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Role of Library Associations' and LIS curriculum in uplifting the competencies of librarians.

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Abstract:

Disruptive technologies, changing social and learning behaviours, and exponential growth of personalised services are changing the eco-system in which libraries operate. Being in the centre of this evolving eco-system, library professionals need 21st century skills and competencies to turn these challenges to opportunities, redefining and leading libraries with sustainable services into the future. Libraries successful in redefining themselves in the face of these challenges, have intrinsically tied their library's transformation strategy to robust capacity building programmes. This has enabled them to be innovative in capitalising new opportunities, thus enhancing their value to the communities they serve.

Against this background, how have library associations and institutions advocated for the redesign of library curriculums and continuous professional development (CPD) programmes to instil skills and competencies urgently needed to upskill library professionals? This paper shares the initiatives of the Myanmar Library Association to engage key stakeholders to level up library curriculums to strengthen capacity building programmes for librarians through its proven model aimed to imbue master trainers

with required skillset and content knowledge to perpetuate development of librarians across the country. A case study of a recent capacity building programme based on the curriculum principle 'Every librarian a leader' and implemented through multiple partnerships will be shared; with the Myanmar Library Association, the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (a non-profit organisation) and KnowledgeDOT (Singapore), an organisation focusing on capacity building in the library field, and funded through a grant from the Head Foundation (Singapore). Key strategies incorporated to ensure success were the careful selection of master trainers, relevant modules reflecting global trends contextualised and aligned to current needs of Myanmar librarians, development of a dual language e-learning platform in English and the Myanmar language to overcoming language barriers, and the use of adult learning methodologies to garner greater knowledge sharing during the sessions.

Keywords: Continuous Professional Development, e-learning, 21st century librarian skills, Myanmar Library Association

*‘In challenging times,
librarians can only rise to the highest level of their skills and competencies’*

Introduction

Dynamic social changes, characterised by disruptive technologies, exponential growth of personalised and customised services, resulting in evolving social and learning behaviours are impacting the library eco-system. In these challenging times, the rapid introduction of technology and improvements in design and ambience of libraries may provide libraries with a facelift, but it is the provision of quality services by competent librarians that translates this investment into value for the community.

Against this eco-system, imparting skills and knowledge through rigorous continuous professional development (CPD) programmes need be at the forefront of library transformation. This is evidenced in Mthokozisi’s study on the co-relation between quality of employee training and development on service delivery for 150 employees, which indicated the need for effective employee training systems and processes to achieve improved employee performance and thus improved provision of basic services to communities. (Mthokozisi & Clifford, 2015). This is further supported by Menhoff, when he states that the Singapore National Library Board’s success in innovation ‘would not have worked out if not for a strong foundation comprising a set of reinforcing capabilities and competency-enhancing activities....’ as well as encouraging all librarians to ‘build up relevant competencies and human capital alongside the transformation of the library....’. (Khoff & Wirtz 2018).

In the region of Asia, unfortunately CPD has mainly been sporadic, largely due to the level of economic development in the region, resulting in the focus at a national level in areas deemed more important; housing, hospitals and schools. A report by Arabella Advisory, and funded by the Gates Foundation, concludes that while participation in leadership programs are often transformative for librarians and their communities, opportunities to attend such programmes and the chance to learn from one another, especially in less economically developed countries, is limited. (Cultivating Global Library Leadership, 2015). The report goes on to say that of the 30 ongoing programmes it identified, fewer take place in developing countries as compared to United States, Europe or Australia. (Cultivating Global Library Leadership, 2015).

While the level and type of competencies required by library staff may defer from library to library and country to country depending on the country’s development, all librarians to varying degrees, require competencies related to leadership, digital, and soft skills. Technical skills will continue to be needed, though it too will have to be upgraded to include meta-data, link-data, digitisation etc. As the voice of the profession, it is critical that library associations and key institutions to lead the way and advocate for the strengthening of professional development as a key strategic channel for libraries to successfully leap into the future. Through IFLA there has been an increased awareness to transform libraries and reskill staff, but it is imperative for library associations as the voice of the profession in their respective country to advocate and lead for greater and more systematic capacity building of librarians aligned to the changing eco-system of today.

