INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNOLOGY IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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http://conference.ntu.edu.sg/iatul2012/Pages/home.aspx
1. Introduction / context
2. Findings:
   For each aspect:
   • What is the problem?
   • The past:
     Experience gained, lessons learned
   • The future:
     Views, ideas and recommendations concerning the way forward
3. General conclusion
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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 & towards the related needed changes in library management.
Introduction / Context / Background

- These programs are supported by the Belgian Government and organised by the Flemish Inter-university Council, (which is named by the abbreviation VLIR in Dutch language.)

Introduction / Context / Background

Each Program includes several Projects.
Introduction / Context / Background

- Each “Program”
  - forms a cooperation with 1 developing country
  - is guided by a “Program coordinator”
  - consists of a few “Projects”

- Each “Project”
  - is coordinated by a “Project leader”
  - works with several “Academic Team Members” from several universities
For each program:

In Belgium:
- 1 “Program-coordinator”
- A few “Project leaders”
- Several team members

In the partner developing country:
- 1 “Program-coordinator”
- A few “Project leaders”
- Several team members
Each Program = “horizontal projects” that aim at institutional capacity building + more scientific “vertical projects”.

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Introduction / Context / Background
Library development in “horizontal projects”
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:

1. What is the problem?
2. Experience gained, lessons learned
3. Views, ideas and recommendations concerning the way forward
Selecting partner countries & universities: PROBLEM

Which countries to select for co-operation?
Selecting partner countries & universities: PAST

Many partner countries...

TOO many partner countries.
Selecting partner countries & universities: FUTURE

- 20 partner countries
Selecting partner countries & universities: FUTURE

- 20 partner countries

- For each partner country, VLIR-UOS is working out a “Country Strategy”
Suitability of technology and expertise: **PROBLEM**

- The expertise and technology that has been built up in the relatively small and rich country Belgium can NOT be simply exported to the context of a university in a relatively big and poor developing country.
Suitability of technology and expertise: PROBLEM

Belgium →
Suitability of technology and expertise: PAST

- In the early years of the programs, this was an underestimated difficulty and bottleneck.
Suitability of technology and expertise: PRESENT

- 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.
Suitability of technology and expertise: FUTURE

- Scarcity of experts remains a problem.
- Furthermore, in view of increasing professional pressure and competition, this bottleneck becomes more important.
- It is not clear how to cope with this.
Appreciation of international co-operation: PAST

- Work and even achievements in capacity building have not been appreciated highly in the universities in Belgium.
- The 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.
- 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.
Appreciation of international co-operation: FUTURE

• Several universities 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 the low level of appreciation will probably remain a problem.
Motivating young experts: PROBLEM

- How to get young, enthusiastic experts involved in development programs?
Motivating young experts: PAST & FUTURE

• To get young experts involved, we face several difficulties and bottlenecks:
  • 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.
Motivating young experts: PAST & FUTURE (continued)

- Straightforward, simple, fast transfer of knowledge and skills as an activity besides the normal work is impossible or makes no sense. Getting involved and productive in development co-operation can be a slow and expensive process.
Involving expertise from abroad: PROBLEM

- The available expertise from VLIR-UOS universities has always been scarce and hardly sufficient to cope with the demands of the projects.
Involving expertise from abroad: PAST

- Parts of the available budgets have been applied to buy in expertise from organizations besides universities, 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.
Involving expertise from abroad: FUTURE

• Involvement of outside expertise has proved to be successful.
• This approach seems well-accepted now.
• 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: PROBLEM

- Library development is increasingly dependent on ICT.
ICT infrastructure as prerequisite:

PAST

• 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.
ICT infrastructure as prerequisite: FUTURE

- Several ongoing Programs have now 1 project dealing with ICT as well as library as online learning.
- This is a recognition of the interdependence.
- More interaction between ICT and library activities.
- This is reflected by the recognition that communication between the formal VLIR-UOS groups of experts for ICT and library should be enhanced.
Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects

- 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.
Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects: PROBLEM

- In these cases the risk is high that the complexity of the library component 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.
Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects: FUTURE

- Future will tell how management of such activities will evolve.
  We learn from experience.
Digital libraries as parts of ICT projects: FUTURE

- Future will tell how management of such activities will evolve. We learn from experience.
- A more fundamental question: Can the library deal with digital information sources? 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?
Scientific research versus applications: PROBLEM

- 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.
Scientific research versus applications: PAST

- 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.
Scientific research versus applications: PRESENT

- 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.
Scientific research versus applications: FUTURE

- The general strategy of VLIR-UOS is now in a confusing phase of change.
- 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: PROBLEM

• Should classical library functions based on printed materials still be supported or should all efforts go to improving digital information discovery and access?
Print versus digital: PAST

• 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
  • by the related low awareness of the possibilities and advantages of digital versus printed information sources.
Print versus digital: FUTURE

• In the future, Internet access will become more affordable and will improve.
• 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:

PROBLEM

• How to evaluate
  the amount of money spent versus the outcomes,
  in these Programs and Projects?

• Is the significant amount of money needed for
  planning, preparation, management, travel and
  evaluation well spent?
Evaluation of Programs and Projects: PAST

- VLIR-UOS considers evaluation as important.
- Up to now, Programs consisted of 2 periods of 5 years.
  1. The first period is devoted to capacity building. This is followed by an evaluation by experts.
  2. 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.
Evaluation of Programs and Projects: FUTURE

- 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: PROBLEM

• 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.

• How to accomplish this?
Communication and synergy among various Programs: PAST

- Communication was poor in early years.
- Therefore VLIR-UOS has set-up “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.
Communication and synergy among various Programs: FUTURE

- These Expert 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 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.
Co-operation among funding donor agencies: PROBLEM

- 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.
Co-operation among funding donor agencies: PAST

- The lack of awareness of programs by various sponsors has been a nuisance in the first Programs.
Co-operation among funding donor agencies: FUTURE

- Various donors can have joint meetings, to coordinate their inputs.
- This may avoid
  - that donor funds are used to develop multiple initiatives, when there may be a need to develop one critical fundamental facility as a first step,
  - that 1 action is sponsored by more than 1 source,
  - that an initiative is prepared without visible output in one co-operation program, and brought subsequently to visible success in another program of another sponsor.
Co-operation among funding donor agencies: FUTURE

- The new approach of VLIR-UOS focuses not only on 1 or 2 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.
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.
Conclusion

• This evolution is 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.
Questions
Suggestions
Topics for discussion are always welcome
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