

Uzbek Libraries in the Age of Reforms: Serving Communities, Supporting the Countries Transformation

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Abstract:

Libraries are key players in national development. Uzbekistan, despite an old civilization teeming with rich history and cultural heritage, has only declared independence as the Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Over the past years of independence, libraries have undergone a lot of changes. In 2016 the second president started a new direction described as “A Quiet Revolution and Revolution from Above” introducing reforms and forging development. This paper focuses the analysis within the four key library institutions on spaces and innovative technologies. Specifically, it will address the questions: 1) how libraries in Uzbekistan provide spaces for promoting community engagement and 2) how innovative technologies adopted in Uzbekistan are reshaping libraries to promote transformation and reforms. The researchers, being aware that information about libraries in Uzbekistan is very limited, shares a perspective of how libraries in Uzbekistan continuously play their role in progressive reforms through socially-relevant, civic-oriented and innovation-driven programs. The case of four libraries provide insights on how libraries played an important role in the community, supporting reforms in the national level.

Keywords: Uzbek libraries, library spaces, innovation, reforms, community engagement

Libraries are key players in national development. Uzbekistan, despite an old civilization teeming with rich history and cultural heritage, the country has only declared independence as the Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Union (Akbarzadeh, 1996). As noted by the first President Karimov (1997), “the general policy of an ever-growing openness and commitment to democratic principles and universal values and norms not only leaves its mark on the processes of democratization of social life in the Republic, but also influences the perception of these changes by the world community, thus shaping a new image of the modern Republic of Uzbekistan.”

Uzbekistan occupies a unique place in Central Asia and the region. It is the only Central Asian Republic that shares land borders with all the other four countries of the region. It has the highest population of 32 million which is just a shade less than the sum of populations of the other four Central Asian Republics combined. Under the circumstances, with democracy not having developed roots in Uzbekistan, the peaceful transfer of power was welcomed with satisfaction and relief (Sajjanhar, 2017).

Over the past years of independence, libraries in Uzbekistan have undergone a lot of changes. At the end of 2016, the second president was elected (The Economist, 2016) and started a new direction introducing reforms and forging development. The decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Strategy of Actions for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021" came out with reforms pushing for development. The library as one of the pillars for development continued the activities mandated under several decrees with emphasis on information development was also further updated. There are more than 15,000 libraries in Uzbekistan and about 7,000 of them are public libraries which are under the umbrella of the National Library (Rakhmatullaev 2002). Among these libraries, a selected number functions as knowledge repositories including the National Library, 14 information-library centers, more than 1 1570 Information resource centers, more than 130 libraries of public authorities and government and other libraries of self-governing bodies of citizens, non-governmental non-profit organizations, and commercial organizations (Bekbalaeva, 2017).

Amidst the important role it plays, it remained unknown. In 2006, Spain prepared a report on the State of Library Conditions in Uzbekistan after visiting five libraries and attending a conference dubbed Central Asia 2002. In the paper, Spain discussed the lack of ICT integration in marketing, dearth of collection and limited services. Issues on low self-esteem of librarians, the need to strengthen international collaboration and few libraries having automated systems were also mentioned.

It is a bit bleary to find out how these issues in Uzbek libraries have been comprehensively addressed. Aside from a few studies that shows development in the ICT aspect published by Bekbalaeva (2017) and mostly by Rakhmatullaev some in collaboration with Karimov (2017), Muminov (2016) and Khabibullaev (2011) on ICT related topics, nothing much discusses about library development.

The researchers, being aware that information about libraries in Uzbekistan is very limited and is less accessible, shares a perspective of how libraries in Uzbekistan take part in a quiet and progressive revolution through their programs that are socially-relevant, civic-oriented and innovation-driven. Specifically, this paper addresses the key theme focusing on spaces and innovative technologies. Specifically, it will address the questions: 1) how libraries in Uzbekistan provide spaces for promoting engagement and 2) how innovative technologies adopted in Uzbekistan are reshaping libraries to promote transformation and reforms.

1. Uzbek Libraries: Reforms, Democracy and Community Engagement

The recognition of the value of libraries dates back in the beginning of independence of Uzbekistan. In the words of the former President, “the revival of spiritual values must also involve their adaptation to some of the values of the modern world and its 'global information' civilization (Karimov, 1996).”

