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The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities



“An Information Lab for the Knowledge Society”

**Report of the Inaugural Planning Meeting of the
ACU Libraries and Information Network**

22–24 October 2007, University of Botswana, Gaborone

Outcomes and Proposed Programme of Activities

1. Background

Libraries are crucial to the success of any institution. They provide a range of services to both students and staff across departments, in support of teaching, learning and research. Yet all too often the importance and value of the university library, particularly in the ‘hidden’ functions it performs beyond the visible acquisition of books and journals, are poorly understood at strategic and planning levels. As a result libraries often suffer in the relative allocation of university resources.

Recognising the need to address this problem, and the potential of a Commonwealth initiative in this area, the ACU and University of Botswana hosted a 3 day planning meeting in Gaborone, supported by the 2007 UNESCO Participation Programme, to consider a number of key concerns and to identify ways forward. Many of the challenges facing libraries globally pose particular problems for African universities. This first meeting therefore focused particularly on African libraries, bringing together librarians from Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, alongside colleagues from Australia, India and the UK. Recognising the need for stronger dialogue between librarians and publishers, a representative from the academic publisher Springer also attended. A full list of participants is included as an appendix at the end of this document.

The meeting considered a number of issues, including Information Literacy, Quality Assurance and Benchmarking, Strategic Engagement within Institutions, and Librarian-Publisher Engagement. This report does not provide a detailed record of the discussion in each area, but instead focuses on the desirable outcomes which were identified, and ways in which these issues might conceivably be addressed by the Network.

2. Formation of the Network

Librarians are well connected internationally, with a number of international, regional and national associations representing the library and information profession. However, while these existing groups enable communication amongst librarians, they are less well-placed to broker relationships between librarians and other university staff. With activities at several levels of university management and administration, including engagement with Vice Chancellors at the highest level, the ACU is potentially well placed to assist.

It was agreed that a formal ACU Libraries and Information Network would be a valuable tool in addressing these and other issues, and that the process of establishing a network, already underway, should continue. A Steering Group, composed of representatives of different Commonwealth regions would be established to guide this. Membership, it was agreed, would be open to all appropriate staff in ACU member institutions. Around 150 registrations had already been received. Each institution would be able to nominate one principle contact, ideally the university librarian, while other staff would also be included in an electronic mailing list.

3. Network Communication

A hard copy magazine, *LINK*, would be produced three times a year by the ACU (in the format of the first issue already distributed), with articles to be contributed by Network members. A regular email bulletin could also be produced if useful, particularly to improve communication between librarians and publishers, and to keep librarians informed of new developments and genuine offers from publishers.

4. Information Literacy

The theme of information literacy was discussed at considerable length. This was widely felt to be a critical area for libraries and for universities as a whole. Experiences differed, but it was generally agreed that libraries face an increasing need to provide information literacy support to students. Introducing programmes and integrating these within departmental curricula is less straightforward, and participants noted the challenge of demonstrating the value of such skills training to both academic staff and students. Participants also agreed that if they and their colleagues were able to embrace this challenge, there was great potential to reframe understandings of what the library and librarians are there to do. With graduate employability an increasing concern for institutions, information literacy skills add much to the perceived – and actual – value of a university's degree programmes. By showing colleagues how they and their students would benefit from the skills not only to *find* information, but also to *analyse* and *evaluate* it, and by offering new and innovative services, libraries might increase their standing. Librarians will need to work hard, though, to reframe the debate in these strategic terms. The meeting also benefited from contributions from Professor Bojosi Otlhogile, Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana, who agreed that information literacy had much to offer institutions in their drive for excellence, and urged librarians to find ways of making this engagement.

5. Development of Externally Funded Projects

By connecting members together through the newsletter and email list, it might be possible to unite those with particular interests or expertise in order to seek external funding for specific projects. From the discussions on Information Literacy, it was felt that this might be one area where external funding could be sought, specifically with a bid through the latest round of the UK Government-funded Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DePHE) scheme.

The scheme provides for partnerships to be formed between two or more institutions, with projects that include south-south partnerships particularly encouraged. Of the 25 bilateral focus countries covered by the scheme, it was proposed that Copperbelt University, Zambia, would be a good lead, with partners to be identified from other African countries, India and the UK. Curricula-focused projects have been supported in previous rounds, and there is evidence to suggest that such a proposal might be looked on favourably again.

