
Academic library consortia in contemporary South Africa

Academic
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in South Africa

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Abstract *Academic library consortia in South Africa are indeed beasts whose time has come at last, although whether they constitute a second coming for our profession or our end-users remains to be seen. They can probably be described as a group of diverse entities, rough and as-yet unsure of their destination. In this descriptive text, we attempt to outline, for a mainly North American audience, the specifics which distinguish the developing consortia in a newly democratic and newly globalised South Africa from those in other more economically advantaged parts of the world. It remains to be seen whether the center will in fact hold. Letting go reluctantly of this literary conceit, for the time being at least, we describe the all-important social and political background in which our institutions must operate, moving on to an analysis of the impulse to cooperate and the obstacles that have emerged to stifle that impulse. In our conclusion we risk some predictions about where academic library consortia may be headed in our part of the world.*

The socio-political context

It is impossible to discuss academic library consortia – or any other subjects – in the new South Africa without locating them in the context of the dramatic changes which are still, five years after the first democratic elections and a day before the second, filling our horizons to the exclusion of virtually all other preoccupations. But South Africa's changes, *pace Time* magazine, have always been and remain to this day, the subject of intense struggle, the outcomes of which cannot be teleologically predicted.

South Africa's economic and social history has produced a divided and confused country. In some respects, the country has the characteristics of the First World, with a highly literate subset of the population making use of a comprehensive system of telecommunications, information and consumer services. But it also has a large number of unlettered people, with rates of literacy varying between 52 per cent in metropolitan areas to 28 per cent in rural areas. The difference in literacy levels across the so-called population or race groups is also large[1]. Urban areas have a higher percentage of high-school graduates, but, again, the spread across population groups is very marked.

Interim results from the first post-apartheid census, conducted in 1996, showed that there are 37.9 million people living in South Africa. The country is formally classified as an upper-middle income country, but a different reality is revealed in the 1996 *World Competitiveness Report*, which placed South Africa

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44th out of 46 countries listed, and 46th in human development. The *World Development Report* showed that, although South Africa is in overall terms the country in Africa closest to the developed world, the gap between rich and poor is enormous. There are vast discrepancies in the quality of life for different sectors of the society, and vast differences between provinces. This is a legacy of the skewed provision of resources under the apartheid government, and is reflected in all social structures, including higher education.

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The language issue

A further complicating factor for higher education – and an issue that has largely been ducked at official level – is the diversity of languages used by South Africans. Eleven “official” languages are recognized, consisting of nine African languages, plus English and Afrikaans, originally a *creolised* form of Dutch that now has full language status. Usage patterns vary within and between regions. It would be unsafe to assume that any one language could be regarded as a *lingua franca* or preferred language for teaching and learning purposes. English is certainly a minority language, despite its high and largely un-interrogated profile in higher education. A recent sample survey by Dr Yusuf Sayed (Sayed, 1998, p. 31) of students in the five higher education institutions of the Western Cape indicated, for example, that the distribution of home language was wide, and that there were considerable disparities even between the various institutions: of English, Afrikaans and the African language groups; no language or language group predominates at all five.

Telecommunications infrastructure

Network connectivity is an essential component of the development of an information society in Africa, and a necessary if insufficient precondition for the effective development of academic library consortia. Several studies have shown that the year-by-year spread of connectivity and the Internet across Africa as a whole has been dramatic. However, this apparent spread of connectivity masks startling differences in provision, both within and between countries, with South Africa being considerably ahead of other African countries. A survey of the number of Internet hosts placed it 20th in world ranking in July 1998, but within the African continent it ranks as first, with approximately 96 per cent of all African hosts (Network Wizards, 1998). Something of the scale of the disparity can be appreciated by noting that Egypt occupies second position in Africa, with some 1.6 per cent of the hosts in the continent. The concept of an electronic “global village” is presently unrealized in Africa – and even within South Africa represents a major technological and social challenge.

Access to telecommunications within South Africa is uneven, reflecting the gross inequities inherited from the apartheid state. A clear commitment to the massive expansion of telecommunications infrastructure has been given in various addresses by government ministers. But such changes will take a

considerable time to have a large-scale effect. It is apparent that cellular communications technology is already gaining a strong position and may offer a more attractive development path than fixed-wire communications technologies.