Background

Myanmar has almost 7,000 libraries, many located in remote communities unreachable by other institutions, gives libraries the potential of providing a lifeline to some of the country’s most vulnerable communities to facilitate all Myanmar people gaining from its rapidly evolving information scene and fast-paced economic developments. (Myanmar Public Library, 2016). Set up and run mainly by volunteers, many librarians do not have formal library education, and those who do, have received minimal or no continuous professional training to upgrade their skills to meet current day demands.

Myanmar's library profession has been fortunate in that the Myanmar Library Association's (MLA)¹ has been proactively working with key stakeholders to ensure that library staff are capacitated to effectively position themselves as a key asset in providing a space for the people of Myanmar to access to relevant and timely information. MLA's transformation journey began in 2014, when a new executive committee was set up. (Daw & Daw, 2018). Since then, together with its long-standing partner, the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF)², MLA has been transforming the profession. Working with key stakeholders, including the Department of Library and Information Science in the universities to enhance its curriculum to upskill all levels of library staff with 21st century skills and competencies for the sustainability of libraries. Its first major step was when it under the guidance of International Federation of Library Associations' (IFLA), Building Strong Library Associations (BSLA) Programme, developed its Strategic Plan 2014-2018, covering seven key areas: governance, advocacy, education and training, membership, programs and activities, communication, and partnerships. (Daw & Daw, 2018). This was followed quickly forming a working group of like-minded representatives from institutions, relevant government offices, practicing library professionals as well as subject experts appointed by IFLA, to develop a Master Plan for Myanmar Libraries. The Master Plan outlines a strategy to level up the capacities of public libraries in Myanmar to serve as key national knowledge institutions, contributing towards addressing Myanmar's development challenges.

The Master Plan, completed and submitted to the relevant government ministry for approval, sets forth the vision that 'Myanmar's libraries should serve as a common public space providing services and resources that match the needs of all their community members. They provide a convenient, comfortable space equipped with books and technology, and they offer activities that help people of all backgrounds learn and develop personally. Library services go beyond the walls of the building to reach everyone in the community.' (Myanmar Public Library Masterplan, 2016). The master plan outlines seven objectives with concrete targets to be achieved over the next five years (2017-2021): developing welcoming and open spaces, up-to-date relevant collection, establishing a programme for continuous professional training for librarians, putting in place minimum service standards that cater to out-of-school children, reducing digital divide, building community partnerships, developing a data management system and updating policies that support the vision of public libraries outlined in the Master plan. (Myanmar Public Library Masterplan, 2016)

Despite the Master Plan pending approval, the MLA, supported by MBAPF, have moved ahead to seize opportunities to upskill their librarians for the successful implementation of the Master Plan. MLA has chosen a multi-throng approach to develop various levels of library staff, as everyone is seen as a leader in their own capacity to build sustainable libraries. To date they have initiated and run several programmes under the following categories:

- **Developing Library Leadership** through participating in the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI) of South Asia and ASEAN, to build library leadership and working with the Mortenson Centre running the course, "Strengthening Innovative Library Leadership"
- **MLA Certificate Course on Library Education and Information Literacy** (spanning 6 weeks with 21 units) is aimed at students to work as highly skilled paraprofessionals in various libraries and information centres.

¹ MLA is a non-governmental organization with the aimed towards development and improvement of the services and operations of the Library, with a vision to be a unique professional organization that promotes library disciplines, skills and services, supports the development of Myanmar libraries and librarians, and disseminates information and knowledge about the library profession.

² MBAPF is a non-profit charity organization with the goal of improving the quality and access to library services throughout Myanmar.

