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Toward a Regional Consortium of LIS educators and practitioners in developing countries in partnership with American universities: barriers and opportunities in the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Librarians (SCECSAL) region

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Abstract:

This paper addresses a model for building collaboration among LIS educators that creates a potential for further collaboration with practitioners in both developing and developed countries. The paper describes an existing process that brings together LIS educators in Uganda and the United States. The paper also explores efforts in the East African Community (EAC) to develop a Consortium/Network of Library and Information Education Institutions in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (LISNET-ECSA). While the attempt in 2004 did not succeed because for lack of funding, there is still urgent need to re-activate the plans in order to encourage collaboration between the educators and the practitioners in EAC and beyond.

With special reference to the EAC, the paper studies the rationale of establishing an LIS Consortium. The objectives of the paper are to discuss the objectives of the Consortium; to propose the structure and services; and consider the resources to manage and sustain it. The paper further examines the potential challenges and strategies to overcome them.

The paper will address the literature on consortia in general and LIS consortia in particular. In addition, participants in successful LIS consortia (NORSLIS, for example) are to be surveyed to identify areas of success and difficulty. Additionally, face to face interviews are to be administered to LIS educators and practitioners at the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL) Nairobi, June, 2012. Consultation will be made amongst the LIS departments in Uganda and the United States, listed below.

The paper will also explore existing relationships among LIS programs in Uganda and the United States. These include Uganda Christian University and the East African School of Library and information Science, Makerere University in Uganda and Valdosta State University, University of South Carolina, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and University of Tennessee in the United States. These include research visits and appointments of visiting scholars and external examiners. Several of the US LIS programs have accepted Ugandan students into their MLIS and PhD programs. Memoranda of Understanding have or will be negotiated among these universities to support teaching and research cooperation.

The beneficiaries of the paper will include the SIG -LIS Education in developing countries, educators, practitioners, students and administrators.

Key term: collaboration; LIS educators; LIS practitioners; transcending barriers; creating opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Cooperation among academic institutions in support of research and teaching is a long supported and sought principle. This principle is recognized and supported among many faculties of library and information science. A well-known example of cooperation among library and information science doctoral programs is the NORSLIS consortium (see http://www.abm.uu.se/norslis/). Library and Information Science schools and their faculties have also joined together in organizations to support the progression - examples of these are EUCLID in Europe and ALISE in North America.

There are cases where library and information science programs have agreed to participate in understandings to promote cooperation in less institutionalized fashion. This paper discusses on such example, the development of cooperative agreements between library and information science programs in Uganda and the United States, with an intention to evolve beyond Uganda in Africa and the United States in North America.   It is also an ambitious proposal. The paper describes an initiative that its authors hope will develop into a fruitful association among library and information schools. It is even more so ambitious in that it seeks to expansion of that inchoate idea to broader purposes. Those broader purposes are viable cooperate agreements among African and North American schools, among African institutions, and among LIS

institutions world-wide. We believe that success on a smaller scale can lead to success on a broader scale.

Development of a Cooperative Agreement

Ugandan and US library science faculty have expressed an interest in some form of inter-programme cooperation as early as 1999 when discussions were started. As an initial consequence, Dr. Wallace Koehler became external examiner to the East African School of Library and information Science (EASLIS) for several years. In addition, the VSU MLIS Program offered assistantships to and admitted three Ugandan students to the master's program. In 2004, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the School of Information Science (SIS), University of Tennessee, and, EASLIS Makerere University. The library and information science schools the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and Valdosta State University later agreed to participate in that understanding. The purpose of the MoU was to promote cooperation among the institutions in the spheres of teaching, research, publication, and the exchange of faculty and students. For a variety of reasons, both institutional and the global recession, the MoU was not fully or properly implemented.

 More recently, the concept was reintroduced. DR. Kigongo-Bukenya accepted an invitation in spring 2012 from Valdosta State University to serve as a visiting professor. The re-inauguration of the cooperative agreement was undertaken at a meeting on 16 and 17 April, 2012, it was agreed that the MoU could be inactivated and that it should include SLIS, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Faculty of Information Science, University, of South Carolina; the MLIS Program, Valdosta State University; Department of Library and Information Studies, Uganda Christian University; and the Department of Information and Communication Technology, Mutesa 1 Royal University. Implementation is under consideration at all institutions.