The argument for support would conceivably run as follows:

- (a) As higher education has expanded its intake, the employability of graduates has become more critical;
- (b) Employers complain that graduates often lack key transferable skills. Some of these embrace what might be termed 'information literacy skills' (ILS);

- (c) At present, many African universities have developed and include information literacy in their curricula, however there are several reasons why this is not having maximum impact, as follows;
- (d) Course provision is not taken sufficiently seriously by students. In some institutions, it is concentrated at the start of the course, or even in induction programmes, whereas the need may be at other times. It is sometimes not examined, or only represents an insignificant element in assessment. Academic staff do not always take content seriously – either for their students or themselves;
- (e) Arrangements for course delivery vary, but often delivery comes from library staff who are inadequately involved in the planning process;
- (f) As a result of these factors, ILS provision is under valued and under used. It also tends to concentrate on educating students on how to use library and information services. There is, however, potential for much wider applicability, for skills in sourcing, analysing and using information;
- (g) The application would seek to encourage this process, by bringing together libraries from Africa and India together with a UK institution which is making wider employment skills a priority in the next three years. It would:
 - Contrast existing course provision, and expose this in a systematic way to employment needs;
 - Produce statements of good practice and model curricular that institutions can adapt to their own circumstances;
 - Help raise the status of the activity within the institution;
 - Provide high quality materials that can be disseminated (through the ACU network) to a much wider audience.

6. Quality Assurance and Benchmarking

It was agreed that an area where the Network could make a useful contribution to current practice would be in the area of quality assurance and benchmarking. A presentation by Robert Moropa, Director of Library Services at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, reflected on his experiences in this area, and discussed how a detailed audit and review process had enabled the library to become more involved in the institution's overall strategic planning exercise, demonstrating the library's contribution to the university's 'excellence' mission. From the presentation by Robert Moropa, and the experience of UNISA in making use of the Commonwealth of Learning for their own institutional review, it was clear that internal audit mechanisms are developing quite quickly. However, participants still felt that there was a clear role which could the Network could play in this area. There was a need to develop reliable mechanisms that were cost effective, but still credible. It will also be important that any such mechanisms are also relevant to less well-resourced libraries. The LibQUAL service, for example, which the University of Sydney Library had used in its own reviews, relies on good ICT facilities within the institution for the collection of data from clients.

As an initial starting point, a proposed survey, outlined below, would enable the Network to gather some level of comparative data on university libraries, and which might provide a baseline for the design of a future initiative. The existing ACU benchmarking model would also be worth exploring, but only within groups of institutions that are relatively well matched. The possibility of a hybrid model, in which institutions can commission a review based partly on information submitted and partly from personal interaction, could potentially be developed, and would provide a relatively cheap form of institutional review.

7. Scanning Exercise and Survey of Commonwealth University Libraries

It was felt that one way which the Network could begin to address some of the issues discussed, would be to undertake the collection and dissemination of a body of comparative information on the current state of university libraries across the Commonwealth. This could encompass a wide area of library activity, including resource access, strategic planning and processes, and involvement of librarians at higher levels of university management and decision making.

There was therefore strong support for the idea that a survey be conducted, in order to prepare a report for presentation at the ACU Executive Heads conference, scheduled for Hyderabad, India, in November 2008. The resulting report, aimed particularly at institutional leaders and policy makers, would:

- Summarise recent trends within the profession, and identify priority areas for future activity;
- Identify the potential for libraries to assist with wider institutional activities, and their capacity to fulfil this potential;
- Look at current trends in provision, and national and regional differences;
- Provide a body of evidence to inform the development and future activities of the Network, and generate information which could be used in discussions with publishers and external support agencies. In particular it would provide information which would strengthen the ability of the Network and its members to engage with institutional heads and senior management.

Particular topics to include in the exercise would be:

- Role of the library within the institution (reporting structure, role in committee process, decision making, etc);
- Current resources, against appropriate measures (staff-student ratios, expenditure as a percentage of university budget, etc);
- Acquisition trends (print and electronic journals) in recent years;
- Extent to which performance indicators have been developed (user satisfaction, etc);
- Staffing resources – shortages, training, qualifications;
- Relations with academic staff and process – teaching provision, etc.