- **Basic Library Education Course**, conducted biannually spanning a month aimed at providing basic education on “Running a small library” to the paraprofessional, non-professional, university staff (professors and lecturers included), and people who love reading and library, who would like to run the library, who are running the home library.

Besides regular courses, the MLA leads projects, such as “Reenergizing the School Libraries” funded by The Asia Foundation for 10 schools in 2017. The pilot to transform libraries as vital learning spaces providing effective access to information resulted in a 100% increase in library usage and is now continuing through a partnership with the Ministry of Education reaching out to 50 schools in 2019.

MLA’s open policy to work with like-minded institutions aligned to its goal and vision of transforming libraries and librarians in Myanmar, enables it to seize opportunities that arise such as the opportunity to partner with KnowledgeDOT (Singapore)³, supported by funding from the HEAD Foundation (Singapore)⁴ to run a capacity building programme. The programme broke new ground as it launched its first eLMS in both English and the Myanmar language, supported by a structured training programme training 28 master trainers in 6 of a 12-module foundation level in mission-critical skills, creating an awareness of global library trends and their responsibility to support Myanmar’s development priorities and ultimately the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

With a UNICEF report stating that in 2014 ‘3.6 million children were out of school (almost 25% of the school-aged population)’ and ‘more than 1.2 million children aged 5-17 are working, and on average they work 52 hours per week.’ (UNICEF, 2016), Myanmar libraries can play a pivotal role to complement the education system, and it was decided the modules taught would also focus on early literacy skills, with a focus on out-of-school children as identified in the Master Plan.

Against this background, it was agreed competencies to be developed will centre on creating an awareness of global trends, an understanding of early literacy, advocacy and marketing skills as well as developing networking and partnership skills.

Thus, the following modules were chosen:

Module I	The Mission of Librarians: A Global Perspectives
Module II	Understanding Customer Needs
Module III	Understanding the Customer Journey
Module IV	Developing Early Literacy Skills
Module V	Developing Sustainable Partnerships
Module VI	Marketing of Library Services

³ KnowledgeDOT, set up and helmed by experienced library professionals with more than 50 years of experience in library services from the National Library Board (Singapore), provides consultancy services related to library transformation and capacity building programmes for librarians.

⁴ The HEAD Foundation (THF) a charitable organisation set up in 2013 in Singapore to contribute to the sustainable development of Asia, believes that providing them a quality education and leadership opportunities will empower Asia’s development. As a think-tank, its focus is on issues around human capital development, education and leadership.

Methodology

It was decided the trainings would be based on the established model of using master trainers, allowing a core group of librarians to be trained as master trainers providing cascade training to the rest. While MLA selected the 25 master trainers, KnowledgeDOT provided 2 experienced and professional librarians from Singapore with more than 50 years of combined experience with the relevant practical and theoretical knowledge, to impart the knowledge and skills identified.

The capacity building programme was designed to

- Build facilitation capabilities to equip the master trainers with skills to conduct engaging and effective training sessions based on adult education principles
- Impart content and knowledge that will form part of a larger training roadmap for librarians in Myanmar.
- Develop an eLMS to facilitate training to a wider number of librarians across Myanmar

The learning outcomes were outlined as follows:

1. Understand and appreciate the emerging library trends
2. Recognize the importance and impact of providing efficient services for the library users
3. Develop and deliver relevant services supporting Myanmar’s national development priorities and the UN 2030 SDGs
4. Identify and develop sustainable partnerships
5. Promote the library services among the most vulnerable community group

The train-the-trainer curriculum was developed on a robust continuing library professional curriculum, with contents derived from know-how and learning points from best practices across the world and Singapore and contextualized for relevance to Myanmar. It was delivered through face-to-face sessions, except for Module 2, which used a blended approach. The six foundation level modules were taught in three tranches spreading over 7 months from July 2018-Jan 2019. The time between each training was for master trainer to train librarians in their region and bring back learnings to the next session. In addition, a scalable eLearning platform was developed to allow for MLA to further their capacity building efforts and to enable a wider reach of librarians. All content and training resources for the 6 modules were uploaded on the eLMS, enabling the master trainers to sharpen their skills and know-how further at their own pace. A key advantage of the e-learning platform is that materials were uploaded in English and the Myanmar language to overcome the language barrier.

