

Satellite Meeting – Africa Section

Building Cross Cultural Capacities for Universal Access to Information and Knowledge in Africa

Dates: 11-12 August 2016

Location: Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA

Enhancing access to library services through the formation of partnerships

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Abstract:

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the largest Open Distance Learning University on the African continent, with a student enrolment of more than 400 000 students. The Library emphasises the importance of access to information resources and services, to students wherever they are. The digital divide on the African continent poses a challenge to achieving this dream. In order to achieve this dream, to date, the Library has established 43 partnerships, which include five international partnerships. The partnerships are governed by a three year renewable memorandum of understanding.

The purpose of this paper is to share the Unisa Library's experience pertaining to the formation of partnerships. The presentation will highlight the types of partnerships which Unisa Library has established; including partnerships with municipalities, public libraries and academic libraries. The purpose of these partnerships is to extend access to library services and information resources to clients in remote and rural areas. The partnership libraries facilitate access to Unisa information resources through the provision of free internet access. Unisa Library has also established courier delivery points at some partner libraries which are far from post offices in order to improve the efficiency of delivering books.

Unisa Library adds value to the partnerships by providing continuous staff development training to the librarians of the partner libraries. From the training evaluations, the training is greatly appreciated by the librarians. In one municipality agreement, fifty –six public libraries benefitted from the extensive training that the professional librarians received from Unisa as part of the agreement.

Partnership formation has provided great opportunities for the Unisa Library as an ODL Library to extend its services to areas where students do not have access to the internet. Partnerships have also proved to be beneficial to the partner libraries.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Public Libraries, Library Partnerships, Access

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share the University of South Africa (Unisa) Library's experience pertaining to the formation of partnerships in order to improve efficiency and extend access to library services, such as information resources, training facilities, and study and computer facilities to Unisa students in remote and rural areas. In this paper the main definitions will be discussed followed by the background information. The research methodology will be explained as this provides answers to questions I dealt with in this paper. Finally I will discuss the findings and make recommendations.

2. Definitions of key concepts

Partnerships

Partnerships are defined as those relationships, usually formal in nature entered into by two more or less equal parties who have a mutual interest in accomplishing something and a mutual agreement to bear the cost of its accomplishment, although their reasons for doing so may be quite different, (Wilding, 2002).

Digital divide refers to the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology and those with very limited or no access. It includes the imbalances in physical access to technology as well as the imbalances in resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen. In other words, it is the unequal access by some members of society to information and communications technology, and unequal acquisition of related skills. (Nkondo, 2014)

A memorandum of understanding is a document that expresses mutual accord on an issue between two or more parties. An (MOU) is generally recognised as binding even if no legal claim could be based on the rights and obligations laid in the agreement. (Retrieved from <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/memorandum-of-understanding-MOU.html>).

Background

As indicated in the abstract of this paper, the focus of this discussion is on the Unisa Library. This focus on the Unisa Library is very appropriate because as an open distance learning library, the Unisa library benefits tremendously from partnerships. Unisa is the largest open distance learning university on the African continent, with a student enrolment of more than 400 000 with the largest percentage of these students residing in South Africa. The University has been in existence for 143 years. It is the single dedicated comprehensive open distance learning higher education institution in South Africa. The University's vision is to be, "the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity". (<http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=20572>). The vision emphasises Unisa's deep commitment to being an Africa – focused and Africa centric university and being equally cognisant of the demand to be globally competitive.

The Unisa Library's mission is aligned to that of university as it supports open distance learning through the provision of adequate information resources and access to these resources. The Library serves as a support service which optimises appropriate technology to ensure effective support of teaching, learning and research. The Unisa Library is well resourced in terms of book collections, E-journals, e-books and full text databases. Resources and services are accessible through mobile devices and Unisa Library website, (Raubenheimer, 2012).

In order to bridge the distance, Unisa established nine regional libraries at the regional campuses in South Africa as well as one in Addis Ababa the capital city of Ethiopia. Despite the number of regional libraries in South Africa, there are still students who are not within the reach of the Unisa libraries and merely depend on information technologies to access information resources. In an effort to improve efficiency, access and demonstration of being Africa –centric the Unisa Library introduced

the concept of mobile libraries which are currently operational in two regions. The mobile libraries provide internet connectivity and services to rural and remote areas. In addition to the above services, the Unisa library also offers a centralised online request service which allows students to request books and electronic resources available in the Unisa libraries. For materials not available in the Unisa Library, access to requested resources is made possible through the well-established South African document supply network, Sabinet. This network provides a global service via WorldCat ILL and Article Exchange as well as access to national information resources via Sabinet's local ILL and document delivery service, known as Request.