A draft survey would be drawn up by ACU staff in London, for discussion amongst the Steering Group, and to enable a final document to be produced for circulation to all ACU member libraries.

8. Identifying and Sharing Expertise, Good Practice and Policy

A key role of the Network would be to assist members to identify specific expertise within the profession, such as undertaking institutional quality reviews, to establish a repository of policies, procedures, curricula and other training materials, and to seek cost effective ways in which such expertise and knowledge might be shared.

This might most usefully be achieved by developing an online repository, through the Network area of the ACU website, to include a directory of expertise available within the Network, and an area to collect and make available a variety of useful information, such as institutional policies, procedures and other documentation, and curriculum and training materials.

9. Expansion of Low Cost Journal Scheme

The ACU has now operated its Protecting the African Library/ Low Cost Journals Scheme for five years. Feedback from those participants who had made use of the Scheme was very positive, despite the existence of a number of other discount journal facilities which are also available. Given the poor level of ICT infrastructure in many participants' universities, the ACU's focus on print journals was particularly welcome and this was not being met by other providers. A presentation from Alan Harris, Licensing Manager for Springer's Developing Countries Initiatives, was particularly useful, explaining not only Springer's own schemes, but the logic, from the publisher's perspective, of the library-publisher relationship.

It was agreed that the ACU should undertake to examine the feasibility of expanding the Scheme, depending on the support of publishers, and according to institutional demand and logistical feasibility. Specifically the ACU would look at the case for:

- Involving more publishers for hard copy journals;

- Extending to books and/or other services from publishers;
- The potential for including electronic publications in the Scheme;
- To liaise with publishers regarding the possibility of extending the geographical remit of the Scheme;
- To communicate the Scheme and its benefits more strongly to member universities.

10. Organisation of Face-to-Face Meetings and Conferences

It was agreed that inline with other ACU Professional Networks, there would be a benefit in organising further face to face meetings, although these might be smaller events rather than larger conferences such as those held by the HRM and PR Networks. Given the existence of other organisations, many of whom hold regular meetings which many university librarians often attend, it might be most useful for any Network meeting to be organised in collaboration with other events, or as a satellite meeting to maximise the numbers who would be able to attend, given the limited budget likely to be available for this.

11. An Initial Agenda

Based on the areas identified above, a short agenda was developed, to be pursued in the coming months.

1. To develop a funding application under the DeIPHE Round 3 Call, to assist members in the field of information literacy;
2. To seek to expand direct benefits to members (particularly less well-resourced universities) through the ACU Protecting the African Library/ Low Cost Journals scheme;
3. To bring together a web-based repository of expertise, policy documents and other relevant information to assist members in policy development, quality assurance and benchmarking;
4. To undertake a large scale survey of Commonwealth university libraries, with a view to preparing and presenting a report to Executive Heads (Vice Chancellors) in Hyderabad, November 2008.

Jonathan Harle, John Kirkland
Association of Commonwealth Universities
November 2007

Appendix: Meeting Participants

Kay Raseroka Director, Library Services	University of Botswana
Dr Buhle Mbambo-Thata Executive Director, Library Services	University of South Africa (UNISA)
Rosemary M. Shafack Chief Librarian	University of Buea, Cameroon
Helena R. Asamoah-Hassan University Librarian	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana
Dr Stephen Akintunde Deputy University Librarian	University of Jos, Nigeria
Robert Moropa Director, Library Services	University of Pretoria, South Africa
Charles Lungu University Librarian	Copperbelt University, Zambia
Kathy Matsika University Librarian	National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe
Dr Maria Musoke University Librarian	Makerere University, Uganda
Aubrey Chapatula Trainee Librarian / MSc student	Mzuzu University, Malawi / University of Botswana
Ivor Lloyd Depute Principal (Planning and Resources)	University of Abertay Dundee, UK
Daulat Jotwani University Librarian	Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India
John Shipp University Librarian	University of Sydney, Australia
Jon Harle Programme Officer (Libraries)	Association of Commonwealth Universities
Dr John Kirkland Deputy Secretary General (Development)	Association of Commonwealth Universities
Alan Harris Licensing Manager Africa & Developing Countries Initiatives	Springer, Netherlands