

Since 2015, the British Library (BL) has been using the Faceted Application of Subject Terminology (FAST) in parts of its catalogues, as a supplement to Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and to older subject schemes used over the years by the Library and its predecessor organisations. In our 2017 article for *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*, “New approaches to subject indexing in the British Library”, we outlined the Library’s reasons for choosing FAST and detailed the work done so far to assess its effectiveness and its reception by our catalogue’s users. This new article will update you on developments since, including on FAST’s role in the lockdowns and emergency measures of the last year.

At the time of the last article, we had recently surveyed users on their views of the benefits and limitations of the scheme. Their views reflected those of our own staff who had been trialling FAST: it was simple to learn and apply, and of course free to access, offering distinct advantages over more complicated schemes such as LCSH in terms of efficiency and economics. The addition of the genre/form facet was especially appreciated. Conversely, there were concerns about sustainability as long as it remained a Beta product for OCLC, and some worries over potential loss of precision, and the impact on the user Search experience this might have.

From here, we took a view of how to move forward, based on the preceding responses from cataloguers and British Library stakeholders, and our own internal deliberations.

### Governing and sustaining: the FAST Policy and Outreach Committee

To address the issue of future governance and sustainability, we sought assurances from OCLC about continuing support of the system, including timely updates to the scheme. For example, where headings are added to the Library of Congress’s Name Authority File (USNAF/NACO), or are updated or changed, we sought to be sure that these changes would feed through to FAST as soon as possible, to avoid adding erroneous terms to our indexes, and to avoid having to double-check on NACO itself. The same applied to LCSH changes: we needed to be sure that FAST would reflect these as soon as possible, since it is based on the full LCSH vocabulary, if not the structure. Feedback from the broader community supported the BL view that an OCLC commitment to the ongoing support and development of FAST into a product was essential for us to consider the possibility that FAST might replace LCSH in all of our workflows.

To support any such a commitment by OCLC, the library community including the BL wanted to contribute actively to FAST, for example through making proposals for new or changed terminology, and hoped to review or contribute to the scheme developments and principles and to training and related documentation. The BL made it clear that it was willing to work with OCLC and other prospective implementers, to develop these schemes and materials. To that end, the FAST Policy and Outreach Committee (FPOC) was established by OCLC and interested libraries and organisations in 2018 to guide the future of the scheme. The current BL representative and Committee co-chair is Alan Danskin, Collection Metadata Standards Manager. The Committee meets monthly, usually by videoconference, though there have also been meetings at conferences and at the Library of Congress, attended also by other interested parties where necessary. It is currently seeking to expand with a view to broadening experience and application of FAST, by asking for new volunteers.

## Using FAST on British Library printed monographs

While development work is ongoing with external collaboration, use of FAST continues to expand within the British Library. It is more important than ever as a tool in both routine and project work, across all manner of material. From the beginning of the project, it has been policy to exclude all legal deposit printed monographs from FAST application in the BL, due to the Library's own contractual commitments to its users and partners, though this is slowly changing as the users and partners themselves become more familiar with the scheme and more aware of the measures put in place by the Library to mitigate concerns. Although the Library does not formally add FAST to legal deposit printed monographs users will already see it on some of these records in addition to LCSH. This is because many records on the Library catalogue are derived from other sources, and in some cases, for example records from OCLC, libraries add terms from both standards, and OCLC itself batch converts LCSH to FAST headings and adds them as well if they are not already present. This will affect largely but not exclusively books which are also published in the United States. The first staff to use FAST regularly at the Library were full-time, experienced cataloguers with years of experience of LCSH. FAST was used in the Digital Content cataloguing team, and on mainstream printed monographs published in European languages.

The FAST training and application for printed language materials was undertaken specifically as a trial and the exact languages covered depended on the skills of individual cataloguers taking part. Thus in the printed collections you will find FAST headings in the BL catalogue on books in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, French, German, and several Hispanic and South Slav languages. The observations and questions of experienced cataloguers, some of whom have now moved into management roles with the possibility of taking their skills and advocacy for FAST to a wider audience, proved invaluable and informed everything we have done since. The aim is for FAST training to expand, and this has recently expanded more quickly than originally hoped, in a serendipitous opportunity afforded by remote cataloguing processes established to support working from home in the 2020 and 2021 public lockdown periods.