In addition to the above services the Unisa Library embarked on forming partnerships nationally and internationally with other libraries with a view to further enhance access and efficiency in their service delivery. This initiative relates to the subject of this paper.

3. Research questions

The following research questions were formulated.

- Why are partnerships formed?
- How are the partnerships formed?
- What are the key requirements for successful partnerships?
- What are the types of partnerships?
- What are the benefits and challenges experienced by library partnerships?

4. Methodology

The methodology used to gather information for this paper included a study of Unisa Library documentation on formation of partnerships and a literature study.

Literature Study

A number of authors have deliberated on the subject of partnerships. Wilding (2002:199) states that "libraries have a very long and productive history of collaboration within their own culture and it is this history that enables them to be so successful now with partnerships of various kinds". In this article he shares that academic libraries have been able to provide communities expanded access to high quality information resources beyond the capacity of the public library by partnering with public libraries. This view relates to the partnerships which were established by the Unisa Library as it also achieved similar results. The study by Sarjeant - Jenkins and Walker (2014) provides examples of successful joint – use Canadian academic and public libraries and key requirements for sustainable partnerships. Their research supported the key requirements for successful partnerships which will be demonstrated in the establishment of Unisa Library partnerships. The requirements are commitment, a shared vision and a need that requires fulfilment.

The Unisa Library follows the guidelines pertaining to the establishment of partnerships, including the managing and maintaining thereof as reflected in the literature.

5. Findings

5.1. Why partnerships are formed

According to the Akamai report (2015), global internet access increased from 400 million users in the year 2000 to an estimated 3.2 billion users in 2015 and is expanding by roughly 200 million new users every year. However, the digital divide on the African continent in particular as a result of the high cost of broadband and the imbalances in physical access to technology negatively impacts on the number of people who can access internet in remote and rural areas of Africa.

The table below, adapted from Internet world stats, portrays the percentage of internet users on the African content as 9.8% which is low compared to the rest of the world.

INTERNET USERS AND POPULATION STATISTICS FOR AFRICA				
	Population (2015 Est.)	Pop. % of the World	Internet Users	Internet % Users
Total for Africa	1, 158,355,663	16.0%	330,965,359	9.8%
Rest of the World	6,101,546,580	84.0%	3,035,295,797	90.2%
World total	7259902243	100%	3,366,261,156	100%

Table 1. Source: Internet world stats -www.internetworldstats.com/stats (2015)

According to the survey done by the South African Institute of Race Relations the average monthly cost of broadband in South Africa is R337 as compared to R36 for the average user in the United Kingdom, this translates to five times more expensive.

On the other hand, since South Africa's attainment of democracy in 1994, great strides have been made in building new public libraries as well as the upgrading of existing facilities throughout the country. The South African government provided substantial financial injection into the development of public libraries which has led to an improvement in the availability of free internet access to the South African public.

The cost of accessing data and inadequate internet coverage in remote areas drove the Unisa library to establish partnerships with these public libraries in order to facilitate access to free internet or at a lower cost. These partnerships contribute to breaking the distance in an open distance learning environment. The table below show the distribution of public libraries by province in South Africa. The Unisa library can consider any of these libraries for partnership formation as the need arises.

Province	Population	Land area by province	Total number of libraries
Eastern Cape	6 562 053	13.9%	144
Free State	2745590	10.6%	173
Gauteng	12272263	1.4%	234
KwaZulu - Natal	10267300	7.7%	174
Limpopo	5404868	10.3%	74
Mpumalanga	4039939	6.3%	111
Northern Cape	1145861	30.5%	253
North West	3509953	8.7%	102
Western Cape	5622734	10.6%	347
Total	51770560	100%	1612

Table 2. GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF LIBRARIES, (NLSA, 2013)

5.2. How partnerships are formed

The Unisa Library's Main library, known as the Muckleneuk Library, is responsible for establishing partnerships on behalf of all its libraries in regional areas. In doing so, it sets common approved

guidelines which are available in the form of a checklist. Bearing in mind that the reason for forming partnerships is to enable Unisa Library to achieve its objectives of extending access and improving efficiency in service delivery. The responsible staff will consider whether the envisaged partnership library complies with the following criteria which are stipulated in the Unisa Library checklist for establishing partnerships.

