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An academic library partnership in the Indian Ocean region

Julia Gross
Edith Cowan University

Aminath Riyaz
Maldives College of Higher Education

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Abstract

The emergence of a global marketplace in education offers valuable partnership opportunities. Libraries in small developing countries often do not have a critical mass of library professionals to share knowledge and to provide advice and collegial support. This case study describes a World Bank funded 'Link Institution Arrangement', which established a library partnership between an academic library in Western Australia and one in the Republic of Maldives.

The authors describe the state of libraries and the emerging library profession in the Maldives. They also reveal ways in which the partners explored development issues facing an isolated academic library, shared knowledge in developing print and digital collections and planning collection development. The authors affirm the value of building enduring professional partnerships and conclude with recommendations for building print and digital collections, which may have implications for other small academic libraries.

Authors:

Ms Julia Gross

Faculty Librarian
Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences
Edith Cowan University
Western Australia

Ms Aminath Riyaz

Chief Librarian
Maldives College of Higher Education
Republic of Maldives

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Introduction

Libraries in small developing countries tend to be disadvantaged in that there is often not a critical mass of other library professionals to share knowledge and to provide advice and support. There may be no formal professional library association and no informal collegial networks. Newly qualified library professionals must struggle along on their own, trying to apply the theory from professional library courses. The Republic of Maldives is one such country, where the library profession is just beginning to develop and there is only a small body of supporting academic and professional literature about librarianship. It is worth noting that until 2001 there were no university qualified librarians in the country.

In this paper we discuss the formation of a World Bank funded 'Link Institution Arrangement', a partnership between Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia and The Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE). The partnership extends to the libraries of both institutions and includes exchange visits, provision of advice, information and resource sharing over a period of two years.

Driven by worldwide economic forces and by the widespread availability of communication and information technology, the activity in global education has intensified within the last decade. Australian universities are participating in this marketplace, drawing on their long experience of providing distance education to remote regions. As well, international organisations such as the World Bank are striving to narrow the "knowledge gap" (World Bank, 1998) and are supporting education partnerships between developed and developing countries, including opportunities for libraries. In this case the location of both members of the partnership within the Indian Ocean region provided geographic proximity.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The IOR includes a range of developed and developing countries of various sizes. Economically, Western Australia sees itself as Australia's gateway to the IOR (Rumley, 2001). In the region there are several small nation states that face development challenges similar to the Maldives, such as the island nations of the Seychelles and Mauritius. While this study focuses on just one case in the Maldives, it has implications for other small countries in the region and beyond. The outcomes may be applied to geographically isolated academic libraries with the capacity to use information and communication technologies to improve conditions. The authors hope to throw some light on strategies used to develop library partnerships and build academic library collections.

As a small developing nation, the Maldives is well placed to benefit from regional and virtual partnerships. The Maldives is a country with a strong government commitment to education, a high rate of literacy and English is the language of the educational system. While there is an 'information divide' between the outlying islands and the capital, Male', the overall usage of

technologies such as Internet is high for a developing country. A challenge for the country as a whole is the participation of all the islands in the Maldives development.

Libraries in the Maldives

The Maldives is a small independent island nation with a population of 270,101 (MPND, 2003). The average size of the islands is less than half a square kilometre and only 199 out of 1192 islands are inhabited, with 90% of these islands having a population of fewer than 1000. Of the total population, 27.4% live in Male', the capital city. Most public services, such as schools and medical facilities, are centred on and around Male'. Likewise, the main libraries are in Male', with a few government and privately owned libraries on the other islands.

While Dhivehi is the national language and legal and official correspondences are conducted in Dhivehi, English is used as the primary medium of teaching throughout the education system. The literacy rate of the Maldives is 96% for both males and females. Historically the literacy rate has been high, proving that the Maldives has had a reading public for some considerable time (Maniku, 1995).

However, the Library system in the Maldives is still in a state of development and there are no libraries that are of 'world standard'. Most of the operations in the existing libraries are manual. Inadequate finance, shortage of qualified library staff, and the poor professional status of library staff, are major constraints on the growth, development, proper management and functioning of libraries in the Maldives.

The National Library of Maldives, located in Male', is the largest and oldest library in the country and also acts as the only public library serving the whole community. It holds a collection of 34,263 items ranging from books, newspapers, periodicals and rare books. The National Library is also the sole organisation to offer basic library training. There are small libraries in primary and secondary schools, government departments, and the Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE).

