

Collaboration in library and information science education in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC): Current status, challenges and future trends

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Despite the growing popularity of Library and Information Science (LIS) education in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, there is evidence of significant shortcomings in resources, expertise and facilities which may seriously threaten the future sustainability of the field. In other parts of the world, trends in regional and international collaboration and co-operation among LIS specialists are contributing to the growth and sustainability of this area of education, and generating innovative ways of addressing resource limitations and other weaknesses. This paper draws on existing literature to examine the current state of LIS education in the GCC states and to provide examples of the types of collaborative models and strategies that might be adopted from other parts of the world in order to improve LIS education in this region. The potential challenges to this process are discussed and some recommendations for consideration by LIS specialists in the GCC are put forward.

Keywords: Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) Countries, LIS Education, LIS Collaboration, Collaboration Barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing popularity of Library and Information Science (LIS) education in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, there is evidence of significant shortcomings in resources, expertise and facilities which may seriously threaten the future sustainability of the field. In other parts of the world, trends in regional and international collaboration and co-operation among LIS specialists are contributing to the growth and sustainability of this area of education, and generating innovative ways of addressing resource limitations and other weaknesses.

This is the case not only in Europe and North America but in less developed areas of Asia and Africa, where systematic efforts have been made to overcome cultural, linguistic and other challenges in order to facilitate collaboration between LIS specialists within their region. It might be expected that, given the cultural, linguistic and political similarities of the GCC countries, and their existing political and economic linkages, high levels of co-operation and collaborative working would also have developed between LIS specialists across the region. On the contrary, a review of the available published information indicates that, to date, there has been little collaboration between the LIS departments of universities in the GCC region, a state of affairs which not only hinders the growth of the discipline in this region but may threaten its existence.

This article draws on published research to identify types of co-operation and collaboration in LIS that have been developed in other regions of the world, and identifies a number of best-

practice examples which might be particularly well suited for adoption within the GCC. The current barrier to effective joint working are discussed, and a series of recommendations are put forward for consideration by LIS specialists in this region.

WHAT IS COLLABORATION IN LIS EDUCATION AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Lin [1] defined "co-operation" as a process that

incorporates many different relationships between two or more individuals or organizations. It involves active partnerships with resources being shared or work being done by multiple partners in coordinated effort for the common good. It involves having a shared sense of a problem or challenges to an area (p. 2).

This definition is an accurate description of the collaboration which has been taking place within LIS education in many parts of the world, in order to address shared problems and issues and to enhance standards. The entire LIS education environment has been undergoing extensive change as departments are forced to expand and adapt their teaching and services to changing user needs, rapid technological change and the internationalization of the higher education environment [2, 3], often in the context of reduced public funding [4, 5].

Regional and international collaboration has been a growing trend in Library and Information Science Education [3], which has been noticeably intensifying in recent years [2]. This

collaboration has taken many different forms around the world, from informal communications within loose networks of LIS professionals to highly structured programs conducted under the auspices of governments and inter-governmental organizations. Other examples of collaborative activity which have been developed include joint research, faculty and student exchange schemes and visiting fellowships, conferences and workshops, shared online resources, electronic forums, and learning accreditation or standards initiatives [6, 7].

The potential benefits of collaboration for enhancing the quality and diversity of LIS education and tackling specific problems being faced by the discipline, such as limited resources, have been well documented in the literature. By sharing knowledge, resources and expertise through networking and other forms of collaboration, LIS departments can expand the range of courses, training and services they offer to ensure that all important topics are covered, to keep up to date with developments and changes in the profession, and to provide opportunities for joint research which capitalizes on their respective areas of specialist interest and expertise [8, 9]. Departments can also pool their experience, knowledge and creativity in order to identify and effectively implement solutions to the particular issues and problems facing LIS education in their particular region [7]. On a strictly practical note, Fan [10] noted that resource-sharing and other co-operative activity free up time for “more necessary things,” something that is particularly important when resources are stretched.

Overall, collaboration has become such a major feature of LIS on a global scale that, as Virkus [2] pointed out, LIS schools must participate in this if they wish to keep up with international quality standards in research, education and services.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN LIS COLLABORATION

The extent of co-operation between LIS departments, however, is much more advanced in Europe and North America than in other regions. As Virkus [2] observed, European LIS schools have recently been actively participating in collaborative initiatives intended to improve and expand their curricula, to ensure that the highest international standards of teaching, research and service provision are met, and to address the changing requirements of the market. Similar trends are occurring in North America, where increased collaboration in the field of LIS education has responded to changes in the nature of the market for library and information services and to the growing impact of other disciplines on LIS, such as knowledge management and multimedia courses [4].

Within the United States, the Association of Library and Information Science (ALISE)—formerly the Association of American Library Schools—has set the objectives of promoting excellence in LIS teaching, research and services [6], supporting the professional development of its members and providing mechanisms for sharing knowledge and information [1]. ALISE hosts an annual conference at which LIS faculty discuss developments in the field and share information about research and practice [11]. Similarly, the European Association for Library and Information Research (EUCLID) holds the annual BOBCATSS international symposia for LIS faculty and students [12], with the symposia itself organized jointly by an eastern European and a western European university each year [5].