Most of the literature about libraries in Uzbekistan has been on status (Spain, 2005; Johnson, 1995); cooperation and collaboration (Spain, 1995; Lorkovic, 2007) and ICT development (Rakhmatullaev & Karimov, 2017; Bakbalaeva, 2017; Rakhmatullaev & Muminov, 2016; Rakhmatullaev, M. & Khabibullaev, 2011). Among Uzbekistan’s current initiatives is the “Corporate Information and Library Network” for university libraries, a system supporting information exchange and resource management between the universities in the capital city (Rakhmatullaev & Muminov, 2016).

Bakbalaeva’s (2017) “Report from Central Asia: How Electronic Resources Are Reshaping Libraries in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan” is also an evidence on the progress in the country. As libraries are a popular place for supplying information to a wide circle of the population, only libraries can become information and resource centers for rendering information and methodic support to the population by providing open access to objective information (Rakhmatullaev, 2002).

The ideas of reform is always intertwined with democracy and civic engagement. In the words of the former IFLA President Sinnikka Sipila (2015), “strong societies consists of informed citizens who actively participate in the life of their community and society.” Democratic practices and ideals are also reflected in concepts advanced by several information theorists and in various literature. The role of libraries providing information infrastructure as an important social tool for the prevention of crisis situations in Central Asia (Rakhmatullaev, 2002) has been a topic even before the advent of the new government. Hagerlid (2010) believes in the role of the national library as a catalyst for change promoting free access to information.

The partnership and synergy between academic and public libraries are equally important to advance reform agenda. Freeman (2005) touched an important aspect on academic libraries in today’s technological environment emphasizing the integration of new information technology has actually become the catalyst that transforms the library into a more vital and critical intellectual center of life. Participatory citizenship (Kranich, 2013; Lievrouw,) and engagement (Jaeger and Burnett, 2005) also play an essential part.

Getting a glimpse of the current projects and how it is aligned with national agenda shows how Uzbek libraries have realized its role in building a strong society.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study describing the proactive development of library services in recent years in Uzbekistan; specifically, from the cases of National Library of Uzbekistan, the Bilim Information-Library Center in Tashkent, the Information Resource Center of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies and the Fundamental Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan. This paper looked into reports available from subject libraries. Policies in Uzbekistan related to libraries, information and technology were also reviewed. Photos and videos since 2016, when the new administration took over were also included in the analysis in relation to its significance in reforms.

The National Library of Uzbekistan in the Age of Reform

The National Library of Uzbekistan (NLU) named after Alisher Navoi has received the status national library under the Decree of the President of Republic Uzbekistan on 20 February, 2002 (UP)-3029 (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers About Creation of the National Library of Uzbekistan Named After Alisher Navoi, 2002). As of 2016, the total collection reached 7 052 437 volumes with books at 497 5200 volumes. The total number of users/ borrowers reached 137 285 with members of the community and visitors from different parts of the globe surging at 755 409 for the year. Every year, socio-cultural and awareness-raising activities are carried out in the National Library through round table discussions, thematic celebrations, presentations, exhibitions and evenings of memory, symposia, trainings, and seminars, national and international conferences. One of the biggest events for librarians is dubbed "Infolib"(Information and Library week), a weeklong activity, aimed at raising the level of information culture, preserving the cultural heritage of the Republic, improving internet capacity and enhancing the socio-cultural role of libraries (National Library of Uzbekistan, 2016).

The scope of responsibility of NLU expanded under the mandate of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to improve information technologies and communications of information-library centers (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers About the Program of Development on the Sphere of Services for 2016-2020, 2016).

On August 11, 2017, the jurisdiction over the National Library was transferred to the Press and Information Agency of Uzbekistan. With system and structural changes, the thrust of the National Library has also expanded along with its resources and services.

NLU: Spaces and Innovation

The managers of cultural/educational services such as public libraries clearly need to become more effective in demonstrating their role in contemporary society, in encouraging the effective use of their actual or potential cultural resources, and in initiating new models of information service provision (Johnson, 1995). The dynamic transformation in NLU have been clearly manifested in various activities that spans up to 30 programs per month. Active participation of key government leaders, international partners, academics, scholars, students, elderly people and all the members of the community at different age levels are evidence of growth and advancement.

