

Short Communications

Library Cooperation and Resource Sharing: Some Lessons from the University of Botswana

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Abstract

In the world that is characterised by shrinking economy, a library may not be able to effectively and suitably meet the information needs of all its users. Cooperation and resource sharing among libraries are therefore considered a sine qua non for effective performance. The paper notes that cooperation and resource sharing among libraries cannot be limited to materials, but need to be extended to skills and human resources. Drawing from experiences of the University of Botswana Library (UBL), this paper identifies some problems that could arise when cooperation disappears and division and dichotomy develops. The University of Botswana operates with limited physical infrastructures. This paper proposes that the high quality service the University of Botswana Library (UBL) achieves is driven by cooperation and resource sharing. The areas of strong collaboration include cooperation within the Library, the faculties of the institution, and cooperation at the national, regional and international levels. The benefits from cooperation and resource sharing are explored, and it is concluded that such practices determine the excellence of UBL.

Keywords: Library cooperation, resource sharing, information literacy, distance learners, training, general education.

Background Information of the University of Botswana Library

The University of Botswana (UB), a broad-based public institution situated in the nation's capital city of Gaborone, was established in 1982. Standing in a country with a land area of 582,000 square kilometres, the University of Botswana is the first of the only two government-owned universities in the country. The establishment of the second government-owned university has recently offered admission to its first cohort of students. The University of Botswana has two other campuses located outside Gaborone: one in the northern city of Francistown, and the other a research institute situated in Maun Township. According to the University of Botswana Fact Book (2011), the overall students' population is 15,731 comprising 12,626 full-time students, 2,559 part-time, and 546 distance learning students. Of these, 14,434 are undergraduates and 1,391 are postgraduate students. The University has 2,805 total staff establishment comprising 4 Executive Management, 1,533 Support Staff, 813 Academic Staff and 455 Industrial Staff.

The University of Botswana Library (UBL) currently has 456,933 books, 14,511 e-books, 32,713 pamphlets, 1,030 print journals, 108,925 full text journals, 79 electronic databases, and 187 internet dedicated workstations (University of Botswana Facts and Figures, 2011). The Library has 145 staff members. Some of the new developments in the Library include the establishment of a digital institutional repository, 'the University of Botswana Research, Innovation and Scholarship Archive' (UBRISA) and 'the Learning Commons' (LC). For the running of its operations, the UBL adopts a model of central acquisition - central processing and distribution of library materials to branch libraries on a regular basis.

For administrative purpose, the UBL restructured in 2000 and stratified the Library into three sections with a Deputy Director heading each section. The restructuring initiated the creation of Customers and Extension Service (CES), Resource Management (RM) and Information Resources and Services (IRS). The CES section deals directly with the on-campus and off-campus students and staff. It is responsible for the circulation of all library materials to on-campus students and staff, as well as meeting the information needs of the continuing education students of part-time evening classes and the distance learners. The RM section takes charge of acquisitions and processing of materials, allocation of funds according to cost centres and the systems unit of the Library. The IRS section, which has the highest number of professional subject specialist librarians, deals directly with the faculties. They liaise with the academic staff and arrange course link information literacy packages for the students in various courses. As subject specialists, the professional librarians are responsible for recommending a selection of materials for the RM to purchase. Each of the sections has its own team of professional librarians and paraprofessionals. For all the sections to work effectively and efficiently, each section needs the cooperation of one other. The effectiveness and efficiency in library and information service in the UBL is seen in the cooperation and willingness of library staff to share specialist knowledge. The creation of the sections became a limitation and created division among the staff to the detriment of smooth running of the Library, which will be discussed later in this paper.

SWOT Analysis of the University of Botswana Library

When Strength Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis is considered, one particular area of strength the UB Library had was the diverse expertise of the library staff. The UBL had recruited librarians from several countries including Botswana, Canada, Ghana, India, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, UK and USA. The combined efforts of the highly skilled staff, good funding, coupled with maximum cooperation and resource sharing among librarians and libraries locally, nationally internationally, meant progress, development,

achievement and excellence for the Library. On the weakness of staff, individuality and attempt to 'hoard' information was perceived. In the strength of the staff was seen the opportunity to attain great height and accomplish tasks when the strengths of staff were pooled together. Even though there was the threat of future institution of the second public university that would compete in subvention given to the UB and consequently affect the UBL, perhaps, the greatest threat confronting the Library was the issue of insecurity of job for staff, especially the expatriates. The combination of threat and weakness seems to set the tone of the problems that would later emerge, as unhealthy rivalry, competition and dichotomy were gradually encroaching and becoming the order of the day in the Library.

