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Paul Nieuwenhuysen

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, paul.nieuwenhuysen@vub.ac.be

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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNOLOGY IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Paul Nieuwenhuysen
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2B114, B-1050 Brussel, Belgium
Paul.Nieuwenhuysen@vub.ac.be

Abstract

Context: In Belgium the universities are quite active in international co-operation programs. Library development is incorporated in many of these programs. Most efforts are directed towards further development of ICT in libraries and towards the related needed changes in library management.

Purpose of this contribution: To outline the evolution of the inputs of Belgium in international cooperation towards strengthening technology in university libraries of developing countries. This may lead to an exchange of ideas with colleagues interested in similar activities.

Findings: For a number of aspects, we can outline

1. experience gained,
2. lessons learned from this and state of the art,
3. views, ideas and recommendations concerning the way forward.

The following aspects or problems deserve attention:

- Selecting partner universities
- Suitability of technology and expertise
- Appreciation of international co-operation
- Motivating young experts
- Involving expertise from abroad
- ICT infrastructure as prerequisite
- Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects
- Co-operation among funding donor agencies in partner countries
- Scientific research versus practical applications
- Print versus digital
- Evaluation of Programs and Projects
- Communication and synergy among various Programs
- Synergy between activities of experts from Belgium for various funding agencies
- Co-operation architecture
- Small isolated co-operation actions versus big institutional co-operation programs

Keywords

University libraries, international co-operation, development, ICT, Belgium, Flanders

Introduction / background / context

In Belgium the universities are quite active in international co-operation programs. The Belgian national/federal government supports numerous programs in which co-operation with developing countries is essential. Each of these programs involves experts from several universities in Belgium working with their counterparts in a particular university in a developing country. Applied sciences are mainly supported, in the hope that this contributes most efficiently to the quality of life in the region of the university. Belgium is a small country; nevertheless, it is a federal state that consists of a few regions with a high degree of autonomy. The Dutch speaking region is named Flanders; this forms an important component. Here we focus on activities based in this region only. This work is co-ordinated by the Flemish inter-university council (VLIR). A section of the VLIR has been created that is dedicated to university development co-operation (VLIR-UOS)

<http://www.vliruos.be/index.php?viaintro2=y&language=EN&navid=587> One group of activities of VLIR-UOS is named Institutional University Co-operation (IUC). This is relatively important, so that a more specific WWW site has been created: <http://iuc.vliruos.be/>. Each institutional university development "Program" is structured as a co-operation of several universities in Belgium working with one institution -- a university -- in a developing country. Each of these Programs consists of several so-called "Projects" that focus on various aims, but that work ideally together in synergy, plus of course a component for the co-ordination and management of the whole Program. In each of these Programs, access to scientific information is considered as a cornerstone and therefore it is evaluated critically but constructively by at least one expert from Belgium in an assessment and consultancy mission in the starting phase of the program. Afterwards library development is incorporated implicitly or even explicitly as a Project or sub-Project with appropriate methods and budgets. Most efforts are directed towards further development of applications of ICT in libraries and towards the related needed changes in library management. These actions are guided and supported by a formal group of experts from universities in Flanders, Belgium, in VLIR-UOS.



Figure 1: Logo of VLIR-UOS.

Purpose of this contribution

In this contribution, we want to outline the evolution of the inputs of Belgium in international cooperation towards strengthening technology in university libraries of developing countries. This may lead to an exchange of ideas with colleagues who are interested in similar activities.

Methods

This contribution is mainly based on published reports and on the author's practical experience that has been accumulated during about 15 years

- by organising 16 international training programs on scientific and technical information management, supported by VLIR-UOS <http://www.vub.ac.be/BIBLIO/itp/>
- by leading a VLIR-UOS-IUC Project "Strengthening of the Sokoine National Agricultural Library (SNAL)" in Morogoro, Tanzania,
- by assessing university libraries and access to information in general, in the Anton de Kom University (Adekus) of Suriname in Paramaribo, Suriname <http://www.uvs.edu> and in the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, in Maputo, Mozambique <http://www.uem.mz> ;
- by involvement in the Project on capacity building as a Team Member in the institutional university co-operation program with the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, in Maputo, Mozambique;
- by chairing the formal VLIR-UOS group of experts on libraries and information, since 2012;

- by contributing to capacity building in Marine Information Management, in the framework of UNESCO-IOC-IODE
http://www.iode.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=35

Findings

For each aspect in the following, we can outline

1. experience gained,
2. lessons learned from this and state of the art,
3. views, ideas and recommendations concerning the way forward.

