

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS OF LIBRARIANSHIP AND INFORMATION STUDIES: CURRENT ISSUES

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper examines the changing context within which international collaboration between Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies takes place.

Method. This is an opinion paper based on a review, not only of the literature of Librarianship and Information Studies, but also some of the literature on internationalization of higher education, and on collaboration in research and in business.

Results. The paper indicates the barriers to international collaboration, identifies actions necessary to its success, and points to the key role of comparative studies in promoting research, curricular development, and understanding of professional principles.

Conclusion. It is argued that collaborative activities now need to be focused on issues that are perceived to be important beyond the boundaries of LIS and thus more likely to attract the external attention and support that would contribute to sustaining collaboration. A formal mechanism is proposed.

Introduction

Collaboration is not a new phenomenon in education for librarianship and information work. In modern times, it has encompassed exchanges of staff for reviews of curricula and teaching methods, complemented by gifts of publications and equipment paid for by the sponsoring agency, and sometimes scholarships for staff or prospective staff of the developing institution to enable them to take a higher qualification in the partner institution. However:

“International co-operation is a natural extension of national co-operation, and as such is affected by the state of co-operation within each country, the efficiency of means of taking part, the kinds of library and their state of development, and how far they find reflection of their aims and functions in other countries. As can be expected, therefore, international co-operation has grown up in an irregular fashion.” (Jefferson, 1977)

One of the earliest examples of international activities involving Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies (SLIS) took place in Japan in the 1950s when a group of American teachers undertook the development of the SLIS in Keio University (Downs, 1958). Japan was also the location of the G8 Summit when the world's wealthiest nations committed themselves to the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society (2000). The G8 are now actively promoting relevant strategies and action plans. These reflect not only increasing recognition of the need to manage the ‘information explosion’ that took place during the Twentieth Century, but also a paradigm shift from the perception of information as a means to an end to the ‘Information Society’ as a goal for development (Moore, 1998). However, between the two events, significant changes have taken place in the context in which international collaboration in the information field takes place and in which it can be facilitated (Neelemeghan, 1997). New approaches to the internationalization of universities have also become apparent, and new aspira-

tions for collaboration have been expressed by SLIS (e.g. Lin & Wang, 2006; Virkus, 2007). This paper reviews past activities and current trends to determine a possible future for SLIS collaborations.

Motives for internationalization in Higher Education

Before 1946, the international activities of universities were relatively small scale, with a small contribution by academics and administrators in fields relevant to the development of the poorer countries (Swann *et al*, 1977). The establishment of the United Nations and its associated agencies, the favorable perception of the development model applied to the post-war reconstruction of Europe and South East Asia, and the termination of colonial regimes in Africa and Asia prompted generous inter-governmental programs of support for the development of universities (Carter, 1964; Rochester, 1991). SLIS participation in these programs was largely conditioned by historic, political, geographic, cultural, and linguistic affinities, and generally arose as a result of an invitation by an international agency rather than from any expression of multinational or global professional interests.

A review of the literature now reveals a variety of contemporary motives for participation in international activities, which may be summarized as:

- reinforcement of student and staff language skills
- opportunity to add value for students
 - student mobility
 - recognition of equivalence of qualifications
- staff development
 - international travel/experience as an alternative to routine tasks
 - enhanced knowledge and quality of academic work
 - joint research and publication
- institutional development
 - opportunity to stimulate change and accelerate innovation
 - opportunity to increase outreach, raise profile, and improve standing
 - opportunity to use external funding to overcome fiscal constraints.

However, the geo-political changes in recent years have been accompanied by shifts in government funds for international development (Johnson, 2008), with a growing emphasis on achievement of the United Nations' "Millennium Goals." The latter emphasize a 'pro-poor' agenda, and offer little support for the development of aspects of higher education that do not obviously conform to these aid objectives. At the same time, many governments in the wealthier countries have been reducing their real-terms expenditure on higher education, and there have been growing doubts about universities continuing to contribute staffing for consultancy work to provide assistance for developing institutions. The focus of some universities on student recruitment and commercial partnerships now differentiates them from institutions focused on collaborative knowledge-sharing (Turner and Robson, 2007).