The initial restructuring of the University of Botswana Library into sections created an atmosphere where problems were seen as the responsibility of a particular section or division of the Library. Staff who the restructuring grouped in a particular division hardly gave support to the functioning of another division and appropriate service to the users in general; rather, they were committed to the responsibilities of their sections or divisions. Thus, the sections created in the fast expanding library to ease the process of administration contributed to creating division and dichotomy among library staff and between sections. The restructuring and divisions created seemed to be working against the mutual cooperation and previous harmonious co-existence of the library staff.

Audit Report of the University of Botswana Library

In 2008, an external audit team from the University of Pennsylvania Library noted in their report on the Library that:

We found certain organizational dynamics that impede the effective performance of the staff and thus the successful progress of the Strategic Plan as it relates to the customer focus on service quality. The following are the main issues: staff working in silos resulting in lack of shared responsibility and coordination. Relationship among units is unclear,

particularly concerning ownership of services and projects.

(Upenn External Audit team report (2008: 7)

The audit report generated change, as it seemed to be a wake-up call to the library management. In order to address the problem, the management organised series of meetings and advocated the need for the entire library staff to see each other as one and users as the number one priority. Some leadership training programmes and customer service workshops were organised for staff, while some members of staff were transferred from one section of the Library to the other. Other strategies the library management adopted to break down detachment between sections and divisions include designating some staff to work for more than one section or division; and when committees were set up on any issue, membership cut across all sections. Some assignments that cut across divisions were carried out on rotational basis among staff. The measures taken by the Library to resolve the separation of staff, section and division re-established collaborative and working relationship and the return of cooperation among colleagues in the Library.

Benefits of Cooperation and Resource Sharing

There is a great deal of literature on resource sharing and cooperation among libraries emphasising the importance of belonging to a resource sharing network. OCLC (2012) asserts that when a library belongs to a sharing network, more information is readily available and customer satisfaction is enhanced. Mudd and Havens (2008) claim that shortages are an inevitable consequence of social and economic instability, and argue that resource sharing and cooperation can resolve insufficient supplies. They draw on the origin of resource sharing, referring to The Farmington Plan. This plan was a proposal for shared collections when there were shortages of international materials during the World War II. Michalko and Malpas (2009) identify benefits of resource sharing, noting that for more than a century, library cooperation in the United States has enabled individual libraries to save on costings while expanding the reach of local collections and services. Mannan (2009) believes

that in the age of information explosion, there has been a growing problem with the collection, processing, storage and dissemination of information. He observes that due to duplication of investments in library holdings, the cost of providing service to the users becomes higher. He argues that resource sharing and networking is the ultimate solution to the problem.

Cooperation and Resource Sharing at the University of Botswana Library

The University of Botswana Library became a resource centre of note because of its exceptional level of cooperation among the staff who were diversely skilled. Staff members were always prepared to share knowledge and train others. This leads to overall better performance by staff in their jobs and responsibilities. Training in the field of information and communication technologies was offered by specialist staff as required. Some of the skills which staff were trained in at inception included the construction of portals, mapping of collection development, the use and application of PowerPoint presentation, Ms-excel, endnote, the use and functionalities of the Internet, construction of websites and blogs. Such cooperation ensured that library clients requiring information and communication technology assistance had professional support without any delay. Problems were addressed collaboratively and were not seen as a sectional or divisional problem.

Cooperation with Faculties: Information Literacy Education and Lifelong Learning

Prior to the integration of information literacy skills (ILS) into the curricula of the University, different departments and faculties had been teaching ILS skills in a sporadic and an uncoordinated manner. In order to prepare the students of the University of Botswana for lifelong learning, Ojedokun and Lumande (2005) suggest that there was a need for cooperation between the Department of Computer Science and the UBL. The authors affirm that the librarians are in collaboration with the lecturers in the Computer Science Department. As a result of this co-operation, they jointly developed the curriculum around computing and information literacy education

in General Education Courses (GEC) 121 and 122. The aim of General Education is to provide the University of Botswana graduates with a broad-based knowledge and skills to prepare them for work and citizenship in the context of the University's Vision, Mission and Values. In a document on 'A strategy for excellence', University of Botswana (2008) states that "The Vision of the University of Botswana is to be a leading centre of academic excellence in Africa and the world; while the Mission is to improve economic and social conditions for the Nation while advancing itself as a distinctively African university with a regional and international outlook. The University, among others, values opportunities that will facilitate the full realisation of the potentials of students for academic and personal growth.

