

Human Networks:

International Library Associations Enabling Co-operation among Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Academic libraries have a long tradition of international co-operation. However, the present-day environment of tertiary education has new challenges with growing international dimension. In universities the process of internationalization calls for more transboundary co-operation, and university libraries must also find ways to respond to the new challenges. The paper explores the role of the international library associations in supporting international co-operation and in establishing the necessary human networks that form the backbone of any collaboration.

Introduction

In the academic environment an international dimension has always been present as students, teachers, researchers, and scholarly information have all traveled across borders. Academic libraries, in serving their communities, have also been part of this international atmosphere. (Meadows 1998, Abdullahi et al. 2007). Today the challenge of every nation is globalization,

where the world becomes one supranational market area. In universities, internationalization has been seen as the response to the impacts of globalization.

In the context of higher education internationalization has been defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global extension into the purpose, functions or delivery of tertiary education. A recent example and outcome of this process is the Bologna process, whereby the university education is harmonized within the European Union.

(Abdullahi et al. 2007). Internationalization presumes understanding of other cultures as well as the capability to see own culture from the viewpoint of others. In this respect academic libraries are in good position because “librarians have a long history of idealistic internationalism and practical international co-operation” (Lor 2006). Globalization is frequently associated with competition where as internationalization is often connected with co-operation (Abdullahi et al. 2007).

Human networks as prerequisites of co-operation

The action of co-operating is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, about working together towards the same end, purpose, or effect. It is very human activity where the “relationships form the basis for collective action and facilitate the exchange of resources and information flows” (Huotari and Iivonen 2003). These human relationships or networks are the backbone of co-operation. The forming and the sustainability of these social networks is based on personal factors. In scientific co-operation research has shown that personal compatibility, including similar approaches to science, comparable working styles, mutual respect, trust and the ability to get along and enjoy one another’s company are used to identify and select partners in co-operation. (Sonnenwald 2007).

Trust in co-operation is important, because it promotes open exchange of information, knowledge and learning making it possible for people and organizations to interact with one another. Trust presupposes similar or related world views and shared meanings. Common values give a frame of reference of social norms that create predictability and trustworthiness. (Huotari and Iivonen 2003). This element of trust is well positioned in libraries: research has shown that many librarians share same or similar values in different cultures and in different parts of the world. These values include service, intellectual freedom, equality of users, preservation of intellectual heritage, and literacy and information literacy (Koehler 2006).

The role of international library associations

There are hundreds of professional associations in the field of library and information science worldwide (World Guide to Library, Archive and Information Science Associations 2005).

They can be found in national and international level, and they may serve a general or specialized audience of librarians and information professionals (Koehler 2006). In Finland alone, there are four general library associations supplemented with special library associations, an association for information studies, and a trade union association.

However, there is one organization that brings together the whole library community: IFLA, The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. It is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. Currently IFLA has some 1500 members representing national library associations, institutions, and individuals from all around the world and it is the global voice of the library and information profession.

The current organizational structure of IFLA is explained in detail in the IFLA website at <http://www.ifla.org> and an extensive record of the history, ongoing activities as well as

strategic emphasis of the organization can be found in Peter Lor's article "IFLA: looking to the future". Very briefly, IFLA voting members form the General Council. They elect the President (-elect) and the Governing board, who are responsible for overseeing the execution of the policies and strategies of the organizations. Work is focused in five core activities and over 45 sections that are formed around different aspects such as library type, library materials, functions or services, support to the profession or regional approach. The sections are run by standing committees whose members are elected biannually.

Return of Invest

What motivates institutions and individuals to join international associations and support participation in the association activities? In this respect identifying common interest is the most logical point of departure in analyzing the potential profits for the organization, as well as for the individual.

How does IFLA, for example, support the work of an academic library? The main IFLA activities have been conceptualized in the IFLA three pillars model where the pillars reflect the operations of the association towards its membership, the profession, and the society at large.

IFLA membership includes several tangible and concrete benefits such as journal subscriptions, conferences and workshops. The IFLA conference programs are a response to the needs of the community. There the topics put forward by the members are discussed and information and experiences are shared with other librarians. In this respect the membership pillar enables members to keep up-to-date, a prerequisite for high-quality library services in the rapidly changing environment. During its annual conferences, IFLA as a truly international organization provides libraries and librarians with means to interact with and

learn from libraries from all over the world. Everyday benchmarking can be done just by listening to others how things are done in their library.

