

# COLLABORATION IN LIS EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Regional cooperation is considered an important step in promoting resource sharing at international level. Several projects have been undertaken to promote collaboration between LIS education programs in Southeast Asia. An accreditation scheme is being implemented for improving the quality of education in LIS programs in Southeast Asian countries. A plan for developing a repository of learning objects is underdevelopment for facilitating sharing of teaching materials for improved LIS education. Faculty development is considered another important area of possible future collaboration in the region with possible involvement of international forums for improving LIS education.*

Keywords: LIS Education; Regional Cooperation; Repositories of Learning Objects; and Accreditation of LIS Education in Southeast Asian Region

## INTRODUCTION

Need for cooperation between LIS education programs has been highlighted by various studies. Lin (2004) reviewed the opportunities and challenges of such cooperation in East Asia. She highlighted the importance of discussion groups and other channels in promoting collaboration and cooperation between educational institutions in different regions. EUCILD Project Report (2005) pointed out that joint discussions on the structure and contents of LIS curriculum are important in efforts of strengthening the LIS education programs in Europe. Khoo, Singh, and Chaudhry (2006) suggested that such collaborative efforts might be more successful when focused on specific areas and on specific projects. With this background in view, this paper describes a number of projects that have been undertaken in the Southeast Asian Region to facilitate cooperation and collaboration between information studies education programs.

Southeast Asian region consists of countries that are member of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Brunei). While these countries have geographic proximity and cultural affinity, they do have linguistic differences and a great deal of diversity in education systems. Majority of these countries has LIS education program, some of these programs

were established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while others are quite recent. The collaborative projects described in this paper focus on the ASEAN region but are also open to other countries. These collaborative projects are aimed at improving the quality of education programs through regional schemes of accreditation and sharing of teaching materials by building repositories of learning objects. Discussion on these projects is expected to provide an opportunity to explore how such projects can be expanded to internationalize such efforts and how professional forums like the American Libraries Association can get involved in supporting such initiatives. Some areas for possible future collaboration are also identified.

## **COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS**

### **Regional Accreditation Scheme**

Currently there is no system in Southeast Asia for accrediting LIS education programs. The issue of accreditation of LIS programs in Southeast Asia was raised during the 2001 International Conference for Library and Information Science Education in Asia Pacific Region held in Kuala Lumpur. Conference delegates expressed that an accreditation scheme for the region would be useful in enhancing the quality of education and acceptability of LIS degrees as well as provide more flexible mobility of information professionals. A survey of LIS schools in Southeast Asia was conducted to study the perceptions of academics and administrators in LIS programs about a regional accreditation scheme (Majid, Chaudhry, Foo, and Logan, 2002). Majority of the schools surveyed agreed that there was a need for developing an accreditation scheme for LIS education programs in Southeast Asia. Participants of this survey proposed that a joint committee of representatives from the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) and LIS schools should be setup for developing and coordinating a regional accreditation scheme.

A proposal for regional accreditation scheme was developed and presented at the CONSAL Conference held in 2003 in Brunei (Majid and Chaudhry, 2003). In the preparation of the scheme, the accreditation standards of the American Libraries Association (ALA), Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) were examined and guidelines provided in these standards were adjusted with respect to the Southeast Asian context. It was proposed that a CONSAL Special Committee on Accreditation with representatives from LIS schools, National Libraries, professional associations, and LIS practitioners should be set up to initiate the accreditation scheme. This proposal covers four major aspects of the accreditation process. These include dialogue, self-evaluation, documentation, and external review. An outline of this proposal was published in the *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science* (Khoo, Majid, and Chaudhry, 2003). Issues related to implementation of a regional accreditation system were discussed in two later library conferences held in Bangkok in 2005 and Singapore in 2006. It was suggested that the accreditation scheme should now be reviewed by smaller groups of relevant experts and professionals.

A meeting of experts was convened to review the regional accreditation scheme as a pre-conference activity of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Library Education and Practice in April 2006. This meeting was attended by 14 experts representing various regional and international professional associations and leading library schools from Asia, Australia, UK, and North America. It was proposed that further discussions should continue with various stakeholders to further refine the scheme and to seek collaboration with other accreditation bodies.