Maldives local publication

According to the National Bibliography of Maldives (National Library, 1995) the average annual local publication during 1990 to 1995 was approximately 66 items, of which 23% were in English and approximately 80% were government publications. The National Bibliography of Maldives does not portray an accurate picture of the local book trade as there is no legal deposit law and therefore no accurate record of publishing activity. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that action has been taken to produce a National Bibliography, given the limitations. The difficulty in obtaining local publications in the developing world, as summarized by Omekwu (2003) can be attributed to the

lack of adequate bibliographic control framework and tools, low level awareness of legal deposit legislation, the sub-standard nature of publications, the unorganised book trade and the fact that the majority of publications emanating from developing countries could be classified as grey literature.

This is very true in the Maldives context.

The demand for information

In line with the high literacy rate in the Maldives there is a high demand for quality information. However, as with any other developing country, the Maldives faces a number of challenges in accessing quality information, mainly due to limited local publication. The Internet promises to be the best alternative to close this information gap; however, even though Internet access is provided to all government authorities, the current configuration of the service, including the quality, high cost and slow speed of the connection make it difficult to use.

Significant geographic and institutional disparities exist in the diffusion of information technology in the Maldives. Male' has better access than some other islands where there is a shortage of telecommunication facilities. Most agencies have acquired workstations for basic office functions such as word processing and spread sheet analysis, whilst some have installed local area networks and support services, such as email and file sharing. A few have also developed and deployed support applications that automate many functions traditionally carried out by hand (Ministry of Communication, Science and Technology, 2003).

Library training in Maldives

The first in-country library training program was started in 1986 by the National Library of Maldives, with the assistance of the Asia Foundation and later with the British Council. It was implemented by a recruited Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) librarian (Habeeb, 1995). These short-term library courses were offered at basic, intermediate and advanced level until 1994. However, they were unsystematic and unproductive as there was no monitoring or follow-up action (Diyasena, 1995). Since then, the Maldives Library Association, in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Library Association, has facilitated a diploma program in Information and Library Science. The first year of this three year program was launched in 1995. Due to financial and other difficulties, the third year was not launched until 2002. Five participants graduated with a Diploma by the end of the program in 2003.

However, the courses offered by the National Library have been discontinued and are at the moment under review; therefore, it is difficult to say when a new program will be offered. The authors believe that it is crucial that the Maldives Library Association take an active role in promoting the profession and the provision of training. But the Association, which was established in 1987, has

been inactive for sometime, due to lack of adequate professionals and leadership in this field.

The Maldives did not, until quite recently, have any fully qualified librarians. However, the situation has changed within the last few years. This is due in part to the formation of MCHE and the increasing recognition of the importance of proper management of an academic library to serve its growing clientele. At present the MCHE employs three professional librarians (one employed in 2001 and two more in 2003), who have library science qualifications from universities in Australia and Egypt.

Library professional development in the Maldives

As mentioned above library staff in the Maldives experience professional isolation, and the lack of appropriate in-country training facilities hinders the professional development of existing staff and the training of new staff. In turn, this contributes to the low professional status of librarianship in the country. In the absence of nationwide library training programs, the MCHE has been looking at alternative training options and development opportunities for the MCHE library staff.

One such initiative is the employment of overseas consultants with expertise in this field. MCHE is looking to consultants and international partners to guide their faculty/centre library development, to mentor the professional staff, to organise and facilitate staff development programs, and to increase and enhance existing library collections.

Maldives College of Higher Education

MCHE, the only academic college in the country, was formed in 1998. It brought together the different institutions undertaking the role of tertiary education providers in the country at that time. At present MCHE consists of eight different faculties/centres specialising in education, health sciences, engineering and technology, hospitality and tourism, management and computing, shari'ah¹ and law, and open learning. Most of these faculties/centres have their own collection of library materials, and are independent of each other. These decentralised libraries are commonly referred as the MCHE library. The amalgamation of these libraries into one central library in a new library building is under discussion.

The MCHE library, being the only academic library, faces a number of challenges in the provision of library services. The decentralised geographical spread of the faculties/centres within Male' is one major hurdle in the provision of equitable access to the students of MCHE as a whole. The MCHE libraries are at various stages of development, and the levels of the library collections vary, as do the qualification levels of library staff.