The library sector

The library and information service sector is characterized by pockets of excellence, and relative technological sophistication, while the majority of citizens, many of whom live in rural areas or townships, do not have access to even the most rudimentary library and information services. South Africa's library and information services include two national libraries, 670 public (municipal) libraries, 370 special libraries, 90 government libraries, and 88 university and college libraries. The national book stock is estimated to consist of 47 million items and there are 1,570 service points. Development has been haphazard and uncoordinated because the apartheid-state government abrogated its responsibilities for the provision of library and information services, which it declared would develop adequately in response to market forces. To their credit, progressive information workers adopted vigorous protest and lobby actions against an approach to library and information work informed by rigidity, conservatism, and an undeclared alignment with government policies of the period. When it became evident that liberation was imminent, these efforts coalesced, in the early 1990s, into concerted but not unproblematic initiatives to start a process of restructuring and transformation in library and information services.

Progress has depended on establishing a set of "blueprints" that define possible courses of action and identify the resource implications and consequences of each. This process developed according to an agenda that espoused the principles of non-racism, non-sexism and redress, promoted by the broad liberation movement[2]. The agenda changed rapidly from the mode of critique and opposition to one of engagement with the development of policy options for the new state.

The complementary and interweaving roles of information technology and libraries in relation to the development of the national information society policy were explicitly recognized. A new national information system is to be developed that is capable of integrating its component parts into a seamless whole (rather than one in which individuality is highlighted is envisioned), making the higher education system responsive to the national agenda of reconstruction, and responding to the demands of globalization and the new knowledge economy. Graduates of the new system should exit with skills that are attributes of the new information age. These include the skills to gain access to appropriate information, the ability to evaluate and discriminate between sources, lifelong learning skills, and social skills that promote co-operative work. The library, if it has adequate levels of information technology and connectivity, is ideally placed through information literacy programs to

participate in preparing graduates to meet the challenges of the knowledge economy.

Academic libraries and the library and information service sector

It is a truism that there is scarcely an academic library left in the world that has the financial resources to purchase the monographs and journals it needs, let alone that it wants. Almost all library consortia therefore attempt to rationalize the building and use of information resource collections through sharing and by granting access more than ownership. To the extent that they attempt to solve the economic problems of sustaining adequate traditional comprehensive collections in traditional campus-based academic institutions by moving operations on to a larger scale, the library consortium is perceived to be a panacea, but it is bound to fail in the long run unless technological change transforms the game. Nevertheless, we will continue to build consortia because they solve short- and medium-term problems to which we have no other answer.

Consortial library activity came late to South Africa, delayed by the decades of apartheid in higher education, as in all other areas of South African society. Institutions duplicated and divided by race and language were not designed to work together. On the contrary, some were designed to fail. As a result, we are now in a position to experiment boldly. According to Reddy (1998, pp. 16-42) there are currently 11 higher education consortia in South Africa, of which at least the two major ones – in Gauteng and the Western Cape – have a primary focus on library-related activities.

South Africa's academic institutions are divided in two ways. The first is between institutions that were intended in the period of apartheid to serve the white population, and were thus well-financed and well-resourced, and those that were for the use of the black population (which in the terminology of the time were "Africans", "Indians" and "Coloreds"). The latter institutions were located in remote rural areas and starved of funds. Current practice terms these as the "historically disadvantaged institutions." Current policy aims to eliminate this distinction for practical purposes by the year 2003.

The other major divide in South African higher education is between universities (degree-granting institutions) and technikons (granting higher diplomas in technical and vocational disciplines). There has been some erosion of the sharp divide between these sectors with the introduction of the Bachelor of Technology degree in the mid-1990s, and some technikons clearly hanker after names such as "Technical University."

In general, South African academic libraries are still in the process of positioning themselves for the kind of consortial purchasing of electronic information products that is now common in North America and other parts of the world. South Africa is a new market for most vendors, both because South African academic libraries are still largely print oriented, and also because most of the libraries cannot afford to buy electronic products outside of a consortial environment. It is evident that such full-text initiatives as JSTOR could offer

significant consortial benefits within this context. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that in terms of the infrastructure, South African consortia do not have access to the connectivity or the general Information and Communications Technology (ICT) environment that makes this kind of co-operation so effective elsewhere in the world.

The current state of consortial cooperation

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Currently, South Africa has five academic library consortia. Given the socio-political context and the extraordinary changes that have occurred in South Africa in the 1990s, it is not surprising that the motivation to cooperate – and the nature, intensity, and success of that cooperation – vary widely among the five major academic library consortia in South Africa:

- (1) CALICO (CApe LIbrary COoperative), in the economically strong greater Cape Town area;
- (2) ESAL (Eastern Seaboard Association of Libraries), in Kwazulu-Natal;
- (3) FRELICO (FREe State Libraries and Information CONSortium), in the Free State, with strong links to GAELIC;
- (4) GAELIC (GAuteng and Environs LIbrary Consortium), based in Gauteng, South Africa's smallest but richest and most economically dynamic province;
- (5) SEALS (South Eastern Academic Libraries' System), in the Eastern Cape, one of the country's poorest regions.