## Uses of FAST in other BL collections

From the beginning, project leaders were particularly aware of the potential of FAST where serial publications are concerned. As these are subject indexed at the serial rather than issue level, analysis does not require the granularity of most monographs, and the risk of losing precision is much smaller. This, and the fact that FAST contains the extremely useful "Periodicals" form heading, suggested that a switch to FAST would be beneficial. Electronic serial titles therefore comprised one of the strands indexed alongside purchased monographs in the first phase of the project, and use soon expanded to include other types of serial or serial-like publication. The Library implemented FAST early on in an electronic social science database of titles, many of which are serials or series, where the indexers work from a simple set list of subject and genre terms pre-agreed with the Collection Management staff leading the project. Whilst not all staff were experienced cataloguers, they were able to use specialist knowledge for subject analysis, without the need for extensive and complex training in the scheme chosen, instead focusing on their knowledge and then applying a quick but effective set of pre-chosen terms from FAST. One significant benefit of this approach is the use of a consistent vocabulary in the catalogue.

Making similar use of specialist knowledge, in one of the largest and most significant of its uses to date, FAST was also adopted early on as the preferred subject scheme for cataloguing interns and cataloguing staff on short term contracts, with limited time allocated for training. This involved subject experts in projects that create records for older, backlogged material which had never been catalogued due to lack of resources. This material is purchased or donated, and belongs to sections of the Library with an international focus, for example south-east Asian collections. The participants create records by filling in specially designed spreadsheets from which data are transformed to MARC21 and loaded to the main catalogue. The spreadsheets are designed using simple element sets rather than full MARC21. In general participants had no familiarity with LCSH, but found FAST to be intuitive and felt confident with its use quickly. A significant benefit for time limited projects and backlog reduction is that training for short-term staff can concentrate on the principles of subject analysis, without the need for extensive scheme training and complex strings and subject heading arrays. This use is still very much ongoing, and has become a permanent strategy for such material. Subject experts do tend to find that precise terms for their specialisms can be missing – for example, FAST lacks terms for smaller literatures or for famous individuals pertaining to the history and culture of countries less familiar to the Anglosphere – but this is an issue it shares with LCSH and other schemes. We get around this by using “place holder” entries for people or concepts not yet in the file, particularly in instances where a pattern can be copied, as in literary form headings. If this approach isn’t possible, for example in dealing with a completely new concept, cataloguers are asked to use broader terms instead.

## **FAST and authority control**

Although there is not yet a mechanism by which cataloguers can directly contribute new headings to FAST, it is still possible to send these through SACO and NACO and await their transfer to FAST. Where new personal or corporate names are concerned, for example, this process is relatively straightforward for NACO contributors: an authority cataloguer candidates the name, and, assuming it is accepted, it appears on the Library of Congress’s Name Authority list, and then, in due course, on FAST. SACO LCSH proposals take considerably longer from submission to acceptance, but there is still the possibility of putting such proposals through in order to ensure the transfer of a similar concept to FAST. The British Library has not established any formal workflow to allow all FAST cataloguers to submit proposals as this would be too much of an overhead on the very small number of people who are familiar with SACO, NACO and FAST, but those who are NACO-trained are able to submit headings as needed in their own work, just as they would when working on descriptive cataloguing or using LCSH.

OCLC’s website also now features a portal through which cataloguers can submit the system numbers and details of LCSH and NACO headings which are not yet on FAST, in order to speed up the process of transferring them for use. In the summer of 2019, the single BL FAST cataloguer who is also both SACO and NACO trained spent time experimenting with this portal, and had some success despite initial teething problems on the technical side which were resolved by personal discussion with OCLC development staff. This portal provides a slightly clunky but reasonably useful interim measure, pending a mechanism for larger-scale contributions by institutions such as the British Library.

## **FAST becomes Business-as-usual**

In 2018, managers agreed that mainstream, permanent cataloguers who work on the legal deposit collection of electronic grey literature would begin to apply FAST to their records. This is in part an efficiency measure, since a huge number of these items are received by the Library. Their content is significant, but their format has in the past meant the material, seen as more ephemeral than published legal deposit books, either printed or electronic, has not received the same focus as mainstream published legal deposit (LD) content. However, with the current aim of one hundred percent subject coverage across the collections, increasingly blurred distinctions in terms of format and publishing boundaries, and minimising diverse approaches to metadata creation in the Library where possible, FAST was seen as a solution. Further, this collection area does not have the same need for external discussion with the Library's partners as would have been the case had we adopted it on mainstream LD monographs. A number of cataloguers received training to do this in the first instance, and the training was later given to others in order to expand the pool of staff able to work on indexing this significant collection.