In less developed regions, such as Asia and Africa, collaboration in LIS education has also been reported, especially where national or regional library associations exist. But, in general, collaboration in the developing world has been less extensive and systematic than in North America and Europe, and there have been more barriers to its successful implementation.

Berakens [13] observed that the most successful collaboration occurs when the partners not only have complementary resources but compatible backgrounds. In contrast to the GCC region, many other parts of the developing world are characterized by significant political, cultural and linguistic differences within the region which might have seriously hindered co-operation in LIS education [12, 5, 2]. Sometimes these differences are manifested even in the use of different terminology with LIS itself, which complicates attempts to collaborate [2]. Additionally, LIS specialists in developing regions often experience significant administrative or legal hurdles in establishing collaboration beyond national boundaries, especially when pre-existing models of co-operative working do not exist.

It might be expected that the GCC states, which share similar cultural, linguistic and political characteristics, and are already organized as a political-economic entity, would be less likely to experience the types of barriers to collaboration in LIS education faced by other developing regions, and that co-operative work across the region would already be well advanced. On the contrary, as discussed in the following section, there is little evidence that this is even under way.

CURRENT STATE OF LIS EDUCATION AND COLLABORATION IN GCC

The six Gulf Co-operation Council States of Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain all have higher education systems which follow similar models, reflecting the shared historical, linguistic, political and socio-cultural context of these countries [14]. In total,

there are ten LIS programs within the region's universities, with the majority (6) located in Saudi Arabia and the others in universities in Kuwait (2), Qatar and Oman. All but one are undergraduate programs [15]. In 2007 it was reported that these varied in terms students numbers from around 200 to 1,800, with 20 or so faculty reported to be in the largest program [15].

An online review of literature conducted for the purpose of this paper revealed that little has been published about the state of LIS education in the GCC states. The available published research indicates, however, that there may be significant shortcomings in terms of resources, expertise and facilities within the LIS field in this region.

For example, an email survey of the LIS schools in this region published in 2007 [15] reported evidence that many had seriously inadequate technological resources, including "computing hardware, software, bibliographic utilities and automated systems," but severely lacked monographic and periodical resources. Although a number of the schools reported intentions to reform their curricula to keep up with technological change and market demand, as in other LIS schools throughout the world, there was little indication that this was actually happening [15].

Worryingly, this survey also found evidence of high drop-out rates among students [15], which raises serious concerns for the future viability and sustainability of LIS within the GCC countries.

One of the few other published research studies of the GCC LIS programs, published in 2001, [14] examined the bio-bibliographic profile of faculty members. This study found that, at the time of the research, although most faculty had a strong professional and managerial background, the majority had relatively little research experience as academic publications. Given this situation, it might be expected that they would be involved in various forms of professional development or networking to improve their own expertise and to explore opportunities for collaborative working and publication. Yet hardly any of the respondents to this survey reported being involved in any continuing professional education, and none said that they were active in professional forums, either within their own countries or the wider region.

IDENTIFYING THE BARRIERS

The review of the international literature on LIS revealed a number of factors, which have hampered collaboration and other LIS education improvement initiatives around the world, and more barriers may exist to collaboration between LIS departments in the GCC region. Identification of these factors is an important first step in the process of understanding how

these can be tackled, and what role collaboration itself might have in this.

In many parts of the world for example, even in Europe, it has been reported that inadequate funding has been a barrier to progress in collaboration [2]. Once established, however, co-operation and joint activities should be useful strategies and could offer mechanisms for making more effective use of the limited funding that might be available for LIS education across the GCC region, for example in the form of shared resources or facilities.

An even more intractable barrier to effective collaboration within the GCC region may be the relatively weak IT infrastructure, including low internet connection speeds. Readily available access to fast electronic communications channels and online resources are crucial to the success of collaborative initiatives, whilst a lack of such facilities can act as a significant constraint, as revealed by research in other regions [16].

A lack of relevant professional skills is a common feature of the field of LIS in many developing countries; this has been documented as one of the factors which led to the failure of LIS schools in Africa in forming successful collaborations. Ochalla & Bothma [17] report that, although a 2004 workshop of the Library and Information Schools Network of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa developed an ambitious set of plans for the establishment of a network of LIS schools which was to address jointly research, teaching and other professional issues, the interim committee appointed to take the initiative forward lacked the skills needed to drive the initiative forward and the proposals were not carried out. As noted above, LIS professionals in the GCC also lack certain types of specialist skills and experience, especially professional networking and leadership skills [15], and this may be hindering the development of collaborative work in the region.

Finally, it can be observed from the literature that government involvement and support for collaboration in LIS is often a pre-condition for its successful establishment, while, conversely, the absence of this support can represent a barrier to the development of co-operative activities. Some of the most successful examples of collaboration in LIS education have occurred within the context of major governmental and inter-governmental initiatives, which have provided not only extensive funding but mechanisms and structures within which collaborative activities can be developed and implemented. This is the case in China, for example, where the Ministry of Education has funded and hosted national and international conferences to discuss the development of LIS education [10]. Unless the GCC states themselves make similar commitments in terms of time and financial resources

to establish such mechanisms, it will be considerably more difficult for LIS departments themselves to do so, given the constraints and pressures they already face in their day to day work.

