Supporting the digital readiness of library science graduates

Two-year review of a pilot project in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia

Strong research and teaching at universities relies on good access to up-to-date information, and this, in turn, requires a strong library and information service.

One of the major barriers faced by university libraries in developing countries, in the support and services they provide to their researchers and students, is a lack of staff with the knowledge and skills to work in a rapidly changing information environment. Without digitally competent librarians, libraries will struggle to cope with the ever-evolving information landscape.

INASP has provided training for librarians for many years and continues to do so. This 'in-service' training addresses key skills or knowledge gaps in managing access to online information. In all of its work, sustainability is a primary objective. One way to ensure this is to address skills-needs closer to the source, by ensuring that newly trained librarians have the skills that they and their future institutions will need. To this end, INASP launched a pilot project in 2013 designed

Workshop participants in Kenya give their full attention

to investigate ways to improve the postgraduate curricula and teaching in library and information science (LIS) in five countries. This is part of INASP's ongoing efforts to improve access, production and use of research information and knowledge, to enable developing countries to solve their development challenges.

The Library and Information Science (LIS) Pilot Project aimed to ensure that professional librarians graduating from African library schools have the knowledge and

About this document

As this was a pilot project, INASP built in a structured review process to capture lessons learned, both to assist in designing the next phase of the project and to inform other similar projects. This publication is a brief summary of the project and the review, with suggestions for the way forward. The document could be useful to anyone working at or with LIS schools in developing countries, or to others working on curriculum review or course development projects. A longer version of this report is available, with further details of the review findings.

Participants in Zambia take a midday break

skills to grow and improve libraries, and in turn to support research and teaching. The first phase of the project involved library schools at Kenya Methodist University (KeMU), the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania, the University of Zambia, Jimma University in Ethiopia and Mzuzu University in Malawi.

INASP staff worked with librarians and international experts to review and update postgraduate LIS courses at these institutions. They helped teaching staff improve their teaching skills, offering them opportunities to update their subject knowledge through continuing professional development (CPD), enabling them to teach new and evolving subjects in the curricula.

Highlights from the two-year review

The first two years of the project raised awareness among library school staff about the gaps in their knowledge and skills, provided a degree of pedagogy support, and reinforced the review of curricula.

However, efforts are still needed to help library science students to become not only technical experts, but critical thinkers and library leaders, who could adapt and manage in the changing digital environment, something that is beyond the scope of the current work.

The CPD component of the project was intended to help fill knowledge and subject gaps among teaching staff, ideally as part of a departmental plan for ensuring that staff members could teach all aspects of the revised curriculum. It was discussed with the heads

> **"The project aims to try to ensure that curricula are in place to have qualified librarians, enabling them to deal with challenges of change coming through IT. Making librarians able to cope is central to adequately serving clientele"**

of departments, and individual staff members could apply for CPD opportunities. However, there was less impetus to pursue CPD as a strategic approach at departmental level, and when this did not materialize, individuals were more reticent than expected to pursue CPD opportunities themselves.

CPD may be more attractive if offered via a grant, so that library school teaching staff could, for example, make a study visit to another university or to a conference. Other suggestions from the review process included creating 'champions' to drive change, such as a 'Champion for Digital Archives'.

While the project recognized the need for high level buy-in from the start – and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the Vice Chancellor at the highest institutional level, the review revealed that this was not enough

to develop institutional change. Greater strategic effort is needed to get universities committed to, and ready for, curricula change at all levels, beyond one-off workshops. In some institutions, the people facing the problems are not those who can realistically change things. This suggests a strong need to encourage and support internal strategies for change at the universities, to ensure more institutional buy-in and solid commitment.

Overall, the review highlighted that the activities INASP supports, which aim to ensure that library schools can produce suitably skilled graduates, is only part of a bigger, more complex picture. Developing 'digitally ready' LIS graduates who can work in modern libraries will be achieved through a broad range of improvements to postgraduate programmes. This will come about in part through curricula review,

pedagogy support and CPD, but also by improvements in organizational management and scope to cover a wider range of subjects, than we had envisaged ●

"Greater strategic effort is needed to get universities committed to, and ready for, curricula change at all levels, beyond one-off workshops"

Pedagogy workshop participanbs, Mzuzu university, Malawi

The way forward

The next phase of the project needs to consolidate and deepen institutional support, and ensure that changes are not linked to individuals, but have broader, long-term impact. INASP could help to achieve this in the following ways:

- Ensuring institutional readiness and commitment to change. Key indicators of institutional readiness might include the existence of quality assurance, teaching and learning or staff development units, or developing stronger links between existing units and LIS schools.

- Ensuring there is someone with vision at each institution who understands the key role that the library and librarians can play in growing research and strengthening teaching, who understands the library as being at the centre (rather than the periphery) of the institution, and someone who can manage change.

- Offering a 'deeper' or 'lighter' version of support depending on how ready the university or department is, and how much commitment and investment they are prepared to give. Universities that cannot give the necessary commitment might then decide to withdraw from the second phase of the project.

- Fostering relationships between LIS staff, senior managers and university leadership, and helping to develop links between universities, including one-to-one peer support relationships. This may also involve identifying experienced LIS leaders from other institutions who could mentor department heads. Linking library schools may take the form of a consortium of library schools, or convening a meeting to enable common problems to be discussed and effective strategies and approaches to be shared.

- Taking a more strategic approach to continuing professional development by working with LIS department heads to strengthen their approach to staff-development planning, identifying needs and matching these to available opportunities. This would also involve developing a better understanding of the barriers to CPD take-up, and identifying 'learning champions' such as 'Champion for Digital Archives', to incentivize staff members to continue learning.

- Integrating curriculum development and pedagogy support through the use of 'constructive alignment', which bridges the gap between the curriculum review and the pedagogy workshops. This approach considers how to design a curriculum so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes that are intended in the course. At the pedagogy skills workshops several course modules were reviewed against this approach and may represent a positive way forward.

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