Collaborative activities between SLIS

In the second half of the last Century, the establishment of education for librarianship and information sciences (LIS) in the developing countries was regularly supported by the international agencies such as UNESCO (Parker, 1984) and individual governments, as it also recognized that clear diplomatic and economic benefits were derived by the donor countries (Nye, 2004). Halsey and Zhong (1988) discussed cooperative curriculum development efforts between a university in the USA and one in China. Evans and Treloar (1994) reported on a link between an Australian institution and one in Papua New Guinea. Neelameghan and Picache (1981) reviewed the development of UNESCO's regional 'Post Graduate Training Course for Science Information Specialists in Southeast Asia' at the University of the Philippines Institute of Library Science, which brought in individuals from other SLIS throughout the

world to assist in delivering the main course, short courses, and workshops. A Dutch government program to support library development in Pakistan benefited several SLIS there, with support from several SLIS in the Netherlands (Mahmood, 1996). The involvement of a number of SLIS from different countries in Indonesia is described by Rungkat (2001). Collaborative activities by SLIS have been inhibited by their isolation, but the rapid growth of the Internet appeared to present new opportunities for communication and developing collaborative activities. In 1995, UNESCO established an experimental virtual collaborative project (UNESCO, 1995). No formal evaluation has been undertaken, although a critique of the project has discussed possible reasons for its demise (Johnson, 1997), some of which were supported by more recent research into web-based academic collaboration that has pointed to the importance of personal contact by all participants prior to virtual engagement.

Most of these projects, generally undertaken by SLIS in Europe and North America, could never be described as a partnership of equals, and it would be more correct to refer to them as technical assistance programs rather than collaboration. It is generally accepted that these activities made a substantial contribution to meeting the needs of the developing countries, but perceptions of their successfulness have changed over time. External support may have created a condition of dependency. Apprehension of the outcomes of change unsupported by foreign 'experts' or local evidence of demand, inertia in local bureaucracies, and lack of other external stimuli have often resulted in projects unsustainable.

Although the need for local curricular and pedagogical adaptations were soon recognized and acted on by the more astute educators (e.g. Downs, 1958), awareness of the shortcomings of some of these development projects began to surface in the early 1980s (e.g. Goldstein, 1982; Tjoumas and Hauptman, 1982). It is now widely recognized that:

"to be an active partner in an international educational programme, there must be a willingness to internationalise the curriculum and mode of delivery..." (Perrault and Gregory, 2002)

Sometimes paternalistic attitudes were evident amongst participants from the more advanced institutions (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2004). Even today, some prehistoric attitudes do seem to linger, causing one commentator to react with astonishment at a recent presentation in which:

"The language, delivery and contextualization of the whole thing was American to the extent that it might have been mystifying even if shown as a cultural curiosity at an academic research seminar. Showing it at a conference in the Gulf region created an iconic moment in the American tradition of genuinely believing that everywhere outside the States is just a set of Territories waiting obediently in line to have their essential Americanness recognized by the award of statehood." ('Msafiri', 2008)

It would be fair to acknowledge that most of the international projects undertaken in the past operated in relatively uncharted areas, and may have been difficult to implement. However, few of the projects involving SLIS appear to have been subject to an objective evaluation of their impact (Johnson, 2005). Most of the accounts in the public domain are descriptive and self-congratulatory, rather than analytical and self-critical professional reviews, although there are exceptions (e.g. Srivastava, 1974). Similarly, comments about the policies and practices of the funding agencies, about the motives, attitudes and professional contribution of the consultants providing development assistance, and on the capacity of the recipient institution and its staff in terms of their capacity to adapt to new approaches and sustain development have been rare, although some can be found (e.g. Stummvoll, 1953; Parker, 1986). We must conclude that most previous activities may not offer relevant models as we enter a new era, and certainly offer little reliable evidence on which to base future collaboration.

Sustainable collaboration - barriers and critical success factors

Moore and Carpenter (2002) have pointed to three critical factors affecting co-operation:

- Size. Larger partnerships can call on a wider range of expertise, and may also achieve economies of scale. But, small units may not be able to find the resources to implement co-operation effectively, however much they might benefit from it. And, beyond a certain size of grouping, some formal coordinating mechanism may be necessary.
- Funding. Co-operation may produce benefits, but not without costs.
- Control. Management will be under pressure for costs and benefits to be demonstrated.

The barriers to international cooperation by SLIS are crumbling according to Stueart (1997), who summarized them as:

- physical distance and economic costs
- conflicting political ideologies
- variations in technological sophistication
- sociological, cultural and education differences
- legal restrictions
- lack of information policies, plans and infrastructure.

These changes had also been noted by the business community, and a model for future forms of collaboration might be drawn from the lessons learned from the strategic business alliances to improve their competitive position and ensure their long term survival (Haque, *et al.*, 2000). Questions have been raised about their value and sustainability, and the failure of alliances has been ascribed to lack of trust, as well as goal incongruency and changes in the environment. The general literature on international collaborations points to a number other factors that inhibit the development of successful collaborations, only some of which appear to have been recognized in the LIS community, and most of which have not been substantiated by empirical evidence:

- limitations in the professional expertise of staff and students
- limitations in any necessary foreign language skills, and/or variations in the use of professional terminology
- perceived national differences and/or stereotypical attitudes towards nationals of the partner country
- failure to distinguish between the universality of professional concepts and distinct local cultural values, beliefs and norms
- failure to adapt curricula and teaching materials to local circumstances and needs
- inappropriate student mix
- failure to adapt management style to suit cultural differences amongst collaborators
- limited time and other resources to commit to collaborative ventures
- staff, students' and employers' adverse reactions to time and effort being allocation to something that they perceive as of marginal significance
- the implicit demand for making changes that contrasts with the need for some stability
- reluctance to share knowledge that is perceived as offering a competitive advantage, institutionally or personally
- institutional managements' perceptions that the opportunity costs outweigh the benefits.