The profession pillar covers the work of the core activities and sections. Bibliographic standards and preservation issues are for instance among the core activities. Where would the libraries be without interoperability, the possibilities to exchange and extract information, not to mention the challenges of digital preservation. Here international co-operation is vital and through the work of different sections of IFLA these important issues materialize into projects, guidelines, and conference discussions.

Society pillar represents the work that is done in advocating for libraries, the impact libraries can have in society. Elevated concepts such as freedom of expression and access to information do not easily fit in the strategies of single library. However, in the context of the operational environment of an academic institution, these important issues materialize in highly timely and discussed topics such as open access to scientific information and copyright matters, both of which deal with the library's interaction with the society in a very concrete way. Here IFLA, through its advocating, gives libraries a necessary high-level support among the policy makers.

The annual IFLA conferences bring together libraries and libraries from all over the world, with different interests and information needs. Hence the conference program is quite diversified, and in-depth coverage of subject-areas may be hard to find in the schedule.

However, smaller and more focused conferences organized by specialized library associations may in this respect offer another very good starting point of building an international network of colleagues. Small conferences often have a more intimate atmosphere where discussions among the participants can be encouraged. Indeed, in the era of Internet brainstorming face-

to-face meetings are still regarded as the most effective form of interaction! (Sonnenwald 2007)

Challenges

In terms of international co-operation there are several challenges dealing with cultural, scheduling, and communication issues. Because “internationalization does not only presume the understanding of other cultures, but also the ability to see oneself and one’s culture in the eyes of the other”(Abdullahi et al. 2007), the cultural aspects cut through all international joint operations. Furthermore, in worldwide co-operation time zones, national holidays, and organizational calendars must be considered in the planning of activities. Today communication in international joint ventures is by and large dominated by e-mail and the use of English language, which is not necessarily the mother-tongue of the participants. In order to avoid perceptions of distrust, communication should be ongoing (Huotari and Iivonen 2003). In the area of scientific collaboration research has also indicated that “without effective formal and informal communication successful collaboration is not possible” (Sonnenwald 2007).

Co-operation and work that is conducted via the non-profit library associations faces yet another challenge, i.e. commitment. In Finland at least the library associations have in recent years experienced a fading enthusiasm for voluntary work, the very foundation of the associations. This has been explained by the rapid pace of present-day working life, and especially the younger generation finds it difficult to fit in the association activities in their demanding daily life (Karhula 2006).

Case experience

To concretize the continuous and goal-directed internationalization process of an academic library the recent experiences of the Helsinki University of Technology TKK Library in the field of information literacy may serve as an example. The library education, user instruction, had been part of the university curriculum since the 1970's and the form of teaching had always followed the current mode of higher education and the available information resources, ranging from mass lectures to small group instruction and hands-on training (Palmgren and Heino 2002). In order to learn more about web-based instruction the TKK library participated in an international EU-funded project Dedicate (Fjällbrant et al. 1999), where the majority of partners were already acquainted with each other via IATUL, the International Association of Technological University Libraries. This fact was indeed instrumental in the successful execution of the project. Inspired by the success of Dedicate, the TKK library designed a web-based information literacy program of its own to fit the needs of the university. In 2005 and the Bologna process in progress, a project was launched to chart the transferability of the information literacy programs in harmonized engineering education. Under the auspices of EUNITE, European University Network for Information Technology in Education the TKK library tested the adaptability of its web-based information literacy course with the Campus Library Arenberg of Leuven University in Belgium. Again, there was previous acquaintance and trust between the two libraries through IATUL.

In anticipation of increasing numbers of international students and to further integrating a global extension into the library educational functions the TKK library promptly joined the IFLA section of Information Literacy when it was established in 2002, and nominated a staff member to serve in the section standing committee. Her participation in the Unesco funded section project "Infolit Global" (<http://www.infolitglobal.info>, including a directory for international information literacy resources and an international state-of-the-art report) is an

excellent opportunity for the library to engage in the overall development in information literacy issues worldwide.

Conclusion

International library associations bring together people who share similar professional values to a forum where trust can develop. These forums offer a fertile ground for the forming of sustainable human networks and thereby the associations foster co-operation. It is important that libraries as organizations see the value of the international library associations. As part of the response to the challenges of internationalization these associations provide means and possibilities for the library staff to internationalize and acquire a network of international colleagues. Successful organizations can incorporate the resources found in these human networks into their knowledge base. And hence the human networks may become a real asset for the organization.

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