Selecting partner universities

Which university in which developing country to choose as partner in a new program? Should a top university be picked to increase the chance that a satisfactory academic, scientific output will be achieved, or should a less prominent university be chosen to assure a relatively high impact for the university and its region?

VLIR-UOS Institutional University Cooperation has always been working with a list of priority countries in agreement with the Belgian Development Cooperation. Then one or two universities from those countries were selected as partners. Attention was then focused on those partner universities and less on the country as a whole. Mainly after running a Program, some extension projects have been going on to apply the achievements of the Program to problems in the region. Recently this approach is undergoing a change. A smaller number of countries are withheld for the priority list. Summarized, this should allow

1. a deeper and growing understanding of these few countries by all stakeholders,
2. more and better co-ordination of actions in these countries; for each country an overview of running projects is created and made available to stakeholders,
3. not only involvement of universities anymore, but also of other actors,
4. a higher efficiency of the evaluation phase for each Program.

The following gives some more details on these positive changes:

1. A growing understanding of each country by all stakeholders is supported by VLIR-UOS as follows:
 - A “statistical box” provides a quick profile of the country.
 - The Fact Sheet summarizes the general status of the country with specific attention for the development aid actors, as well as the sector of higher education.
2. A better co-ordination of actions in each selected country by all stakeholders is supported by VLIR-UOS as follows:
 - The Linkage List provides an overview of past and present linkages between relevant Belgian (academic) institutions and the country, including even those that are not funded by VLIR-UOS.
 - The “thematic and strategic framework” presents the various donor interventions along thematic lines, with reference to partners and national development priorities.
 - An overview is made available of the relationships between the country and international and European institutions; this includes their websites and documents on the cooperation actions.
3. The focus on only one or two universities in the country is extended to a so-called “Country Programme” that is composed of a portfolio of differentiated intervention types.
4. Evaluation by more or less independent international and local experts is always a needed but cumbersome and expensive part of a Program. By increasingly concentrating efforts in larger but more focused Programs, efficiency is also increased in the evaluation phase.

To select the countries on the country list we have made an analysis taking into account:

- the existing relations of cooperation between Flemish universities / university colleges and countries in the South;
- the socio-economic indicators by country (Human Development Index) and indicators on (higher) education and research;
- the priorities of the Belgian Development Cooperation and its 18 partner countries;
- the presence of other Belgian development organizations.

After an extensive consultation process, the VLIR-UOS approved a list of 20 partner countries and 34 additional counties and signed a political agreement with the former Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation.

In implementation of the agreement, VLIR-UOS will reduce the number of partner countries to 20 as from 2013. We believe that we can obtain more impact working with fewer countries and focusing more on the needs of the partner countries and the partners involved.

For each of the 20 countries VLIR-UOS will work out a Country Strategy, which will serve as a roadmap for further cooperation with the country.

The 20 partner countries as from 2013 are:

- *Africa*: Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa
- *Asia*: India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
- *Latin America*: Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, Suriname