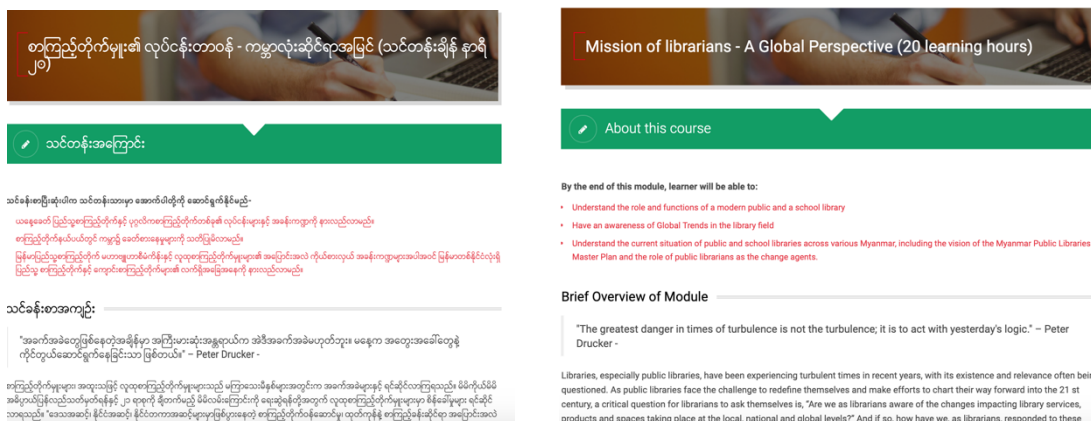


Fig 1: Sample of bilingual pages of Module 1: Global Perspectives: The Mission of Librarians

Impact Measurement

The deliverables as outlined in the grant agreement was:

- 20-25 Master trainer librarians identified by MLA would be trained by trainers from KnowledgeDOT experienced in the Singapore library system
- Each master trainer would in turn train another 10 librarians, reaching a collective total of 200 librarians across Myanmar.
- A pre-and post-training assessment would be carried out to evaluate the training effectiveness and knowledge retention by master trainers.
- A collection of human-interest stories from the libraries would be harvested by MLA to show the impact of the training on librarians and the services they provide

Cascade Training

In total 28 Master trainer consisting of public, school and community librarians as well as the National Library, Associate Professors and lecturers from the Department of Library Science had been trained in the 6 modules, supporting MLA's strategy for training to the masses as well as improve the relevance of the curriculum of undergraduate librarians at the local Myanmar universities.

By May 2019, master trainers had conducted training for over 2,300 librarians, far exceeding the original commitment of training 200 librarians. Public librarians continue to provide cascade training for staff at community centres and public libraries. MLA has also included the modules into its twice yearly, one-month Basic Library Education course, reaching out to at least 320 librarians by 2019.

Pre- and Post-Training Assessment

The pre-and post-training assessment consistently showed that learners gained new knowledge with high retention of the acquired knowledge. Though learners had some prior knowledge of some of the topic, the post-course results showed significant improvements in scores in terms of accurate responses received on knowledge acquired, with average knowledge on topics taught increasing from 16.75% to 96.13%.

Self-assessment

At the end of the third and final training tranche, each learner was asked to do a self-assessment of what their overall knowledge acquired, before and after the six modules. 26 trainees rated themselves at level 2, with two trainees rating themselves at level 4 prior to the commencement of the course. When asked to peg their own knowledge acquisition after receiving the training, trainees pegged their learnings within the range 7 – 9 out of a 10 scale, reflecting learners perceived a significant improvement in their skills and knowledge as a result of the course.