State of LIS education in the East, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) region

In 2004, there were twenty-four LIS education institutions in the East, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) region (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2004). The number has decreased in the Republic of South Africa because of university mergers; but equally new institutions have sprung up, for example, in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Each of these institutions is autonomous and free to offer any nature and number of LIS programmes.

Another landmark development in the same region is the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Librarians (SCECSAL), a Biannual Conference that unites librarians and institutions related to library and information services and systems in the region. As a Pre-conference activity of SCECSAL XV1 hosted by the Uganda Library and Information Association (ULIA), a seminar, was organized towards the formation of a Library and Information Schools Network of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (LISNET-ECSA). The seminar was sponsored by IFLA/ALPS, with partial sponsorship from INASP and IDRC. The goal was to establish cooperative machinery between the LIS education institutions in the region.

A Coordinating Committee was set up to work out the logistics and plans of establishing the Network. The Committee completed the assignment but follow up was stillborn because of lack funding to reconvene the meeting and decide on the implementation of the Network. Nothing has taken place since then.

At the international scene there are LIS professional organizations similar to the aspirations of NETLIS-ECSA. These include the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), the European Association for Library Information Education and Research (EUCLID), and the Association Internationale des Ècoles des Sciences de l'Information (AIESI). There are also national organizations, amongst them the Brazilian Library Education and Schools Association.

Under their different mandates these organizations have an identical goal, namely unity among the profession. In the opinion of many observers, a consortium of LIS education institutions is overdue in the ECSA region. The proposal in this paper targets similar development in the ECSA region.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on literature analysis of consortia in general and LIS consortia in particular. In addition, through online survey, participants in successful LIS consortia for example NORSLIS, EUCLID, etc. would be administered to identify areas of success and difficulties. Additionally, face to face interviews are proposed to be administered to LIS educators and practitioners at meetings of the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL). Preliminary discussions were conducted at the Nairobi SCECSAL meeting in June, 2012. Furthermore, consultation is proposed among six selected LIS schools, departments and programmes in Uganda and the United States.

AIM

The LIS Consortium in ECSA and selected partner LIS education institutions in the United States aspire to consider three lines of action:

- Establishing and developing regional electronic network of LIS education institutions in the ECSA and partner LIS Institutions in USA in order to facilitate a more efficient and effective response to the needs and demands of the changing information environment in which they operate

- Enhancing the teaching, learning, research, publishing and service capabilities of LIS education institutions in ECSA through bilateral and multilateral cooperative initiatives, in the context of regional and global networked information environment with the USA partner institutions in particular

- Exploring the collective expertise of LIS education institutions to provide an innovative response to the challenges and opportunities that are emerging in an increasingly complex and turbulent information environment in ECSA and partner LIS Education institutions in USA

OBJECTIVES

- Establish the training needs of LIS education in the ECSA and partner institutions in USA

- Determine required changes and incorporate them into LIS Schools/Departments curricula in ECSA and partner institutions in USA

- Establish ICT requirements for the School/Departments to provide e-learning in ECSA together with partner LIS Education institutions in USA

- Examine possibilities of staff and student exchange programmes in ECSA and partner LIS Education institutions in USA

- Consider joint research and publications IN ECSA and partner LIS Education institutions in USA

- Workout modalities for establishing a database/web page/portal for LIS Schools and Departments in the ECSA and partner LIS Education institutions in USA

CONSORTIUM STRUCTURE AND SERVICES

Based on the structures of existing consortia and LIS associations, emulation of the IFLA model should be preferred. It should comprise of full membership (Schools. Faculties, Departments or Programmes; and related institutions/special groups; affiliated members of related institutions in the LIS fields and any such category of membership decided suitable.

The consortium structure/hierarchy should comprise the following

- Council comprising of members representing the schools/departments/ programmes both from ECSA and USA Partners. Membership fees could be assessed

- Executive Committee should be formed reflecting the Consortium membership

- A Secretariat (permanent or rotating) comprising of an Executive Secretary General, a Programme Director and Office Assistants could be established

- Annual/Biannual Conference as a forum for members and supporters to discuss and resolve issues for the Secretariat to implement

- Planning Unit to generate and manage a strategic plan phased into short and long terms

- Business Sector to generate and manage projects, proposals, etc. backed up by a Marketing/PRO drive

SERVICES

The Consortium could offer the following services but should adjust according to the market demand forces

- Curriculum development and review and harmonization of curricula

- Monitoring of standards through exchange of examiners

- Establishment of the Centers of Advanced Studies and Research

- Exchange of teachers and students

- Accreditation of qualifications

- Promotion of research through joint research projects specially in the fields like Information for development in Africa, and ICT applications

- Joint publications, creating African texts, which will be more relevant, and African refereed journals disseminating information on researches related to information field

- Discussions and negotiations on creating centers of excellence

- Regional conferences, seminars and other professional gatherings.