The National Library of Uzbekistan in collaboration with other libraries in the country from different regions has made effort to promote the community understanding of international relations, opening doors for deeper understanding on mutual agreement, cooperation, and socio-economic growth. Among the activities include:

Book Launching: "Foreign Policy of CIS Countries". Aside from being open for the general public, the event which was attended by teachers and students of the university of the world economy and diplomacy focused on the discussion of the authors, scholars and representatives in the context of organizational process of CIS, economic integration, political integration of cooperation, and foreign policy of European countries, the states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Collaboration, Cooperation and Prospects for Bilateral Relations. On May 11 2018, a visit was made by the delegation of the University of Culture of Aichi (ACU), headed

by the Chairman of the Board. Discussion on cooperation, learning of rare and particularly valuable manuscripts stored in the library, storage and restoration and consideration of possibilities for their research were the main agenda. A Roundtable discussion followed on mutual cooperation in the cultural and humanitarian sphere, as well as prospects for bilateral relations in education and science.

Moreover, the spaces also served its purpose for socio-cultural awareness. Select activities exemplifies the dynamic programs that proves libraries are enablers and equalizers that make it possible for all people to live a rich life and participate to their full potential in the activities of their communities (Sipila, 2015).

Commemoration of the Day of the Defenders. On January 11, 2018, an event was dedicated to the Day of the Defenders of the Homeland. The Deputy Commander of the Security Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs spoke of the priority direction of state policy to ensure peace, security and stability in the country, amidst violent conflicts in the world and the threat posed by members of various terrorist groups. In his speech, he noted the importance of maintaining vigilance, ensuring security. He also emphasized the role of the armed forces ensuring the protection of human rights and freedom, political stability, public harmony and economic development of Uzbekistan.

Bringing Inclusivity in the Evening of Poetry and Dance. Another example of social awareness and inclusion is an evening of poetry and dance which was held in the foyer of the national library entitled "all possibilities of peace for you", where participation of children with Down syndrome was highlighted. The purpose of the event is to involve people with special needs in activities to help them play an active role and believe in their potential. The library also holds workshops, master classes and help those people with disabilities who, due to certain circumstances, are separated from society.

Exhibit of "Works of the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov". On January 29, 2018, an exhibition entitled "works of the first president of the republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov" was opened on the 80th anniversary of the first president. The exhibition was attended by teachers and students of higher education institutions, students of universities and colleges, as well as students of general education schools. The exhibition presents the writings of the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, on building of an open democratic state with a socially oriented market economy, free and independent life. Books and photographs, highlighting historical events that have contributed to The Declaration of Independence and the fundamental of the life and consciousness of the Uzbek people, were also displayed.

Crucial for strong libraries and strong societies is the democratic ideal —freedom of access to information for all (Sipila, 2015). A national library can successfully act as a catalyst for a closer cooperation between the main bodies of research and research libraries in advancing an open access agenda and developing a digital research information infrastructure (Hagerlid, 2011). The growth of services of libraries and museums improving the accessibility to museum and library national collection for the population through the phased transfer of library, museum and other collection to electronic form has been the major thrust of the government (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers About the Program of

Development on the Sphere of Services for 2016-2020, 2016). Among the activities that the library provided spaces for strengthening capacity are:

XII International Conference: "Central Asia-2018". On April 18, 2018, a plenary meeting of the XII International Conference "Central Asia-2018: Internet and information and library resources in science, education, culture and business" was held. This conference became an avenue for knowledge sharing among key library leaders in Central Asia with speakers from Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan along with representatives from Korea and Russian State Library. The discussion covered various topics such as building digital information resources modern trends in information and library activities.

The National Library of Uzbekistan has been connected to 6 foreign licenced databases and 32 databases in open access, which provide an opportunity users of the National Library and to more than 120 information and library institutions of the Republic, including research institutes ministries and agencies, access to world resources, use them, apply in research and make them more effective (National Library of Uzbekistan Facebook, 2016).

National Scientific and Educational Forum. To enhance publications activity in Uzbekistan in 2016, the National Library of Uzbekistan with other responsible organizations decided to hold an educational Forum. So in 2018, the 3rd National Scientific and Educational Forum on "Access to Scientific Information and Publication" was organized in cooperation with the committee for the coordination of science and technology development in the cabinet of ministers of the republic of Uzbekistan, the Academy of Sciences, Ministry of Innovative Development, Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Forum was attended by heads of ministries and departments, universities, scientific centers of the academy of sciences, director and leading specialists of information and library institutions, teachers, primarily and applicants of degrees and representatives of leading companies. The Forum discussed issues on access to information where information centers and library institutions in the country discussed ways to improve the efficiency and quality of scientific publications and research outputs. Master classes and trainings was part of the event along with a round table discussions on strategies to enhance access to scientific information and visibility of the activities, the ideas and the outcome document of the forum.