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Despite the challenges of establishing regional collaboration in LIS education, particularly when funding is limited, relevant skills are in short supply and infrastructure is inadequate, many models of successful collaboration can be identified in other developing regions, which might be adapted for use by LIS specialists in the GCC states. Some of these have already been mentioned. But a few more examples of best practice are also highlighted below.

Formal and semi-formal networks

There is considerable evidence to indicate that, where library associations exist, these have been instrumental in advancing the interests of LIS specialists and in helping to reform the field of LIS in line with international developments. In many regions of the world, library associations have formed special committees or working groups to address the specific issues faced by LIS professionals in their region and to promote their interests. For example, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) established a Research Education and Training Interest Group (RETIG) with the objective of promoting collaboration between LIS schools in South Africa. This group meets regularly and has been successful in tackling a range of issues, including the LIS curriculum, job market and professional development [7]. In the Gulf region, there is already a regional chapter of the International Special Libraries Association, which holds an annual conference. In 2010, this was held in Kuwait, with the theme “Beyond Libraries: Innovation for Knowledge Gateways”. The GCC LIS departments might also consider establishing similar regional forums, concerned specifically with LIS education and perhaps linked with IFLA or another international organization.

Standards and accreditation

Despite facing such considerable barriers as diversity of cultures, languages and political systems, a successful collaborative scheme for accreditation of LIS education programs was developed by LIS specialists in southeastern Asia. First suggested in Kuala Lumpur at the 2001 International Conference for Library and Information Science Education in Asia Pacific Region, a special committee of the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) was set up to take this forward, with representation from LIS schools in the region. The initiative is intended to establish tiered standards for the recognition, endorsement, and accreditation

of LIS schools in order to improve their credibility and comparability [3].

Shared resources

Also in southeastern Asia, a collaborative project between Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the University of Malaya has resulted in the establishment of a web portal for LIS education in Asia, including a repository of teaching materials for use by LIS schools throughout the region [3].

Faculty development

With funding from the Open Society Institute, a network of training centers has been established throughout central and eastern Europe and central Asia (TCN-LIS) with the objective of support the continuing professional development of LIS specialists throughout this region. There is research evidence that this initiative has already had a positive impact on standards of professional competence in the region [18]. There are also examples from developing countries of successful smaller scale, more informal collaborations intended to develop the professional skills and expertise of faculty, with other positive benefits from their institutions. LIS schools in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, for example, have been operating exchange schemes and knowledge-sharing mechanisms regarding the use of new media and digital technologies, which have helped them diversify the range of courses and services that they offer [3].

LIKELY FUTURE TRENDS

LIS education is becoming a highly competitive, market-driven activity in which providers must keep abreast with the latest technological developments and teaching methods, and ensure that their services are tailored to the rapidly changing demands of users. Without collaboration with others in their profession, LIS departments are unlikely to be able to keep up with these developments and deliver international standards of teaching, research and information services.

Already the LIS departments of the GCC states are showing signs of weakness, for example in the form of high student drop-out rates and inadequate professional networking skills. In other parts of the developing world, such as Africa and southeastern Asia, LIS specialists have been able to successfully overcome barriers to collaboration in order to develop initiatives which can help to enhance their standards of teaching and research, diversify their services and improve cost-effectiveness.

This article has provided a number of different examples of the types of international and regional collaboration in LIS

education which are already providing benefits to LIS departments, faculty and students alike in many parts of the world, and which the GCC states might consider adopting.

The regional chapter of the Special Libraries Association could act as a vehicle for the development of collaborative activities and mechanisms in the Gulf region. However, it will be necessary for LIS departments, their universities and, ideally, their respective state governments to allocate the time and effort needed in the short-term to drive these forward and develop the kinds of linkages that will generate benefits in the medium to long term.

Initially, a mapping of facilities and expertise available across the region would be a valuable collaborative activity. This would be used to identify opportunities for sharing resources and facilities or doing joint work, enabling departments to reduce costs and increase efficiencies, enhance their teaching and research programs, and provide opportunities for professional development. In the longer term, more ambitious initiatives, such as a regional standards and accreditation schemes, might be considered.

All this, however, must also be accompanied by stringent monitoring and evaluation, preferably overseen by an external government body or international LIS organization. This would allow the success of the collaboration initiative to be measured against defined performance indicators, such as the number of joint research publications, the number of enrolled students in participating universities etc., and help to ensure that resources and efforts were being targeted at activities producing tangible positive results.

The overall objective should be to develop a dynamic, sustainable, first-class LIS education sector, which attracts students and faculty from around the world. Without collaboration, this objective is likely to be difficult, if not impossible, for LIS departments in the GCC to achieve. In the worst case scenario, if successful collaboration is not developed, the long-term sustainability and survival of LIS education in the GCC region may be at stake.

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