Certainly, differences among consortia exist in the USA and other first world countries; these differences are often a matter of focus, institutional style, and personality factors. In South Africa the differences are much more remarkable, and many spring from factors external to institutions. A stark difference that cuts across all institutions, even the best-resourced, is that the scale of financial support among tertiary institutions is quite different. For example, the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) are both English-language institutions with many world-renowned scholars and significant research agendas. UCT's annual acquisitions budget is about 12.5 million SA Rands; that of Wits is about 9.5 million SA Rands. These budgets are the current equivalent of about 2.0 million US dollars and 1.5 million US dollars respectively. UCT is the largest member of CALICO; Wits is one of the largest members of GAELIC. Yet, the acquisitions budgets of these two libraries combined are considerably less than that of any single institution in the USA with a comparable research agenda.

In addition, other issues shape the most basic concerns of consortia. Only since the new Government of National Unity took over in 1994 has there been a serious attempt to address the most basic literacy needs of the majority of the population. One might expect public libraries to play a major role in broad aspects of public education and basic literacy. However, because of the massive

undertaking to uplift the basic living conditions of millions of desperately poor South Africans, public libraries, like many other institutions, have taken massive budget cuts. Thus many of the needs previously filled by public libraries are beginning to fall to tertiary and special libraries.

Another serious problem, which cuts across all library consortia, is the continuing decline of the South African currency. As most academic publishing is done in first-world countries, the ability of a library to keep up with scholarly output may vary widely from year to year. For example, in 1998 alone, the impact of the sliding Rand, coupled with general inflation in the price of journals, means a one-year decrease of more than 36 per cent in the number of journals that can be purchased.

Though academic library consortia in South Africa face a common set of problems that distinguish them in many ways from first-world consortia, there are also significant external factors that differentiate one consortium from another within the country. The regions covered by academic library consortia differ dramatically in the mix of ethnic background and predominant languages, economic stability and wealth, numbers of academic institutions, proportion of previously disadvantaged institutions, levels of technological infrastructure and connectivity. There are vast disparities in the wealth and library collections of institutions. Eleven "official" languages are recognized; and member institutions of one consortium may use a different common language from others. Transportation to some more rural institutions can be difficult, expensive, and time-consuming; it can thus be very difficult for staff to participate in meetings where consortial decisions are made. In some rural areas the postal service does not function efficiently, making interlibrary lending difficult and slow.

Each of the consortia has special opportunities and challenges. For example, with only five member institutions, CALICO is numerically one of the smaller South African consortia, but it is a key player in national terms, and its member institutions hold many important academic library resources. It includes two major universities that were historically "advantaged": the University of Cape Town, a predominantly English institution, and the University of Stellenbosch, with a very strong Afrikaans tradition. The other members are the previously advantaged Cape Technikon and two previously disadvantaged institutions: the University of the Western Cape and the Peninsula Technikon, both located adjacent to each other in the outlying, predominantly "colored" Cape Flats area to the northeast of central Cape Town. Both institutions were founded during the apartheid years, to educate primarily "colored" students. They have traditionally been less well resourced than the three white institutions. During the years of the anti-apartheid struggles, the University of the Western Cape was often referred to as "the University of the Left," and many of its former students and staff now hold key positions in government and in NGOs.

Early on, the CALICO institutions decided to try to put into place a true "shared" system and have worked to implement a single flexible online library system on a single server. The project has been supported by a significant grant

from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The hardware for the project is in place. Early hiccups in connectivity seem resolved for the moment. Whereas INNOPAC is clearly the dominant system in the South African market, CALICO has chosen to try to implement the Aleph 500 software from Ex Libris. Both the Johannesburg and Cape Town consortia belong to the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) and closely follow developments and practices regarding consortial licensing in other parts of the world.

In general, CALICO and the Johannesburg (Gauteng) consortium, GAELIC, have reached a fairly advanced stage of development, by comparison with other South African academic library consortia. In addition, CALICO has been the standard-bearer for South African institutions in exerting political and moral pressure on the country's telecommunications monopoly, Telkom, to permit differential tariffs for network connectivity – a critical issue in a country faced with South Africa's economic problems and differential access to information resources.

