above made this situation even more difficult, it was possible to come to an agreement with them all, with the exception of a single publisher.

The contracts closed in the framework of these negotiations and the resulting license fees were divided between the individual licensees according to the set cost allocation key with respect to specific products, whereby (as mentioned) 50% of these costs for regional canton universities were financed by project-related federal funding.

In this context, it quickly became clear that it is extremely difficult to find a cost allocation key which is equally accepted by all project participants (regardless of their size). The recently used key mainly took the number of users

The Long Road to Becoming a „Consortium of Swiss University Libraries“

Consortial partners		Databases (Part 1)					
		ABI / Inform (Bell & Howell)	Biosis Previews ¹	Business Source Elite/ Premier	Dissert. Abstracts	Historical Abstracts	Inspec
3	Universität Basel		SP ²	x	x	x	SP
	Universität Bern		SP	x	x	x	SP
	Université de Fribourg		OID	x		x	
	Université de Genève			x	x	x	OID
	Université de Lausanne	x	OID		x	x	OID
	Università della Svizzera italiana						
	Universität Luzern			x	x	x	
	Universität de Neuchâtel		OID	x	x	x	OID
Universität St. Gallen	x		x	x			
Universität Zürich	x	OID		x	x	OID	
4	EPF Lausanne		SP		x		SP
	ETH Zürich		SP	x	x	x	SP
	EAWAG		SP		x		SP
	EMPA						SP
	PSI						SP
WSL							
5	7 Fachhochschulen						
	Schweizerische Landesbibliothek				x	x	

Consortial partners		Databases (Part 2)				Electronic journals	
		MLA Internat. Bibliography	Philosopher's Index	StatWeb	Zentralblatt Math Database	Academic Press IDEAL	Springer LINK
3	Universität Basel	SP	SP	x	x	x	x
	Universität Bern	SP	SP	x	x	x	x
	Université de Fribourg	SP	SP	x	x	x	x
	Université de Genève	OID	SP	x	x	x	x
	Université de Lausanne	OID	SP	x	x	x	x
	Università della Svizzera italiana	SP		x		x	x
	Universität Luzern	SP	SP	x		x	x
	Universität de Neuchâtel	OID	SP	x	x	x	x
	Universität St. Gallen			x		x	x
Universität Zürich	SP	SP	x	x	x	x	
4	EPF Lausanne			x	x	x	x
	ETH Zürich		SP	x	x	x	x
	EAWAG			x		x	x
	EMPA			x		x	x
	WSL			x		x	x
5	7 Fachhochschulen						x
	Schweizerische Landesbibliothek	SP					x

Figure 2: Licenced products for the year 2001

1 Backfiles have to be purchased.

2 SP = SilverPlatter

3 As a total, there are 10 universities, which are cantonal institutions

4 EPF Lausanne and ETH Zürich are technical universities, the other four are national laboratories; they belong to the Federal Government and are parts of the so-called FIT Domains (Federal Institutes of Technology Domains).

5 Since a few years there are seven universities of applied sciences.

at the individual universities into account, i.e. both students and the research staff. In order to avoid extreme results, a minimum and maximum fee was set. An annual contract was closed for every licensed product.

The consortium's central office developed and installed a trilingual website¹⁸ which proved to be a highly useful method of communication. Accessing information for all services and clear database descriptions could be viewed on the website. In addition, each individual Site was given a www-page with a list of its relevant licensed products.

PROSPECTS

In a first step, small university libraries could also extend their database range within the scope of the national consortium, thereby providing a significant improvement in information services for their users.

One of the next aims will be to continuously extend the number of journals. Here initially, licensing entire title-packages is probably simpler than authorising a selection of individual titles, especially with respect to small publishers. Whether this strategy conforms with the requirements of the participating libraries still needs to be investigated. Thus, the decisive problem which needs extensive discussion in the relevant bodies (as with all consortiums) remains the subject of journals.