- Fundraising strategies including fundable projects and fundraising/income generating ventures.

PUBLICITY

The good plans, strategies and ventures would not be effectively implemented towards achieving intended goals unless professionally disseminated to both current and potential targets. There is therefore need for deliberate and protracted publicity and PRO

The Consortium should consider applying the following strategies to reach and tap support as well as raise effective supportive sympathy

- Websites

- SNS and blogs

- Paper documentation

- Journals or newsletter

- Workshops/seminars

- Media adverts

- Sending representative to bigger organs like IFLA etc. to interact with delegates about the ventures

- Collaboration with other groups/key players/partners such as Foundations, Funding agencies - IDRC, IFLA/INASP, NGOs, the private sector, etc.

- Cooperation with national professional associations

- Promote appropriate legislation affecting LIS

FUNDING

All the activities and operations will depend on the availability of adequate funds. Consequently all efforts should be focused on means of securing funds through

- Membership fees – institutional, affiliated, etc.

- Income generating activities e.g. workshops, seminars, short courses within countries or the region

- Well-wishers/Friends In Need – for donations

- Writing Research/Project proposals

- Publications featuring advertisements and sales propaganda, commercial interludes, etc.

MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY RESOURCES

The Consortium should need management and sustainability resources. These should include

- Grass root qualified and experienced LIS professionals to manage the LIS education institutions and the LIS service centers where the practitioners work and where internship is supervised for the upcoming IPs.

- Appropriate LIS education accreditation policies and mechanisms

- Effective LIS Professionals Associations – for the management of Professional Register and Code of Ethics

- Finances for both capital and overhead expenditure

- ICTs physical, hardware/software/engineering/physical and human infrastructure

- Computer/information literate community

- Strong, up to date legal framework

CHALLENGES

There are many challenges that confront cooperation in the SCECSEL region and elsewhere have been documented by, among others Abidi (2004) Rosenberg (2004), Mchombu (2004), and Ocholla and Majanja (2004). These barriers and possible solutions include:

- Recognize the strategic objectives of several initiatives such as COMESA, EAC, NEPAD and the African Union to bring them in line for technical and financial assistance.

- Cultural diversities. The ECSA region comprises of many tribes which speak varied languages and own different cultures which might not be easily reconcilable. Many times this leads to lack of collaboration which even extend to regional efforts

- Technical and financial assistance. Foundations such as Carnegie, Ford foundations etc.; renowned partners in development such as Danida, Sida, IDRC, etc. have cut back on the financial support hitherto before sunk in developing cooperative venture. This is either due to the economic squeeze or due to corruption based discontinuation.

- ICTs Readiness – infrastructure, services, engineers and competency. The digital divide is still a major hindrance in development and cooperation in some of the countries. This means no practical and useful cooperation could be effected due to lack of ICTs infrastructure leading to lack of ICT related services which today is a key avenue to cooperative ventures.

- Cultural/political issues. Often than not the national education system aims at producing citizens to spearhead the development of that nation. Curricular should therefore reflect the national need. This is tricky to balance in a situation where two or more nations have political differences. In serious incidences some countries prefer divorce from such regional efforts. Kenya did just that when it withdrew it students from Makerere University during the Amin regime.

- Political instability. This factor has adversely affected cooperative efforts because citizens from other countries might feel unsafe to work or cooperate with countries where due to political instability the future is unclear and therefore generates a lot of hesitancy to cooperative ventures.

AFTERTHOUGHTS and SOLUTIONS

It is not necessary to discuss separately each solution to each of the above challenges. Suffice it to emphasize that the solutions lie in the conviction of the partners about the philosophy of cooperation, the willingness to shelve and charter common approaches to national politics, culture, languages, and other differences; the willingness to share equally the responsibility of promoting and maintaining the Consortium; bridging the digital divide; the willingness to fight corruption and counter development excesses by the leaders; strong publicity and PRO drive to promote the aspirations of the Consortium and cooperating with international partners, foundations, etc. for financial and technical support

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