Unlike CALICO, GAELIC is a large consortium, with 16 members, including the State Library and the universities and technikons of Gauteng. Its choice of the INNOPAC online library system was followed by academic institutions in the neighboring Free State, members of the FRELICO consortium. With these purchases, INNOPAC moved into the dominant position in the South African market, with half the country's 30 or so academic libraries on board. Younger than CALICO, GAELIC moved far more quickly to install online systems in many of its member institutions; unlike CALICO, it opted for a distributed model, reflecting, among other things, concern about the country's IT infrastructure.

Unlike CALICO and GAELIC, SEALS is located in a less economically developed area. It faces considerable problems of inadequate campus networks and low-grade bandwidth connecting the historically disadvantaged institutions, located in remote rural areas, industrial suburbs, or black townships. Among the eight member institutions, Erudite and URICA are the principal existing library systems. The consortium has taken a decision not to migrate to a common online library system platform at present. In fact, a needs analysis reported in 1998 rated human resource development above IT issues in overall importance (Edwards, 1998).

ESAL, based in Kwazulu-Natal, includes three universities and three technikons. Five of them already run the URICA system. The consortium has decided that rather than purchasing a new online system it will seek funds to provide the URICA system for the only consortium member that does not yet have the system.

On the horizon

In our view, there are two major challenges facing academic librarians, especially librarians in such less developed countries as South Africa. The first is the generally recognized problem of how to preserve and sustain what is

valuable in the traditional print-based library while integrating it with a rapidly-changing technology that seems to threaten the need for librarians entirely. The second challenge is the discernible trend towards turning information into a commodity for sale through a generalized expansion of intellectual property rights, and of the Internet through commercialization[3]. The decentralized and essentially subversive character of cross-border data transmission is in direct conflict with these trends: in other words, the technology allows us to do what we want, but the economics of the technology may prevent us from doing it.

There are at least two issues that are core to progress in developing South African library consortia. The first is that high-bandwidth connectivity at a low tariff is an essential pre-condition of success. Without it, libraries may be able to share union catalogues and work from the same software platform, but they cannot achieve full and seamless integration of computerized services across institutions. Users will continue to see each library as a separate entity. Therefore, the academic community has engaged in negotiations with the political authorities and with the monopoly telecommunications corporation to achieve such connectivity. The South African telecommunications sector will be deregulated within the next four years, so the corporation moved rapidly to accept the idea of a differential tariff for education. In the Western Cape, a new high-bandwidth higher education network, which carries all Internet Protocol (IP) traffic between the five local institutions, began operation in early 1998.

The second issue has been the need for an increased emphasis on large-scale information literacy training through consortial activity. This could most effectively allow us to "spread best practice" across institutions with concomitant savings in resources. Relatively little is known about the cultural specificity of the group of skills that constitute information literacy, and particularly what difficulties face learners whose first language is not English and who are not particularly at home with the technological commonplaces of the Northern world. What is most interesting about information literacy work, when seen as more than just teaching people to use libraries and computers, is that it moves librarians and academics together into an exploration at the center of the learning space. What is most disconcerting is the tendency to inflate its significance until it becomes virtually indistinguishable from the academic project itself.

The short-term future of academic library consortia in South Africa may well be a rosy one. There is no doubt that they will be able to deliver information far more effectively and efficiently than individual libraries, and they will bring additional benefits of partial redress through access for the inequities of the past. However, they remain essentially a tactical response to the organizational problems of the long term. It is likely that the organizational and financial basis of the South African academy itself will be questioned as we move towards such

delivery systems as distance education, lifelong learning, and resource-based education for adult learners.

Writing this on the eve of the 1999 Election, it is difficult to overlook that, at its heart, the move to a democratic culture in South Africa is about the right of all of its people to be involved in the decisions which are made about their lives. The creation of effective consortia requires a combination of discussion and shared decision making leading to action. In some respects, the evolution of democratic systems in South Africa has also encouraged a culture in which previous decisions are re-visited, decisions questioned and action obstructed. As the South African democracy matures, the precondition of representativeness and equal voice will likely give way to greater levels of trust and reliance on expertise. When this occurs, consortia in South Africa will begin to realize the conviction of South Africa's First World cousins and achieve a similar level of success to deliver upon their promise.

Notes

1. One of the contradictions of the new South Africa is that, although discrimination by race (along with gender and sexual orientation) is forbidden in the new Constitution, it is still necessary to use the old racial categories in the process of ensuring that the previously disadvantaged receive redress – and so we must use such terms as “population group”, “colored”, “white”, “black”.
2. This term is used to refer, not simply to the African National Congress (ANC), but to the range of anti-apartheid movements engaged in the struggle for full democracy.
3. We have written about this elsewhere. See Darch (1995, 1998) and Darch and Underwood (forthcoming).

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