Virtual Reading Halls for Electronic Library of the Russian State Library's Dissertations. As part of the campaign to expand access to information, virtual reading halls for e-resources on the collection of dissertation (research output) from Russian states was made accessible to the National Library of Uzbekistan along with 14 regional information and library centers, regional and cities information centers in Tashkent.

Intercom-2018 Participation. The National Library of Uzbekistan in collaboration with National Media Council of Uzbekistan organized the "Intercom-2018". The exhibition is carried out pursuant to the decision of the cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan to further develop national content in the world internet information network. This endeavour participated by various government and policy making bodies showcased the best content and information services to accessible users in the national information space, to create conditions for further development of the digital economy, e-Commerce, national information resources and services of different content.

This narrative reflects that the National Library has played an active role in facilitating community engagement advancing reforms. The National Library is the key stirrer, considering that it is placed directly under the government and thus closer to national policy-making (Hagerlid, 2011). However, the support from other libraries are as important. The cases of another Bilim as a public library and two academic libraries are evidence of the power of collaboration.

2. Bilim, TUIT and FLAS: Active Participatory Roles in Reform

Formerly known as Central City Library of Bilim, the Bilim Information Library Center (BLC) in Tashkent was organized as a Central Library of two districts in 1937. When the library received a status as Central City Library (CCL) of Bilim, it covered two districts in Tashkent supervising 11 libraries. At present, the BLC collection reaches more than 100 000 copies of books, booklets and magazines, out of which more than 10 thousand are in Uzbek language. Little has been known on specific programs in BLC but the library renders service to more than 6 000 people every year and has issued more than 160 000 copies of books, booklets and magazines. As a major Library-Information Centre in Tashkent, it has been in active collaboration with the national library in symposia, seminars and programs. While it plays a more traditional role of public service, carrying out the thrust of the National Library and playing as an active partner, BLC plays a central role in the execution of various strategies that uses the spaces and infrastructure as catalyst of change.

Aside from public libraries, academic libraries also played an important role in Uzbekistan. One of which is the Information Resource Center of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies (IRC TUIT) which was founded in 1955. The initial collection consisted of hundreds of books on humanities, physics, mathematics, and chemistry sent from institutions in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Odessa. Nowadays, it serves more than 6000 users of electronic. Many academic libraries are now “soul searching” to re-define their roles and functions in adapting to the myriad changes affecting the landscape of library and information services (Toong Tjiek Liauw, 2014). IRC TUIT, as an academic library, has become a space that provides an impetus for reforms. The library carries out different kinds of activities from book displays to exhibits and organized thematic activities and support for research and scholarship.

Moreover, the Fundamental Library of the Academy of Sciences (FLAS) of Uzbekistan is the largest universal scientific library of the Republic, which provides information services to scientists, faculty institutions of higher education, job seekers and students. FLAS has a collections scientific journals of national and foreign publishers and scholars in various fields of science. The general collection is more than 5 million copies. Currently 45,000 readers rely on these libraries. For over 60 years FLAS carries international book exchange with 135 partners in 40 countries of the near and far abroad. Particularly, high demand by from partner institutions are on academic journals "Reports of the Republic of Uzbekistan", "Uzbek Journal of Physics", "Chemistry of Natural Compounds", "Social Sciences in Uzbekistan", "solar technology."

3. Technologies in Uzbek Libraries

Various projects has been embarked by NLU to facilitate access to information. The National Electronic Educational Library (NEEL) for digitization of library materials, development of

the Integrated Electronic Library System (ISEB) and the Service Portal (PSO). Furthermore, the NEEL Project has been created to maintain important national information resources to ensure the exchange and use of data between libraries provide information services for various segments of the population. Recently, the professors of TUIT developed an anti-plagiarism system called APLIS as part of innovative solutions to ensure the quality of research work in the country (Rakhmatullaev & Karimov, [2018]).

Uzbek Libraries: Reshaping the Future

These narratives may not essentially encompass and give a clear picture on the advancements undertaken by Uzbek Libraries. But certainly the activities have shown active participation of various stakeholders in the society facilitated by the libraries. The current innovative practices hopes to encourage involvement of the rest of the 7 000 libraries. It hopes to be expanded by collaboration. Further interests of scholars as well as local librarians to enhance this information can pave way for further reforms and integration with the world community.

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