¹ Islamic Jurisprudence

At present, there are fifteen staff working at the MCHE libraries, most of whom gained their knowledge through courses offered at the National Library, and some short courses abroad. Seven of the staff have no prior training in the field other than the practical hands-on experience they gained through working in their respective libraries. Due to the lack of in-country library training programs, anyone wishing to pursue a career in this field must go abroad to neighbouring India, Sri Lanka or to Australia and other developed countries. This is usually organised under government scholarships or international grants.

Maldives College of Higher Education library collections

In terms of volumes held the combined MCHE collection is the largest in the country. The current MCHE libraries collection totals 44,267 volumes. The Faculty of Education Library has the largest collection (26,240), followed by the Faculty of Health Sciences (8,396). Other faculty/centre libraries have varying numbers ranging from 2,930 to as few as 519.

It is acknowledged by MCHE management and staff that the collections are inadequate, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for teaching, reference and research purposes. Most of the existing collections are dated and static as a consequence of budgetary constraints, lack of a collection development plan, and unstructured and ad hoc acquisition practices.

Print monograph collections have been acquired mainly through funding from international grants from organisations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and other donors. The Maldives Government funding provides a limited amount of acquisitions revenue. The serials collection is almost nonexistent, mainly due to budgetary constraints, but also due to the shortage of professional library staff and absence of guiding principles as to what needs to be subscribed to on the small budgetary provision.

Some of the MCHE libraries have a small collection of audiovisual materials, plus CD-ROMs, mostly those that accompany texts. The recent introduction of the Internet to all computer workstations within MCHE has greatly enhanced access to material outside the physical boundaries of the library. However, the system is frustratingly slow, making it unreliable as a research tool (Linklater, 2003).

Approximately 90% of both the MCHE and the National Library's collections consists of the books in the English language. This reflects the teaching medium and also the lack of published material locally in either English or the local language as noted above. Most books used in libraries, for reference and for teaching purpose of higher education, are imported from other countries, due to the dearth of local publications.

Maldives College of Higher Education future library development

The MCHE has a keen interest in developing its library to university standard and hence is obtaining expert advice from overseas professionals in this field.

In 2002, the MCHE hired an Australian consultant, Mr Bill Linklater, to advise on the creation of a central library for MCHE and other issues. There was a follow up visit in July 2003 providing mentoring and advice, and resulting in recommendations. Further to this, in 2003, the World Bank funded the Link Institution Arrangement between Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia and MCHE. This established a library partnership, which is the subject of this paper. A key focus of this partnership is resource provision and collection development.

Collection development in the Faculty of Education

The problem of resource provision for academic libraries in developing countries in the pre-digital age has been outlined by Boake (1994). Added to the financial and logistical constraints described back then, is the imperative to evaluate and make decisions about the possibility of a digital library and future digital collections.

At the micro level the Link Institution partnership focuses on the Faculty of Education Library within MCHE. The Faculty of Education is in a strong growth stage, with strategic directions that include curriculum development, future expansion of student intake, and increases in staff research. Furthermore, academic staff are being encouraged to upgrade qualifications and engage in research. But such rapid development places considerable pressure on the Education Library and improvements are needed to assist the organisation to achieve its strategic goals. It is recognised that the Library impacts upon all MCHE goals, and in particular:

- Attracting and Retaining Quality People
- Enhancing Teaching and Learning
- Promoting Research
- Enhancing Internationalisation

(Maldives College of Higher Education, 2000)

The Link Institution partnership provides advice on improving and developing the library collection in the Faculty of Education.

Building a basic education collection

The aim is to build upon the existing print collection of texts, and provide advice on how to raise the collection to a level that would support staff research in the long term. In the short term it is hoped to source quality donations, establish print serials subscriptions, and explore the options of building a hybrid library model whereby print holdings could be supplemented by digital collections. This is all to be achieved with the constraints imposed by a small budget, few qualified staff and the limited availability of communication technology needed to deliver digital content.

It is important to view the current faculty library development and collections within the context of the local environment outlined above. Until quite recently

there were no qualified librarians in the newly formed MCHE or within the Faculty of Education. The first trained librarian was appointed to Education as recently as April 2003.

Currently the Education collection contains mainly undergraduate level texts that support student learning, not staff research. In the past collections were reliant on donations and funding from aid organisations. Those purchased items had been acquired in an ad hoc manner without the framework of a collection development policy.