Unisa Library checklist

- Staffing available at Service Points (Partner Library)
- Infrastructure/Facilities available for use by Unisa Students
- Internet access and information technology (workstation, Internet Bandwidth and stability)
- Seating Space
- Building and facilities (conducive for Learning)
- Finances/Charge: Will Unisa have to pay for using the Public Library service at what cost?
- Location of library, that is rural and remote and student numbers which can be served and distance from a post office

When a library is identified as a suitable partner, negotiations are either conducted by the Regional Librarians or in conjunction with Muckleneuk Librarians. The result of the negotiations is a draft agreement which will be formalised by the legal department of Unisa after the legal representatives of the partner libraries have considered the draft agreement and indicated that they are satisfied with the agreement. The Memorandum of Understanding is valid for a period of three years with a clause to extend or dissolve the agreement when the agreement expires. The agreement provides the terms of collaboration between Unisa and its partners; it also covers the resolution of disputes and notice periods in the event of discontinuing the agreement. The diagram below shows procedure of establishing partnerships at the Unisa Library.

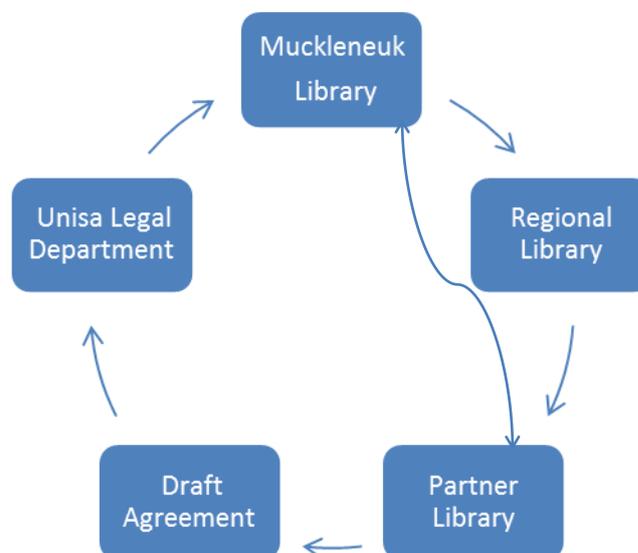


Diagram 1. PROCEDURE FOR ESTABLISHING PARTERSHIPS AT UNISA LIBRARY

Due to the necessary consultations which have to take place in the partner library the process generally takes long to conclude. In most cases more than one meeting is scheduled due to the necessity to present to different levels of management.

5.3. Key requirements for successful partnerships

It is crucial for both parties to the partnership to be clear about the reasons for the partnership. Unisa Library highlights the three key requirements for establishing successful partnerships, namely a shared vision, commitment and a need that requires fulfilment as identified by Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker

(2014). In the negotiations for establishing partnerships Unisa Library focuses on these criteria. This discussion serves to highlight that both libraries in the partnership will benefit by taking part in the partnership.

The shared vision for all libraries in general is to maximise results which lead to customer satisfaction. Although the Unisa students are distance learners they are at the same time members of the communities in which they live. In general this is also applicable to university libraries since they normally allow members of the community special membership. The mandate of public libraries is to provide access to facilities, services and resources to communities within their jurisdiction. The mandate of the Unisa Library's or other academic libraries is to provide their patrons access to facilities, resources and services. Hence the libraries in the partnership all have a commitment to provide these services. Unisa Library's need that requires fulfilment is the need to reduce the transactional distance between student and the university and to extend access. The partner's need is to meet the needs of their clients which can be met by partnering with the Unisa Library. The partnerships established by Unisa library hence have the key requirements for successful partnerships.