Since countries in the Southeast region follow different educational systems and their perceptions about accreditation are varied, pursuing accreditation at different levels is considered more appropriate. These levels include recognition, assessment, endorsement, and accreditation. It is expected that some countries would be able to use the accreditation guidelines for securing adequate resources and may not pursue formal accreditation. We believe that international forums like ALA, ALISE, and IFLA can play a significant role in our efforts of quality improvement and ultimately establishing a regional system for accreditation.

### **Repository of Learning Objects**

A project for developing a Web portal for LIS Education in Asia (LISEA) was initiated in the year 2005 (<http://www.ntu.edu.sg/sci/lisea>). It was aimed at serving as a gateway to LIS education programs. This portal is also expected to provide a platform for knowledge and resource sharing. This is a collaborative project between the School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) and the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology at the University of Malaya.

LISEA started as a modest project of compiling a directory of LIS schools, programs and faculty members in Asia—aimed at surveying the state of LIS education in the region as well as to facilitate dialogue among LIS educators. Considerable interest was expressed by faculty in Asian programs in raising the level of collaboration and cooperation among LIS educators in response to our initial request for participation in the Web portal project. This encouraged us to expand the scope of the project to include, among other things, building a repository of learning objects and teaching materials that can be consulted and re-used by the faculty of LIS schools in Asia.

Such a repository of learning objects for LIS education can be useful in many ways. The repository will certainly benefit instructors who are teaching a particular subject for the first time. It can show the different perspectives/approaches that other instructors have taken in teaching the subject, the level of detail covered for different topics, amount of material that can be covered in a certain amount of time, types of activities used to enhanced learning and evaluation methods. The repository will also be useful to instructors who are already teaching a particular subject. It can alert the instructor to new developments and emerging topics that are being covered by other instructors. Instructors can also search for supplementary materials, e.g. diagrams, illustrations, exercises/tutorials and class activities, to enhance student learning.

The repository of learning materials will probably be most useful in new and emerging subject areas. A new subject developed in one school can help other schools to jumpstart courses in the same subject. It can also serve to identify experts in new areas who can be engaged as consultants or invited to give workshops. We expect that a repository of learning objects can help to raise the quality of LIS education. It can help to form communities of practice—for instructors teaching the same subjects. It can help in standards development, and development of competency standards in each subject area. It can also help to identify experts and experienced instructors in different areas of LIS, and identify areas of strength in different LIS schools.

The repository will have course outlines and syllabi, lesson plans, presentation slides, lecture notes, student activities (e.g. tutorial/lab material, exercises, discussion questions), bibliographies and readings, exam questions and test bank, and other evaluation tools. These materials are potentially re-usable. The materials can be obtained from publishers, e.g. NETg by Thomson Learning, commissioned and created specially for the repository, harvested from Web sites of LIS programs, and contributed by LIS instructors. High-level materials such as programs and course descriptions, course outlines and reading lists can often be harvested from Web sites, but materials of smaller granularity such as presentation slides may have to be obtained through contributions from instructors. Agreements will have to be signed with LIS schools for harvesting materials from Web sites, and with instructors for use of the course materials. Instructors could grant permission for the use of their course materials for educational purposes and not for re-publication.

Many schools are already using different types of e-learning systems and online platforms (e.g. Web CT and Blackboard) to make their course materials available online. However, course materials on such systems are available only to staff working in the same institution and to students registered for the course. There will be a need to make arrangements to allow outside users to access materials on these systems through institutional collaboration. Preferably, copies of such resources should be made available on the LISEA portal for more control and effective access. Once institutional arrangements are in place, resources can be contributed at different levels: individual instructors, programs, schools, and universities.

Since most of the learning objects are expected to be contributed by instructors, it is important for instructors to know how to create learning objects that are relatively context-free, to facilitate re-use in other schools and countries. Resources that are created for a single teaching context and particular student cohort may not be effective in other contexts without adjustments and enhancements. Instructors will have to be made aware of the potential of use of their teaching material in other institutions and, therefore, encouraged to think of ways in which the resources could be used for more than one application.