Not long after the training of the second group, the Library entered COVID-19 lockdown. This came suddenly, and meant of course that many cataloguing staff accustomed to working on printed items that cannot leave the Library's sites found themselves without their usual work to do. The department quickly identified a number of projects to occupy them and make use of their skills, including by expanding the group working on grey literature still further. This entailed adapting the training slides and exercises so they could teach themselves FAST at home without a tutor, emailing any queries they might have before embarking on using it.

FAST was also adopted as the standard to be used on the records for nineteenth century books digitised by Microsoft. Cataloguers amend these records through an electronic portal known as Zooniverse, adding subject and other relevant data by consulting the digitised copy. This has been an important strand of work for people unable to access print materials, and will provide remote access to very large swathes of the Library's legacy collections.

A possible legacy of this expansion of FAST will be that more cataloguers come to use it on purchased monographs in the future, with one cataloguer already doing so, finding it a more comfortable and intuitive system than LCSH.

There have also been a number of other projects that have used FAST in lockdown, with or without direct cataloguer involvement. A notable one was FAST-en, which matches parts of British Museum shelfmarks to FAST headings and assigns the latter to the historic catalogue record. This is a partial compensation for the fact that the old British Museum subject headings were not digitised and added to the records since many terms in use in this old scheme are today considered unacceptable. While FAST itself uses some vocabulary that does not translate well outside a US context the matching of terms has been done by present-day cataloguers who do their best to circumvent these and take account of sensitivities in ways impossible when dealing with the decisions made long ago in nineteenth century cataloguing.

Smaller scale use of FAST has involved language cataloguers identifying older items in a language they know on a particular theme within the collections and assigning FAST to these. Themes have included Travel, Descartes and other topics, and the objective as ever is to expand subject coverage in areas where there was none before.

Talks are also ongoing about the ways in which FAST can be used to assign management information to purchasing decisions for collection analysis purposes. This could take the form of selectors choosing headings at item level, or – possibly more likely – of acquisition staff assigning a pre-determined heading or headings to entire collections as they ordered them. Subject areas which might appropriately receive such treatment could be works on aspects of library and information studies, history of science, or black history, and any headings would clearly be at a broader and more general level than the granular ones assigned in cataloguing.

## **FAST and external collaborations**

For several years, the British Library has been offering the opportunity for training in a number of standards to groups of cataloguers and other librarians from institutions wishing to pay for this. The training arose as a response to gaps in provision of RDA, LCSH and Dewey courses nationally – and also internationally, as one group of staff who requested RDA training were librarians working for EU institutions.

Following a request from external archive staff, this training has been expanded in 2020 to include a tailored FAST course that comprises a self-guided module in subject analysis, followed by a taught session on using the standard itself. This is delivered through Zoom, and feedback has been very positive. This Zoom-based course has now also been used for British Library staff, and can be adapted as needed with examples to suit other external organisations and institutions. FAST also forms a case study in a draft course about subject analysis in general, which – like the tailored course – takes cataloguers through a process that starts with the principles of analysis and moves on from this to try practical examples of translating analysis into headings and assigning them to specific real-world items using a chosen standard.

We are also now starting to discuss FAST as part of our wider bibliographic partnerships.

## **Conclusions and the future**

The British Library has now been experimenting with FAST for more than five years. In these years, its use has expanded continually to encompass many varied strands of current and retrospective cataloguing and collection analysis, and has received particular attention due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and staff absence from site. Exciting international projects are addressing issues that originally worried both staff and users, and we have worked hard to reassure stakeholders of FAST's value as a discovery tool, and impart practical knowledge of the scheme.

At this point, with enquiries and interest increasing by the day both inside and outside the Library, we confidently anticipate further expansion in regular workflows and in many retrospective and enhancement projects, as well as further developments in internal and external training, and other potential collaborations to come.

## Further reading

OCLC's FAST site: <https://fast.oclc.org/>

Ashton, Janet and Caroline Kent: New approaches to subject indexing in the British Library: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01639374.2017.1354345>

Danskin, Alan. FAST Forward? Sustaining and extending subject indexing at the British Library: [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/collection/32B46020-D067-4D33-99A7-4FE34BCDC01A/catalogue\\_and\\_index\\_issue\\_192\\_september\\_2018\\_danskin\\_fast\\_forward.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/collection/32B46020-D067-4D33-99A7-4FE34BCDC01A/catalogue_and_index_issue_192_september_2018_danskin_fast_forward.pdf)

FAST Policy and Outreach Committee Regulations: <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/fast/fast-policy-and-outreach-committee-regulations.pdf>