With the integration of Information Skills into the curriculum, the need was also felt to introduce computing skills component. Thus, the GEC 121 and 122 courses made compulsory for all 100 level students of the University of Botswana had the components of computing skills and information skills, and were jointly and cooperatively taught and examined by the computer science lecturers and the librarians. As the courses were made compulsory for the on-campus students of the University, the courses were also developed into modules for off-campus distance education students in a similar fashion as other courses were prepared and taught.

In a recent review exercise of the General Education courses of the University, the alliance between computer science lecturers and librarians was broken; with the result that librarians are now paired with lecturers in Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) to teach COM 111 and 112 courses. Whilst the communication and study skills component is taught by the lecturers from the CSSU, the librarians remain the lecturers of the information skills component for the two courses. The skills-based courses are at present being taught for two semesters, with COM 111 taught in the first semester serving as a requirement for COM 112 taught in the second semester. Whether paired with computer science or communication and study skills lecturers, the job of the librarians at the University of Botswana now involves cooperative and active teaching on how to find, use and evaluate information as part of a lifelong learning continuum. The involvement of the

librarians in the teaching assignment at the University of Botswana has thus further increased the level of understanding, cooperation and resource sharing between the Library and the faculty. It also ensures full realisation of the potentials of students for academic and personal growth

Cooperation at National Level

The University of Botswana Library is a major resource centre in Botswana and legal depository in the country. Despite the fact that the University operates distance and continuing education programmes which attract students from all over the country, it has physical facilities in only four locations. The outreach arm of the University runs a number of part-time evening diploma courses and distance education at degree level in about eight locations. Irrespective of the type of programmes on offer and the location of the students, the UBL knows it has the responsibility to take the library resources and services to the students. For a library that has the obligation to meet the information needs of the students but has some handicaps in terms of adequate physical facilities, it has to go into cooperation and resource sharing with other libraries around. For instance, distance learners desire to have access to catalogues or the holdings of the Library without having to travel long distances. This can be achieved by establishing some level of cooperation and resource sharing with other libraries near the ubiquitous students. The UBL maintained printed catalogues and or a small collection of some recommended materials in some cooperating libraries where the students meet for occasional residential programmes.

In Botswana, the national public library has several branches or facilities in various parts of the country. In some locations, the UBL is into some form of collaborative partnership with the local branch public library to be able to effectively serve the students in the catchment area. It should however be noted that though public libraries serve the generality of the people, they hardly stock materials for higher level (the University) students. In this respect, part of the agreement was to deposit some materials in public libraries for the use of the UB distance learners. In other cases, the cooperation of the libraries of technical colleges (where they exist)

is solicited and the facilities are used where allowed. This can appropriately be described as collaborative effort among libraries and information centres in aid of distance learning. In cases where the materials deposited would not meet the information needs of the learners, telephone calls are made or emails sent to the closest UB branch library to supply the required materials to meet the needs. In instances where the Centre for Continuing Education – the outreach arm of the University of Botswana uses hired premises for the part-time evening programmes, or distance education regional centres, the cooperation of the appointed coordinator and or library of the institution is solicited to keep some materials that the students could obtain on loan. This arrangement is usually undertaken with the knowledge and approval of the school authorities where the programme takes place.

Cooperation at Regional Level

Though relatively well funded and resourced, UBL, like other libraries, often finds it difficult to satisfy all the information needs of its numerous customers. OCLC (2012) states that when your library belongs to a sharing network, more people find the information they want. There is a number of ways resources are shared and cooperation solicited and obtained among libraries in Southern Africa. A few of the most important ways are mentioned. First, the University of Botswana Library is a member of Southern African Bibliographic Information Network (SABINET). Oyelude and Ola (2008) describe SABINET as -a library consortium in South Africa - a union catalogue of collections of a number of major libraries in Southern Africa. Based in South Africa, SABINET (2012) prides itself as an organisation that facilitates access to electronic information. The catalogue tells of the collection of each library in the union. When a user makes request for any materials that are not available in UBL, the inter-library loans service unit of the UBL checks the library that has the item in the Sabinet and makes request to obtain the item from the member library. It is further noted that, generally, the consortia eliminates replicating processing of the same materials over and over again, thereby cutting costs, time and energy among consortia members.

Another salient area of cooperation and resource sharing that the UBL has tremendously benefitted at the regional level is what has been described as Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium (GAELIC). Willis (2009) in a statement described GAELIC as a regional academic library consortium established in 1996 as a programme of FOTIM, a South African higher education consortium. GAELIC was initially established to collaborate in the purchase of a common library system; its focus has evolved to ensuring the effective use of the library system; skills development and capacity building of member library staff and seeking opportunities for resource sharing and cooperative purchasing. Its benefits include: providing networking opportunities among member library staff, collaborative projects, access to collective resources and cost-effective practices. Members of partner libraries also visit each other and assist in jointly tackling and solving problems.