Feedback

The programme's structured approach, with each module building on the previous, and the adult training strategies employed by trainers played a key role in the high rates of knowledge retention and application, and was seen as key success factors of the course, as seen by quantitative data collected and the feedback from partners and participants.

From Partners

'Thank you for a wonderful workshop, it was good on so many points. The lesson plans you conducted and arranged and watching and interacting with the different protocols helps everyone enormously. Your course was informative and interactive which gave "the academic librarians, public librarians, community librarians and teaching staff who produce many library graduates" practice and examples of what they can do, was most important. One important thing is creative and reasonable thinking for globally, regionally and locally. I am very pleased to see the best result at the end of the workshop.' Daw Myat Sann, Vice-President II, Myanmar Library Association

‘(The) course layout is excellent, lessons planned are correlated, practical work / tasks are effective to memorize the facts (though) more length of discussion time should be allowed’. U Thein Lwin, Retired Professor of Library Science and Interpreter; Patron of the Myanmar Library Association

‘I also would like to thank you both for your time and excellent workshop. We are optimistic for the future of our Myanmar librarians. Thank you very, very much for all your support and effort.’ Dr Thant Thaw Kaung, (Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF))

From participants

Participants were also grateful for the opportunity to attend the programme and shared their desire to attend more courses. Some feedback received included:

- I really thank all of you for giving (me knowledge) about how to (use the new skills to ensure) sustainability of libraries, (and) how to develop library service(s). And I will try my best to do cascade trainings and I want to attend if there (are) more training of yours.
- (As a) librarian, I would give my knowledge to my library members, library students and also (see how to build) other partnerships. I want you to do many workshops like that in the future. I am very interested in this workshop. I am proud of being a library (course) participant.
- I want to learn level 2 of building capacity training. I will try to learn at e-learning platform. I thank (you) a lot for (the) learning (gained)
- It is a good workshop. By attending this I get new knowledge that I didn’t know before. And I get (to know about) new partnerships from this workshop. And I got (to learn about new) learning styles that is very important and useful for my teaching. So special thanks for (letting me) attend (the courses).

Improvements in Learners

Learners were not familiar with the methodology of adult learning, which required much more participation. However as the workshop progressed, the learners grew in confidence and the energy levels reached a new high, reflected through their increased sharing and participation throughout the sessions. With increased confidence, many were able to take the new knowledge learnt and assimilated them into their own training demonstrations during the classes, building up their own skills in training adults.

Learners, especially university lecturers, shared that they had learnt not only new knowledge, especially in the area of customer needs, early literacy skills and partnerships but also new concepts of teaching, such as effectiveness of recall. Other learners, already master trainers, also shared that they learnt how to structure a course with clear objectives, outcomes and action plans and new ways of learning through group discussions, activities and peer learning, especially important for adult learners. The variety of learning methods was appreciated as reflected by feedback received, improving effectiveness of training through the use of slides, graphics, practical sessions, movies and activities. The inclusion of a recall segment was a high point for learners and indicated by one participant as the best learning point for participants.

Key Challenges and Lessons Learned

eLearning Platform Development in the Myanmar Language

The biggest challenge was in the translation and conversion of content and system from English to the Myanmar language. This was mainly due to the fact that the India-based software developer engaged was unfamiliar with the Myanmar Language resulting in a lot of time to ensure accurate translations were loaded into the system.

Weak Wi-fi signal

Due to a weak wi-fi signal, it was challenging to train the learners on the use of the eLearning platform. Learners were encouraged to try the e-learning platform at home and issues were discussed during class time. This is an important point to consider when moving towards e-learning or even blended learning, especially in developing countries. Having said that, learners were appreciative of the platform and have been accessing it to use the resources loaded.

Passion of librarians

The passion and commitment of the Myanmar librarians showed in their thirst for new knowledge and ideas on improving their libraries and taking their responsibility to cascade the training very seriously enabled more than 2,300 librarians across the country to be trained within the short time. Others in more influential positions shared how they had used the knowledge gained, especially on SDGs to position and advocate the value of libraries to key stakeholders.