Given that so many collaborative ventures between SLIS do not appear to have fulfilled their potential, we must seek to identify the requirements for successful and sustainable collaboration. Various actions that contribute to success are suggested in the literature about educational and business collaborations. These include:

- evaluating the potential for collaboration before entering into a commitment

- understanding the prospective partner's capacity, motivation for the collaboration, and the sense of shared purpose
- recognizing political and other realities
- defining and agreeing on aims, clear and attainable objectives, specific outputs, and the critical success factors
- gaining attention and securing broadly-based support from institutional managers, government, and the other 'stakeholders'
- creating an enabling environment with incentives and resources to collaborate
- developing a realistic plan to achieve the required combination of organizational structures, activities, and funding
- creating trust in the partnership, and developing mutual respect and a shared culture
- identifying the key individuals to 'champion' the collaboration – both students and staff
- planning and managing activities systematically, i.e. with a logical sequence, clearly defined roles, and specific timescales
- creating flexible structures with appropriately dispersed decision making
- sharing information and monitoring progress against plan
- involving the majority of the staff, including younger staff, operating through influence and consent, and recognizing all contributions
- briefing staff and students on local arrangements and circumstances
- mitigate differences between administrative systems
- using pilot projects to demonstrate benefits and 'quick wins'
- committing to a medium to long-term program of collaboration, sufficient to achieve demonstrable and lasting results
- ensuring adequate opportunities for meaningful communication among potential participants to enhance understanding of the aims, organization and potential benefits
- ensuring regular communication between participants to achieve a balance in contributions, mutual support, and cohesion
- acknowledging and surmounting cultural differences
- evaluating staff and student participants' perceptions of progress and responding appropriately to issues identified
- ensuring local ownership of the outcomes
- communicating progress and celebrating success.

Recently, a new form of collaboration may have begun to emerge. Cortez, *et al.* (2007) have described initiatives linking 3 North American SLIS with one in Africa, based on a Memorandum of Understanding clearly outlining the mission, values and principles supporting the collaboration and the plans for action.

Progress in SLIS collaborations

Given these formidable challenges, what might we assess the current state of collaboration between SLIS to be? Shachaf (2003) has developed a paradigm of the life cycle of library consortia, which evolve through 5 stages:

- **The Embryonic Stage.** Recognition of the need for collaboration is the initiating force, characterized by informal, voluntary networking activities.
- **Early Development.** The consortium defines its processes and member relationships, gaining understanding of the best structure, budgets, relationships, and services that fit within its specific context.
- **Development.** Efforts are focused on effectiveness and efficiency, extending the number and range of services, and securing funds to secure viability.

- Maturation. The consortium is stable, with a clear identity and clear boundaries. Evaluation, quality assessment, and statistical measurements are employed.
- Disbanding. Disbanding could follow any of the four stages of development, if its viability weakens for any reason.

Where does the evolution of collaboration between SLIS sit within this model? Opportunities for international exchange of information and experience, and the development of personal networks have increased in recent years, as transport and communications have become more readily available and relatively less expensive. The Scandinavian SLIS began to work together in the Nordic Network in the 1970s (Harbo, 1994a). Regional international conferences for SLIS are now well established (e.g. ALIEP in the Asia-Pacific Region; EDIBCIC in Latin America), and as well as occasional country to country (e.g. University of Delhi, 1992) or inter-regional meetings (e.g. Savard, 1998).

To support its goal of facilitating labor mobility, the European Commission initiated the ERASMUS program to facilitate staff and student exchanges within the European Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the establishment of the European programs aimed at the improvement of structural capacity of higher education institutions in the newly independent states (later extended to the neighboring countries around the Mediterranean and to Latin America). It also led to an independent initiative by 9 SLIS, the BOBCATSSS Conference which is organized each year by different SLIS from across Europe as an exercise in international project management undertaken by their students. This has become a major international conference, with a strong emphasis on education for LIS, and has been taken under the wing of EUCLID, the European association for library and information education and research, which was initiated around the same time by the same Heads (Harbo, 1994b). However, Kajberg (2003) has, in effect, argued that internationalization of SLIS has progressed little beyond what Shachaf described as the 'embryonic' stage, with few examples of progress into even the 'early development' stage and little evidence of semi-permanent groups progressing to the next stage in the model. Perhaps the only collaboration to show signs of 'maturation' is the International Masters Degree in Information Studies at the University of Parma in Italy (Dixon and Tammaro, 2003).