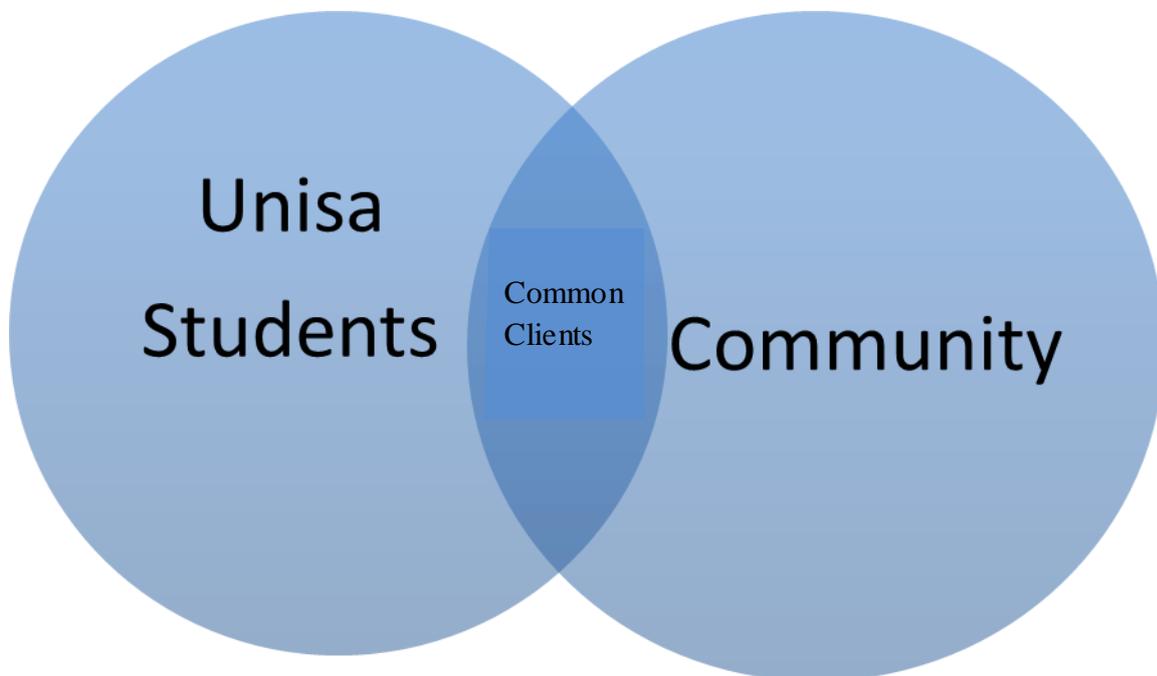


Diagram 2. Common clients shared by Unisa Library and a partner library

5.4 Types of Partnerships

The types of partnerships pertained to national and international partnerships. The large number of national partnerships which the library established is with public libraries. Within the national partnerships there are partnerships which have been negotiated with individual public libraries. Due to the time consuming nature of forming partnerships, in 2012 Unisa Library began to establish partnerships at a higher level, that is, at city or provincial level. The Unisa Library first partnership with a city was with the City of Tshwane. This gave Unisa Library access to 56 public libraries. From 2014 the Library focused on pursuing negotiations with provincial governments. This first partnership at provincial level was signed in 2015 with the North West Province; this was followed by the Eastern Cape Province in 2016. This allowed the Unisa Library, access to more than one hundred libraries in a province. To date the Unisa Library has established forty- three partnerships (thirty –five with

individual public libraries, and three with provincial governments, two with universities and one with a college of education and two with non- governmental organisations).

South Africa Provinces	Total number of libraries	Unisa partnership with public libraries	Provincial or Metro level
Eastern Cape	144	9	Provincial (144 libraries)
Free State	173	2	
Gauteng	234		City of Tshwane, Metro (56 libraries)
KwaZulu - Natal	174	1	
Limpopo	74	3	
Mpumalanga	111		
Northern Cape	253	6	
North West	102	5	Provincial (163 libraries)
Western Cape	347	9	
	1612	35	3

Table3. UNISA PARTNERSHIPS IN S OUTH AFRICA

Internationally, the Unisa Library also established partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations Economic commission for Africa and African Union in Addis Ababa. This facilitated access to study space and information resources to Unisa students in Addis Ababa. The Unisa Library also established partnerships with the two universities, University of Addis Ababa and the University of Lesotho and a college of education in Lesotho. It is more challenging to establish partnerships with universities because universities face similar challenges as the Unisa Library, for example limited physical space as well as the need for their own clients to use computer facilities.

Country	Educational	Non – Governmental Organisations
Lesotho	2	0
Ethiopia	1	2

Table 4. International Partnerships

5.5 Benefits and challenges experienced by partner libraries

A partnership formation offers some benefits for the Unisa Library and other benefits to the partner’s libraries. There are also some challenges experienced by both parties.

5.5.1 Benefits for Unisa Library

The main benefit for Unisa Library is the ability to extend free internet access to students who do not have access to internet or cannot afford the high cost of broadband /data. This enables students to access Unisa Library's electronic resources.