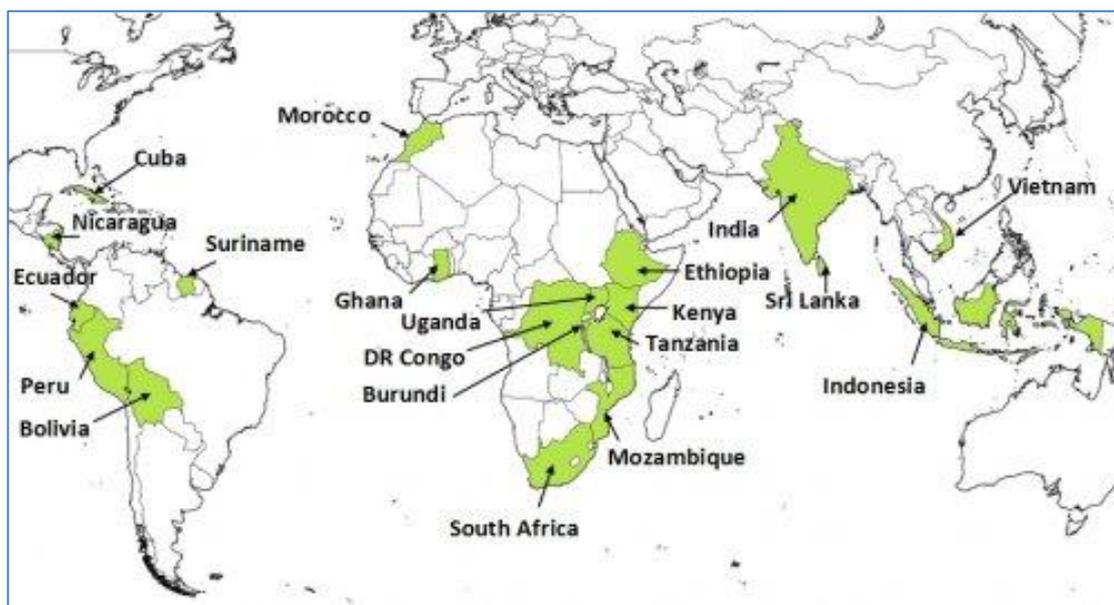


Figure 2: Map of the 20 VLIR-UOS partner countries as from 2013

<http://www.vliruos.be/index.php?navid=647&language=EN&throughadmin=1>

For each partner country, VLIR-UOS is working out a Country Strategy:

“A country strategy paper will be used as a guiding document for funding decisions by VLIR-UOS. The country strategy will include a 6-year budget framework. The country strategy paper will allow the different VLIR-UOS interventions to be brought together into a more integrated country programme. This will internally allow for synergies and add value to the overall VLIR-UOS interventions in a particular country. It is anticipated that a Country Commission will be established in order to ensure coherence in terms of the country level Project Cycle Management, and the corresponding programme level decisions. The country strategy will allow VLIR-UOS to strategically earmark funding taking into consideration local needs, interests and opportunities in Flanders, and interventions by other stakeholders.”

First VLIR-UOS plans to complete an initial series of country strategies for five countries: Cuba, Ecuador, Vietnam, Tanzania and Uganda. The strategy for DR Congo follows. The strategies for the other partner countries will come later.

The development of country strategies is linked to the possible selection of new partner institutions for the VLIR-UOS programme Institutional University Cooperation (IUC).

Suitability of technology and expertise

The expertise and technology that has been built up in the relatively small and rich country Belgium cannot be simply exported to the context of a university in a relatively big and poor developing country. In the early years of the programs, this was an underestimated difficulty and bottleneck. Several experts in Belgium have steadily enlarged their expertise to include approaches and solutions appropriate for co-operation and developmental work. Exchanging views, experience and ideas in the “expert groups” set-up by VLIR-UOS supports this evolution.

For the future, the scarcity of experts is a clear problem. Furthermore, in view of increasing professional pressure and competition, it is not clear how to cope with this growing problem.

Appreciation of international co-operation

Work and even achievements in capacity building have not been appreciated highly in the universities in Belgium. The general reason for this problem is that such work does not lead to visible results for most colleagues in the form of top level publications or of systems that are running usefully. In other words, involvement of an expert will probably hamper and not boost her/his academic career. This contributes to the scarcity of experts available for capacity building. Recently several universities try to change officially and formally their view of this type of efforts, to counter this problem. In practice however, most decision makers are not yet taking this into account.

In the near future this will probably remain a problem.