Collaboration, comparative research, and sustainability

Whilst considering the limited progress that SLIS collaborations have made, perhaps we should step back and examine the broader context to help us identify why collaboration has not been more successful? Support for LIS depends largely on the perception of decision makers in governments and universities whether or not LIS produces significant benefits in terms of economic and social development. However, studies continue to point to the inadequacy of research purporting to demonstrate the impact of librarianship and information work (Stone, 1993; Wavell et al., 2002). LIS is not alone in being unable to present an irrefutable case for its impact in society; education is another field in which the evidence is indicative rather than conclusive (Lewin, 1993), but the transformational value of education is never questioned. LIS perhaps needs to attach itself more visibly to endeavors that attract similar common assent.

There appear to be many similar opportunities for SLIS to enhance their status by focusing their research on the role of information and information services in support of the issues concerning the development agencies, eliciting generally applicable principles and critical success factors by undertaking international comparative studies. It may require academic staff to adopt new, inter-disciplinary approaches, and develop their capacity to undertake comparative analysis, but it will attract wider recognition and prestige. A comparative approach, with its emphasis on 'why' rather than 'how,' would also challenge the nature of much pedagogy for librarianship and information studies, fulfilling the purpose of education, which is:

“..to provide understanding, enabling those so educated to adapt to the dynamics of change and allowing them to view international developments from a national perspective.” (Francis, 1990)

International comparative research may thus provide an opportunity for SLIS to fulfill their implicit responsibility to contribute to the advancement of society in a more visibly transformative way. Universities not only deliver a nation’s educational aspirations but, by generating and disseminating knowledge, also advance thinking and create understanding. The research that they undertake provides evidence about existing provision, reveals gaps, highlights issues, and stimulates new ideas that may become the basis of new policies and services. There is ample evidence of the involvement of other disciplines in providing research services and policy advice to governments in developing countries, but examples of SLIS undertaking such a role are relatively rare. How else could more research be initiated that is likely to attract the attention of governments? Is there a viable approach to engaging in appropriately focused collaborative activities that offer SLIS a way to develop their expertise and achieve greater recognition? Collaboration lends itself easily to comparative research studies, as the following table suggests:

| Collaborative activity | Potential comparative research focus |
|--|---|
| • establish partnership | → national and institutional policies |
| • develop curricula | → job market and current professional practice |
| • exchange students | → knowledge base and cultural sensitivity |
| • exchange staff | → subject and pedagogical expertise |
| • undertake research | → research strengths and methodological expertise |
| • establish foundations for future collaboration | → issues underpinning sustainability |
| • assess impact | → national and institutional benefits |

A review of research practices and priorities in the UK noted amongst the potential benefits of collaborative research that:

“The quality of the research is likely to be higher, giving the research greater academic standing and thereby enabling it to have more impact on the research agenda.” (McNicol and Nankivell, 2003)

How, then, could the impact of research outputs be assured? As the profession takes on more complex responsibilities, the outcomes contribute to the reconstruction of social realities, and ultimately provides the framework for political action. Collaborative and comparative research into aspects of the work of information services in support of development will, however, only make a contribution to our professional future if it is effectively communicated, particularly to the policy makers whose continued support is essential (Johnson *et al*, 2004).

But the first issue that requires attention is how a lead could be given to establishing the strategic alliance necessary to push forward a collaborative agenda, and focus the efforts of SLIS on matters that are seen to be of unquestioned significance. It is now almost 20 years since UNESCO established the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Program* to build regional university networks and encourage inter-

* The UNESCO/UNITWIN Chairs program can be seen at: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=41557&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

university cooperation through transfer of knowledge across borders. There have been only one or two established in the LIS field. Significantly, the latest policy guidelines emphasize the contribution to sustainable human development that any new Chair would be expected to make. Which SLIS could rise to the challenge of securing UNESCO support and providing a lead in this field?

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Professor Ian Johnson has held senior positions at the Robert Gordon University since 1989. He has been Chairman of British, European and international bodies concerned with education and training for Librarianship and Information Studies, and of the IFLA Professional Board. He has led or participated in numerous projects concerned with the development of Schools of Librarianship, sponsored by UNESCO, the European Commission and other agencies. He is currently Joint Editor of *Libri: international journal of libraries and information services*; a member of the editorial board of *Education for Information*; and writes a regular column on education for librarianship in *Information Development*.