There are a few serial back runs that were acquired by donation, or purchased when funds were available. However, as there has been no ongoing budget in the past it has been difficult to maintain ongoing subscriptions. This situation is not uncommon in developing libraries where a constant budget stream cannot be guaranteed and budget control may sit outside the library management structure.

Staff usage of the Education library collection is low. The scarcity and costs of imported texts means that some academic staff maintain their own office collections for the benefit of their students, which adds to an overall poor perception of the library within the institution.

Education collection growth by donation

Over the years developing libraries have become very wary of the promised largesse of donations from libraries of developed countries, and rightly so. If these donations have not been selected according to strict selection criteria, they become more of a burden than a benefit. The Link Institution partnership is developing donation selection criteria within clear collection development guidelines for the Faculty of Education library. The partnership is providing advice on sourcing donations from areas in the developed world, in particular from the Link Institution.

Building a digital collection

The Education library faces the choice of going totally digital, staying with print only, or having a mixture of both. There is support from the faculty to build a hybrid library model whereby current print holdings could be supplemented by digital collections. However, several factors prevent this, including:

- Digital databases are subscription based and require a recurrent acquisitions budget.
- Most commercial digital resources are expensive, making subscription difficult for developing countries.

Any attempt to build an adequate academic library collection must take into account the constraints imposed by the budget and support infrastructure. Obstacles encountered at MCHE included those noted, plus slow network

speeds to deliver digital resources and other “digital divide” type issues, which will be discussed later.

New pricing models for developing countries

Fortunately, new pricing models for the developing world are emerging and the range of free resources and Eprint repositories expanding. These encouraging developments were explored as a way of providing affordable digital resources to the Maldives. The objective was to identify some key resources that could help establish access to indexing databases and other digital content relevant to the academic profile.

There is a growing recognition among publishers of scholarly information that they have a role to play in bridging the information divide between the developed and the developing world; and major publishers such as Elsevier, Blackwells, and Academic Press are participating in important initiatives to deliver academic content to libraries and researchers in the developing world (Silver, 2002).

Some recent examples of these initiatives are listed below and more fully described in the Silver article:

HINARI: Health Internet Access to Research Initiative
Sponsored by the World Health Organisation
<http://www.healthinternetwork.org>

PERI: Programme for the Enhancement of Research information
Sponsored by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP)
<http://inasp.info/peri/>

eIFL: electronic Information for Libraries
Sponsored by the Open Society Institute (OSI)
<http://www.eifl.net>

Not all of the initiatives are available to all developing countries and the Link Institution partnership is exploring the possibilities of these developments for MCHE. Paradoxically, the countries most able to benefit from these initiatives are often not aware of them, due to lack of access to the professional networks and literature where these programmes are discussed.

Free digital resources for developing countries

There is now a wealth of globally available free resources that can be exploited in an environment that is content-poor and where funding is tight.

As Chowdhury has presented in his paper on digital libraries and the digital divide, digital libraries can help bridge the divide by providing users with access to: “subject gateways, digital reference services, free access to e-journals and e-books in many areas, e-print archives and free digital libraries”

(Chowdhury, 2002). The paper provides details of these services and resources.

As part of the Link Institution partnership several affordable Education resources and services were identified:

AskERIC

The AskERIC website includes e-Reference services and a publicly available version of the premier Education database, ERIC. This database contains an index to Education journals and documents. No full text is available however the brief topic summaries or ERIC Digests are suitable for undergraduates.

Electric Library

Electric Library is a multidisciplinary database containing full text journal and newspaper articles. This is aimed at undergraduate level and is one of the more affordable full text databases.

EDResearch Online

The Cunningham Library of the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) provides a membership support service for libraries in developing countries charging a moderate fee. In addition, the ACER Cunningham Library's EdResearch Online Database provides an excellent resource of Education journals, 70% of which are free. For those that charge the payment method is via pay per view. This arrangement is ideal for a developing library such as MCHE as it delivers a "just in time" solution and gets around the problem of continuity of the library budget. It is particularly well suited to academic staff wishing to gain access to search, retrieval and document supply at one point.

Many developing libraries are either unaware of these resources or unable to access them due to a myriad of infrastructure and digital divide problems.