Through networking and resource sharing, the University of Botswana Library has profited from a number of libraries in the region, especially libraries in South Africa. It will be noted that for reasons of proximity and cutting cost, the UBL can easily make a quick call to any of the neighbouring South African University Libraries and compare notes. A typical case in point was when the UBL wanted to establish Learning Commons. Since the idea of learning commons was new, but considered a project that was capable of improving the students' experience as a priority area in the strategic plan of the University of Botswana, site visit was considered a necessity. At the time, only one university in South Africa had a semblance of the learning commons and a visit had to be undertaken to borrow 'vessel' on the plan and its operationalisation in the university operating it in South Africa.

International Cooperation and Resource Sharing

University of Botswana Library (2012) in its vision statement asserts that 'the Library will be a leading customer-centered provider of excellent, globally competitive information services and access to resources.' In order to ensure the fulfillment of the vision statement, it is viewed that the UBL must

compare with other major libraries around the world. Problems arise where the librarians would not want to carry out research and publish, but would complain when there is disparity in their treatment against the academic staff. Even within the Library, not all the librarians would want to participate in the mandatory teaching of information literacy skills (ILS). In order to live the Vision statement and be able to put up the best practice and service, the UBL was benchmarked with a number of libraries internationally. The UBL ensures that links are established with some of the renowned libraries and relevant international associations worldwide. First, in order that network could be established with professional colleagues in various parts of the world, the librarians are encouraged on self development and sponsored to attend and make presentations at international conferences. As such the UBL librarians are able to establish links, cooperation and sharing of resources with their counterparts in libraries in different parts of the world. On several issues, they could compare notes with, and seek or obtain advice from their professional colleagues outside Botswana. In some cases, the UBL librarians are also able to share ideas or offer advice to others. The encouragement received enabled some of the librarians to register for and complete their PhD degrees and other higher degree programmes. The UB librarians and the Library are also regular members of professional associations. Through international cooperation, the UBL has been able to produce the president of International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

For reasons of the network established, the UBL as noted has been able to easily compare notes with one library or the other on virtually any projects embarked upon. For instance, when it was felt that the auditing of the UBL was needed, the partnership with University of Pennsylvania (Upenn), which the UBL enjoyed, was readily available to undertake the exercise. Similarly, when the UBL wanted to establish the learning commons and needed to hear the views of the libraries that had gone through the project, the University of Guelph *Library* (UGL) in Canada was contacted for assistance. The shared information and resources obtained from UGL were beneficial to the UBL. In addition, the UBL as a member of Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeLPHE) has incredibly benefitted from the

cooperation and resources that accrued to and from member institutions. DeLPHE is a project supported by the United Kingdom Government. Among others, the UBL has received assistance from DELPHE Project on Information Literacy Initiative towards Best Practices, which attempts to develop an Information Literacy programme for lifelong learning. The objectives help bring lecturers and library professionals closer together in curriculum design and programme implementation in the field of information literacy, and also empower libraries to fulfil their role in developing and delivering lifelong university learning strategies (DeLPHE project, 2011).

Through the established cooperation, the UBL has been able to benefit from exchange programme with partner institutions. It is on record that the UBL has sent some of its staff for exchange or attachment with collaborative libraries in the US, UK and South Africa, among other places. The UBL, being an established library within the region of Southern Africa, has also been a beckon to a number of libraries in Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa which sent their staff for some period of attachment and training.

Conclusion

For a library to effectively meet the information needs of its varied users, it must take advantage of the benefits of networking. This will allow a library to offer a world of limitless resources. The focus has shifted towards creating cooperation and connections between people and developing the need for exchange and sharing of resources among libraries and information centres. The University of Botswana Library instigated a cooperative and resource-sharing approach not only at local and regional level, but also at an international level. The benefits are boundless, and this has been evidenced in the effective and efficient service that the UBL is able to offer its students. In collaboration with the faculty, the UBL teaches information literacy skills made compulsory for all 100 level students of the University. This collaboration has resulted in fulfilment of Vision, Mission and Values of the University and the Library. The UBL has also been able to provide services and receive resources that ordinarily would have been difficult. Today, some of the librarians are also very proud of their achievements. Given the ever increasing

possibilities that technology offers, it is important that the UBL continues reviewing, expanding and improving its current services to accommodate the students who utilise their facility.

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