- Unisa partner Libraries serve as courier delivery points for material requested from the main Unisa library which improves efficiency.
- Students are able to utilise the physical spaces for study purposes.
- Unisa library staff also utilise the partner libraries facilities for delivering information literacy training.
- Partner libraries provide stopping venues for the Unisa Mobile Libraries.
- In addition, partnerships enable the Unisa Library to fulfil three of the ACRL Distance Learning Libraries standards/ guidelines; these pertain to access, space and resources.

5.5.2 Benefits for the partner libraries

- Client satisfaction due to the ability to fulfil client needs through the Unisa courier service delivery of information resources. When Unisa students, who are also clients of the partner library visit the partner libraries and request books online which are not in the partner library's collection, the Unisa Library then delivers the books at the cost of the Unisa Library.
- Publicity of the partner libraries and increased awareness of their services in their communities. The use of the partner libraries as venues where the Unisa mobile library can stop has also increased the visibility of the partner libraries.
- Staff development opportunities - Unisa Library staff train the staff of partner libraries in advanced search methodologies in use by academic libraries, the use of open educational resources and the various online request methods to apply when requesting required information resources. In this regard public libraries have expressed their appreciation for the workshops conducted by Unisa Library staff since 2012. This is what some of the librarians who attended the workshops had to say:

“Training was well researched and prepared. Thank you”

“The training was very good and relevant to me as the public librarian and I hope we can invite more staff to attend next time”.

“I think this training need to be done to all library workers because when you come out you have learned something big and it's up to you to make a difference in your community”.

The topics covered in the workshops are a result of needs identified by public librarians. An example of such workshops is the one that was held on 29 and 30 September 2015 when 21 public librarians from the city of Tshwane attended a workshop as illustrated in the table below.

TRAINING DESCRIPTION	DURATION	DATE
WEB 2.0: WIKIS WIKIS: Introduction to the potential of Wiki technology for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating subject gate ways for their respective library communities, for example school projects, information of specific interest to their communities. 	09:00 - 10:00	29 September 2015
COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection development – birds eye view • Tasks of the collection developer • What are your goals for your collections • How did you come to realise these goals • Collection assessment 	10:00 -15:30	29 September 2015
BASIC COMPUTER SKILLS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic mouse and keyboard skill • Introduction to the Internet 	09:00 – 11:00	30 September 2015
ELECTRONIC DATABASES SABINET, ADL, E-LIS, Bio – Med, Institutional Repositories and Subject Repositories , Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN); OER’s Free E-books, Google Scholar Electronic References: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online dictionaries • Online Encyclopaedias 	11:30 - 13:00	30 September 2015
CLASSIFICATION & CATALOGUING Overview of Dewey	13:30 – 15:30	30 September 2015

Table 5. Training Programme

5.5.3 Challenges

- A challenge often faced by the Unisa Library from academic library partners is that the partners expect Unisa Library to provide computers to improve the access to databases in their library.
- Partner libraries expect their clients who are not registered with Unisa to be given access to electronic databases which the Unisa Library subscribes to. This is not possible due to licence agreements regulations.
- Most partner libraries expect Unisa to provide physical collections in the partner libraries.
- The partner libraries also recommend that the Unisa Library should consider the funding of a prescribed books collection for Unisa students.

6. Recommendations for improvement

During regular visits to the Unisa Library partners the following areas were raised as needing improvement.

- Priority should be given to training workshops for **partner** librarians **immediately** after the formation of the partnership in order to orientate relevant staff about the operations of Unisa Library.
- Marketing messages should also include an invitation to the students to meet the Unisa Librarians at the partner library for orientation of the services which would be delivered through the partner library. The orientation would highlight the role of the partner library in improving efficiency in information service delivery.
- A launch of the partnership would be held with extended publicity such as the press to ensure that the event appears in the local newspapers.
- Regular liaison with the partner libraries was also strongly recommended.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that, through partnerships, libraries benefit by providing more than they could on their own. The formation of partnerships has provided great opportunities for the Unisa Library to align itself with standards for International Open Distance Learning and in so doing reduce the transactional distance between the Library and its clients. The answers to the research questions have been discussed. These indicate that partnerships have enabled the Unisa Library to extend services to students and thereby it not only improved access to library resources, but also the effectiveness and efficiency of the Library's services in general. Partnerships enabled the Unisa Library to break the isolation which is typically found in an ODL environment. On the other hand, the Unisa Library partners benefit by being able to satisfy their clients who are Unisa students by being able to provide efficient services in partnership with the Unisa Library. The training offered by the Unisa staff has also been appreciated by partners.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Ms Jenny Raubenheimer for advice and editing of the paper.

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