Motivating young experts

How to get young, enthusiastic experts involved in such development programs? Here we face several difficulties and bottlenecks:

- Flanders in Belgium is small and only relatively few experts are active in universities.
- The appreciation of activities in capacity building is small in many cases.
- The payments received for efforts made are essentially zero, as only travel costs are reimbursed.
- Heads of libraries and related departments are not always enthusiastic to get their expert academicians and technicians involved, because the very limited personnel budget forms an important bottleneck for progress in most universities in Belgium.
- Straightforward, simple, fast transfer of knowledge and skills as an ad hoc activity besides the normal work is impossible or makes no sense. However, getting involved and productive in development co-operation can be a slow and expensive process.

Involving expertise from abroad

The available expertise from VLIR-UOS universities has always been scarce and hardly sufficient to cope with the demands of the projects. Therefore parts of the available budgets have been applied to buy in expertise from outside universities and even from other countries. For instance several workshops were held with the involvement of organizations specialized in international library development, such as EIFL and INASP.

Involvement of outside expertise has proved to be successful.

For the future, this approach seems well-accepted now and furthermore, the new country strategies should give all stakeholders a better view on expertise that is imported into each selected and participating country.

ICT infrastructure as prerequisite

Library development is increasingly dependent on ICT. Some of the first Institutional Co-operation Programs included a project on ICT development, besides a separate component on library development. A difficulty observed was the heavy dependence of progress in the library on progress in ICT. An analogous situation exists for online learning.

Several running Programs have now one project dealing with ICT as well as library as online learning. This is a recognition of the relations among these components.

In the future we foresee more interaction between ICT and library activities in the Programs. This is reflected by the recognition that communication between the formal VLIR-UOS ICT and library groups of experts should be enhanced.

Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects

Here we go on with the consequences of the reality that ICT capacity has become a prerequisite for library capacity building. Facing this reality, library development is planned in some Programs only as part of a larger ICT development project that is headed by an expert in ICT. In these cases the chance is high that the complexity of the library components is underestimated. A simple example: spending money from the Project budget to acquire licenses to access some digital information source and managing the licenses afterwards is more complex than buying more printed books or journals and placing these on existing shelves.

Future will tell how management of such activities will evolve. We learn from experience. A more fundamental question is if the library as organization still makes sense as the central organization to deal with digital information sources, indeed, in some cases, the staff is not adapted to the new information landscape and adaptation is slow or impossible. In those cases, should some ICT department take over activities to stimulate digital information discovery and access?

Co-operation among funding donor agencies in partner countries

How to increase international co-operation between funding donor agencies and universities in the area of international university co-operation? This is desirable to avoid overlap or at least to improve awareness of overlap or even conflicts between projects that run in parallel. The various donors can have joint meetings on a regular basis, to coordinate their various inputs into a more integrated and complimentary fashion. This may avoid

- that donor funds are used to develop multiple new initiatives, when there may be a need to develop one or two critical fundamental facilities as a first step,
- that one initiative/action is sponsored by two or even more sources,
- that an initiative is prepared, given shape or even started silently without visible output in one co-operation program, and brought subsequently to visible success in another program of another sponsor.

The lack of awareness of programs by various sponsors has been a nuisance in the first Programs. The new approach of VLIR-UOS focuses not only on one or two universities in a priority country, but more on a country as a whole. In each country strategy, the problem of multiple sponsors and actors is taken into account. Even in the preparatory stage, for each country an overview is created and provided of on-going actions funded by Belgium as well as by other funding agencies.

Scientific research versus practical applications

How to create a suitable mix of short term practical advances and of long term academic research in library and information science? Even more fundamentally: is academic research desirable in this context? An academic approach can hinder fast progress, but a reasonable scientific approach is always desirable.

Up to now, a middle of the road approach has been taken in most library-related projects: a mixture of short term improvements of libraries with long term capacity building in the form of advanced studies by selected members of the personnel of the library in the partner university. In general this strategy is well accepted by the partners in the South, as well as by the VLIR academic team members of the Projects.

The general strategy of VLIR-UOS is now in a confusing phase of change, and it is not yet clear if this will affect the type of actions in Projects. Probably a similar approach will be taken in the near future.

Print versus digital

As in any program with limited budgets: where to set priorities? Should classical library functions based on printed materials still be supported or should all efforts go to improving digital information discovery and access?