The Consortium of Swiss University Libraries will only have achieved its actual aims, however, when the provided services are actually used. Thus, an important factor will be the day-to-day work of spreading awareness of the jointly licensed information resources amongst a widespread readership, and to inform and train the users with respect to searching possibilities. The central office will intensively support the libraries in this by providing courses and training schemes. In this context, contributions by providers and publishers should also be very interesting. It is important that such measures are aimed both at the library staff and end users to an equal extent. In this way, a further quantitative and qualitative extension of the electronic information services for the entire Swiss academic community can be achieved.

REFERENCES

- 1 Cf. in this context: Griebel, Rolf; Mai, Richard: „Konsortialvertrag mit Academic Press.“ - In: Bibliotheksforum Bayern 27 (1999) Issue 1, 17-32, here p.17.

The Long Road to Becoming a „Consortium of Swiss University Libraries“

- 2 Keller, Alice: „Konsortienbildung in der Schweiz.“ - In: Rützel-Banz, M.: Grenzenlos in die Zukunft: 89. Deutscher Bibliothekartag. Proceedings.- Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie, Special Issue 77 (2000), p.147-160.
- 3 Keller, Alice; Neubauer, Wolfram: „Hochschulbibliotheken in der Schweiz.“ - In: Bibliothek (1999) 23, No.2, p.133-143.
- 4 For instance the Berne University Library has also operated as the City Library since 1905 and is officially called the Berne City and University Library.
- 5 RERO: Réseau des Bibliothèques Romandes et Tessinoises. This body is an association of libraries whose activities are based on the common use of the VTLS library system. Participants are exclusively libraries in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking regions, plus the Swiss National Library.
- 6 This library system is currently being transferred to the radically changed VIRTUA version, which will no doubt require a substantial period of time before normal operations can resume.
- 7 The university libraries at the universities in Basle, Berne, Lucerne, St.Gallen, Zurich and at the ETH Zurich form a cluster of uniformly structured library systems based on identical cataloguing rules and lending conditions. The development of a unified lending group is envisaged in the near future.
- 8 The smallest fully equipped university has around 3,000 students, whilst the largest (University of Zurich) accommodates 25,000.
- 9 The FIT Domain contains the two technical universities in Lausanne (EPFL) and Zurich (ETHZ) plus four research institutes for special scientific and technical study.
- 10 Although the number of 1,200 electronically available titles seems relatively small compared to services in other European countries, the ETH-Bibliothek lays great store by the high quality of offers, thereby doing without services such as newsletters, titles without peer-review-system etc.
- 11 This working group is made up of representatives from libraries within the „Conference of German-Speaking University Libraries“ („Konferenz Deutschschweizer Hochschulbibliotheken“ - KDH) (cf. also Footnote 7). The group's task is to exchange experience and develop project-orientated collaboration in the field of electronic information resources.
- 12 In 1998, the discussion and decision-making body, which has been renamed the Swiss University Conference (Schweizerische Universitätskonferenz - SUK) is made up of representatives from the cantons and the national federation, set

up several work groups to deal with the special questions concerning the country's universities. One of these was the Commission of University Libraries (Kommission der Universitätsbibliotheken - KUB), in which the directors of all university libraries in Switzerland collaborated.

- 13 Keller, A.: Konsortium der Schweizer Hochschulbibliotheken: Projektstudie zuhanden der Kommission für Universitätsbibliotheken der SHK.- Zurich: ETH-Bibliothek, 1998.- <http://lib.consortium.ch/projektinfo_e.html>.
- 14 Keller, Alice; Werfeli, Maja: „Konsortium der Schweizer Hochschulbibliotheken: Detailkonzept zuhanden der Kommission für Universitätsbibliotheken der SHK.“ - Zurich: ETH-Bibliothek, 1999.
- 15 Since the Swiss system of universities of applied sciences is still relatively new, not all the organisational structures have been set up, although this is also true for the library systems in a few universities. In the early summer of this year, these problems should, however, be solved, so that universities of applied sciences can be treated as „normal“ consortial partners.
- 16 <<http://www.switch.ch>>.
- 17 Piguet, Arlette: „Das Konsortium der Schweizer Hochschulbibliotheken konnte die ersten nationalen Lizenzen für elektronische Informationsprodukte erwerben.“ - In: Arbido (2001) 16, No. 2, p. 18-19.
- 18 <<http://lib.consortium.ch>>.