We are in the process of developing guidelines for users and contributors. The sources and creators (owners) have to be acknowledged when the material is re-used. Users who would be adapting learning objects for their own courses could be requested to contribute

their course materials to the repository. While the current intention is to make these resources available to educators as primary users, eventually the repository will be accessible to professional staff (e.g. librarians and archivists), societies and professional forums (e.g. associations), and students. Policies and procedures for content management and rights management (ownership, access and copyright) will also be developed in due course. Guidelines, procedures and systems have to be developed for indexing, tagging, storing and providing access to the resource. We are also working on a system for checking resources for physical integrity and correctness, metadata creation, and taxonomies and categorization. We are also looking into the possibility of translation of resources in languages other than English, preferably with an automatic translation program, or an English synopsis created. Resource will have to be checked for copyright problems, and processed to replace or remove copyrighted material, or permission sought from the copyright owner. Preservation and archiving concerns need to be addressed, e.g. whether to maintain software needed to run the learning objects, and whether to convert the learning objects to new versions of the software or to new formats. Details about the repository system that is currently under development to support some of these features are discussed in a conference paper to be presented in the IFLA Conference in Korea (Chaudhry, et. al., 2006).

### **Faculty Development**

A couple of countries in the region (Malaysia and Singapore) have expanded LIS curricula to include new areas like knowledge management and information systems while others are working for enhancing LIS curricula (Thailand and Vietnam) with increased emphasis on digital information and new media. Faculty in these programs have been exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge regarding difficulties experienced in these new ventures. Through these interactions, we have learnt that expansion in curricula provided opportunities to LIS programs to expand their markets beyond traditional groups of students. As a result, the LIS programs have been able to attract students from different sectors that resulted in changed student demographics. While this diversity of backgrounds of students enriched the learning environment, it has created challenges for the faculty requiring them to look for different learning styles and assessment modes. For example, we have experienced that peer learning has become an important element of pedagogy and assessment of demonstrated competencies instead of assignments has become necessary when it comes to teaching knowledge management subjects.

Factors described in the above section require changes in teaching methodologies and approaches to learning making collaborative learning important. This requires the LIS faculty to look into the possibility of exploiting e-learning systems and new educational technologies. It has also necessitated that strategic partnerships and alliances are developed with other education providers in and outside LIS schools. Rehman and Chaudhry (2005) observed that academic management in LIS schools was not yet ready for such alliances. They stressed the need for enhancing leadership skills of LIS faculty colleagues to take advantage of opportunities created by new areas like knowledge management.

We have ventured into faculty development program with very modest joint efforts and hope to strengthen these programs with collaboration and cooperation. Joint workshops were conducted on special topics to expose faculty to new areas and attachment programs were introduced in different universities to provide opportunities to younger administrators to observe how collaborative programs were run. These efforts need to be strengthened by collaboration with leading LIS programs and professional forums.

## **CONCLUSION**

Collaborative projects undertaken by Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated that collective efforts are more useful to improve the quality of LIS education. While there is a demonstrated interest in regional accreditation schemes, implementation of such a system is very challenging and requires collaboration with international forums with adequate experience in accreditation. It is desirable that such accreditation schemes are implemented in stages to provide flexibility to individual LIS programs. It seems appropriate that a tiered approach to accreditation may be more practical in the Southeast Asian region. Such an effort may begin with an objective of gaining recognition for programs and gradually move to assessment, endorsement, and eventually formal accreditation by widely accepted agencies.

New technologies make it more practical that teaching materials are shared among faculty to save time for course development and content creation. The project initiated by two Southeast Asian countries for development of a repository of learning objects seems to have tremendous potential to facilitate resource sharing among LIS education programs. Cooperation from leading LIS programs and international professional forums will be very helpful in achieving the objectives of resource sharing through repositories of learning objects. Several issues need to be addressed and guidelines developed for content organization and management and accessibility and usability of learning objects.

Effective teaching of new subjects and modules to cover topics related to knowledge management, information systems, and digital media requires that LIS faculty look for new teaching methodologies and learning styles and introduce new modes of assessment suitable for collaborative learning. Collaborative programs for faculty development therefore have become a necessity to be able to take advantage of enriched learning environment created by new student demographics.

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