A key collection development goal at MCHE is to establish a digital collection. This is seen as a way to provide cost effective library materials for growing student numbers, to support staff research and to provide services to remote users in the outlying Maldivian islands.

Some suitable digital content has been sourced from the new publishing initiatives and from the free resources and various e-repositories and gateways, as described above. However, the Link Institution partnership has cautioned against going totally down the digital road and not continuing to build a basic print collection. One reason for this is that there are barriers to entering the digital road.

Down the digital road: Barriers to entry

Just as the concept of "barriers to entry" applied in industrial age economies to areas requiring high capital investment, so it applies in the digital age. Building a fully digital library is not a cheap alternative to print. In addition to

acquiring content, there are a host of issues relating to providing access to content that need to be considered.

The concept of the “digital divide” which describes a perceived gap between digital “haves” and “have-nots” has been well documented in the information technology and library literature. Some of the barriers outlined by Byrne (2003) have echoes in the Maldives library context, as follows:

Content

As has been noted the Maldives is a highly literate culture with its own language, Dhivehi, and high levels of English language proficiency. However the annual publishing output is very small. The digital content available to smaller nations is rarely local. This is an issue well understood and widely discussed among Australian librarians where content is invariably provided by dominant US and European publishers. Where some Australian full content is available, it is often expensive due to economies of scale. The issue is even greater in a small developing country such as the Maldives, where there is no local digital content of an academic nature. However, being an English language proficient country does provide advantages in that imported content from databases can at least be used.

Connectivity

Connectivity is a major issue at MCHE as network speeds are frustratingly slow. While the tolerance for a slow network seems high, it would be a mistake to assign too much of the finite budget to digital library sources. Student numbers are growing and student Internet usage is high. Higher levels of network traffic can be anticipated in the future without any apparent solution to the access speed problems. These issues are not unique to developing libraries and are being experienced in the developed world where IT network upgrades are usually built into forward planning.

Issues of local geography

A digital divide exists between the capital, Male' and the outlying islands as has been described above. The islands suffer from a severe shortage of telecommunication facilities. Furthermore 90% of the islands have small populations of less than 1000. This compounds the internal digital divide within the country.

User Skills and Training

Information Literacy of both library staff and students at MCHE has not figured on the agenda. It is barely 12 months since Internet access was provided in library workstations. As more scholarly resources are provided, the need to improve student and staff skills will become critical.

With the above threats and opportunities in mind, some key strategies for improvement were identified. These are being worked through over the two year time span of the official Link Institution partnership.

Key strategies for improvement

To improve the Education and MCHE libraries, the following specific recommendations were made:

- Set up a library committee to provide a forum for discussion and decision making and to raise the status of the library within the institution
- Establish a recurrent collections budget within the library
- Write a collection development policy
- Develop a list of core Education print journals
- Establish selection criteria for donations, including subject areas, formats and types of materials required based on needs
- Seek suggestions from the Australian partner institution on sources of possible donations and establish a mechanism for delivering donations
- Identify the free resources and make them available through the institutional website
- Explore the opportunities provided by new pricing models for developing countries

Conclusion

Some of the recommendations above may be resourceful for other small academic libraries.

Library cooperation and knowledge sharing has long been a feature of the profession. What this case describes is one example of how this is happening in the Indian Ocean region. In the short term this arrangement provides professional support and mentoring and a contact point for advice. It thus empowers professionals within their own organisation so that they can raise the image of the library and secure academic support. Ultimately, the aim is for the MCHE library to become self-sufficient and develop to a point where Maldives professionals can both re-establish the professional association and partake in regional library cooperation, especially within South Asia.

In the Maldives-Australian partnership, what began as a “face-to-face” dialogue is being maintained in the virtual environment. Further exchange visits will take place. The work being done by the partnership is ongoing as the Link Institution Arrangement continues until April 2005. By that time there

will be more local qualified librarians, raising the critical mass of professionals to a level that would support a small local professional network.

Partnerships such as the Link Institution arrangement help to bridge the divide between developed and developing libraries. As Paul has noted "It is imperative that librarians build a communication network (both digitally and physically) ... to bridge the digital divide" (Paul, 2002). The Australian-Maldives Link Institution partnership goes some way towards achieving this by helping to inform and empower librarians working in isolation. Whilst there is still much to be done, the case affirms the value of building enduring professional partnerships.

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