Project Sustainability and Future Plan

The MLA, together with its partner, MBAPF are keen to further develop competencies required for their librarians and have indicated interest to pursue further modules under the foundation level but the challenge of funding remains. Despite funding issues, MLA remains committed and open to working with partners to strength the capacity of its librarians to transform its libraries in line with the its strategic thrust in training and educations as well as the vision for libraries outlined in its master plan.

Efforts of MLA

MLA's efforts are focused on the following:

- Leveraging off the eLearning Platform for Myanmar librarians
MLA and MBAPF are working on uploading content from other partners onto the eLearning Platform to make it more comprehensive in terms of the training offered to their librarians.
- Strengthening existing training
MLA has incorporated the 6 modules into their twice-yearly training cycle for Myanmar librarians to step up from their basic library science course for new library staff or as refresher courses, reaching about 300 staff each year.
- Cascade training by master trainers
MLA will develop master trainers from this programme as their first line advocates and trainers for other Myanmar librarians and encourage further cascade training, beyond the 2300 trained as at May 2019.

Contributing towards UN2030 SDGs

Master trainers, university lecturers and associate professors have developed a deep understanding of the SDGs and the role of libraries in contributing towards achieving the SDGs listed in the country's national development priorities, using this knowledge to advocate on the value of libraries as shared by a learner who says, "Before [the courses] I didn't know about the 17 SDGs in depth. Now I know it in details & realize that these should be taught to everybody in the library". Daw Myat Sann, Vice-President II, Myanmar Library Association also reflected, "I am pleased seeing that University teachers and community librarians received a solid understanding of the SDG goals and key to the framework for implementing SDGs, and libraries have been able to identify how they can best serve the people with resources and information."

Creation of a network among and beyond Master trainers

Greater teamwork and integration between different library types also increased over time as learners from the National Library and the Library Science departments who were initially more reticent in the first-round training, displayed strong comradery with librarians from the school and public libraries in the subsequent rounds of training. The training had the ripple effect of providing learners an opportunity to get to know librarians from different libraries, extending their local network of librarians to share knowledge. The master trainers have also set up a facebook page sharing their experiences to enhance their learning from each other. This has enabled them to stay connected across different types of libraries and continue their knowledge sharing beyond the physical training.

Beyond Myanmar: Potential use of eLearning Platform for other similar library outfits

The eLearning Platform created for the Myanmar librarians can be replicated for other similar library systems in Asia, with the existing contents translated into the required language, thus overcoming language barriers. As the eLMS is built on the open-source Moodle software, it has built in flexibility to cater for future expansion of system features or functionality.

Conclusion

MLA has been committed to strengthening itself and transforming libraries and librarians in Myanmar. Their continuous effort in sourcing for suitable trainings for its librarians, despite its country's challenges, including the issue of funding, have enabled them to make great strides in putting in place relevant and regular training for the library staff in Myanmar. As a forward-thinking association, they have engaged key stakeholders to ensure that various segments that contribute to the overall success of the library profession are fully engaged in its transformation; from university lecturers from the LIS, to government officials and librarians from all types of libraries.

The results of their continuous efforts are clearly seen in the passion and commitment shown by the master trainers during the training sessions. The success stories they shared so soon after each training was a reflection of the urgency to quickly spread the knowledge gained to fast track the changes needed within libraries to be aligned to global library trends, contextualised to Myanmar's development. MLA, together with MBAPF, have targeted all levels of staff for their training: from developing library leaders, master trainers, who act as advocates for the profession and train others, to instilling basic skills in all librarians and to the lecturers' who can change the course of the profession through the curriculum taught to undergraduates from the LIS courses. With the vision of the Master Plan for Myanmar Libraries and MLA's vision as their guiding star, and MLA taking the lead to capacitate Myanmar librarians in the 417 government libraries as well the over 6000 community libraries around the country, professional development of librarians in Myanmar could not be in better hands.

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