Up to now, classical functions like automation of the management of printed library materials have taken up a large part of the Projects. Improving digital information discovery and access has been hindered by poor Internet access in many countries and the related low awareness of the possibilities and advantages of digital versus printed information sources. More than 12 years ago, when I started a Project in Tanzania, the low speed of Internet access was considered by the Program Co-ordinator as a small problem that would be overcome soon.

Nowadays, low speed of Internet access still forms a bottleneck that hinders progress, mainly in Africa and Cuba.

In the future, Internet access will become more affordable and will improve and in parallel interest in digital information will increase. However, this evolution is slower than expected years ago. The closer interweaving of ICT and libraries in a single Project, directed by experts in ICT pushes Internet applications to higher priority.

Evaluation of Programs and Projects

How to evaluate in these Programs and Projects the amount of money spent versus the outcomes? And is the significant amount of money needed for planning, preparation, management, travel and evaluation well spent?

VLIR-UOS has always considered the evaluation as quite important. Up to now Programs consisted ideally of two periods of 5 years. The first period is devoted mainly to capacity building. This is followed by an evaluation by independent experts. In the case of a positive evaluation, this is followed by a second phase of 5 years with an emphasis on harvesting the accomplishments of the work done during the first period, for instance by producing some scientific research results and publications.

In the new VLIR-UOS strategy, evaluation will probably come faster, after a shorter period.

Perhaps consequences will be

- a faster adjustment of activities and plans for a Program and
- more pressure on the team members involved in a Program.

Communication and synergy among various Programs

Various experts in general and library experts in particular, who are active in co-operation programs in different countries, should ideally communicate well, to increase efficiency through exchange of lessons learned and through synergy of projects. However, this has been relatively poorly developed in early years. Therefore VLIR-UOS has set-up so-called "expert groups" These consist of experts in the areas of

- Information and communication technology and online learning
- Libraries and scientific communication

These areas were chosen because they are important in many programs.

The members of the groups have varying degrees of experience in development work, but most have been involved in some Program.

These groups should enhance the synergy among Projects, knowing that activities take place in various developing countries with support from various universities and experts in Belgium.

In a further step, more interaction between the two expert groups is planned, because ICT applications are increasingly important in libraries and because in several Programs one and the same project deals with development of ICT as well as library development.

Synergy between activities of experts from Belgium for various funding agencies

Good experts active in development work are scarce. Therefore they are solicited often by more than one funding agency to get involved in capacity building programs. Accepting this as a given fact, how to avoid competition between funding agencies and how to stimulate growth and application of expertise in the framework of more than one funding agency? An example of such an agency besides VLIR-UOS is UNESCO-IOC-IODE, an international organization with a project office in Flanders, Belgium.

Co-operation architecture

The architecture of a co-operation Program in the form of several universities in Belgium working with one (or two) universities in a developing country is working well, already for more than 10 years. However, this architecture hinders extension to other universities and organizations in the same country. Is it more efficient to implement an architecture of several universities in Belgium working together with several organizations in one developing country?

This becomes the new way of working, as pushed by the government of Belgium, in agreement with VLIR-UOS.

Small isolated co-operation actions versus big institutional co-operation Programs:

How much money should still be spent on small, isolated actions that involve only one or a few experts in Belgium and one university department or library in some developing country, besides the bigger institutional university co-operation Programs?

Such small actions may be proposed by highly motivated experts and may be quite promising and attractive. However, the required infrastructure (management and/or ICT and/or library) may be inadequate for long-term success and also evaluation and follow-up is even more difficult than in the case of institutional university co-operation.

The future trend is a clear shift from many small dispersed actions over bigger institutional co-operation to even fewer and greater Country Programs. The degree of success of this evolution will be evaluated and will become clear in about five years from now.

Conclusion

International university co-operation in Belgium, including capacity building in libraries, is evolving from a small side activity of individual highly motivated individual professors with their colleagues in the South, to larger well-organized Programs of co-operation by several universities in Belgium with selected countries in the South. This evolution is generally evaluated as positive. However, a side effect is that involvement requires not only expertise in a specific domain such as libraries, but also expertise in the rules, standards and do's and don'ts of international co-operation.