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An International Training Program in Library and Information Science: Looking Backward and Forward

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to improve the subsequent editions of an international training program in information management. Up to now 15 editions have been organized, coordinated by the author of this paper. About half of the participants work in developing countries in Asia. Each program takes place mainly in Brussels, Belgium, for about three months. One program has been organized each year, on average. The following are research questions: How to obtain financial support? How to organize the management of the program? How to exploit the fast evolution of ICT, to announce each new program? Same question for the communication with participants before and during the program. How to improve the use of computers and Internet by the participants? How to cope with the heterogeneity of the participants? Which contents to provide in the curriculum? Which types of learning experiences should we offer in this kind of training program? How to adapt to the specific needs of the students? How to assist the participants in translating their experience into a support for their future work? How to motivate the participants to use the training for concrete implementations in their home institute? How to deal with the reality that there is not just one solution for each challenge, while participants want to receive concrete solutions for needs in their home organization? What can be the function of assessment of each participant in such programs? How to provide a basis for future professional contacts among participants? How to use the program not only for professional development, but also as eye opener to other cultures? How to follow-up progress made by participants in their home organization? The training programs have served as lively laboratories to investigate how we can improve them. For each of the research questions above, we describe the situation during the first programs, the changes that we made during subsequent programs, and our view on the success of the various attempts towards improvement.

Keywords: Libraries; Education training; Information science; Information studies; International aspects; Internationalization; Internet; WWW.

INTRODUCTION

International training programs in library and information science and management have been organized 15 times up to now. These have been coordinated by the author of this paper. Most attention is paid to improving discovery of and access to scientific and technological information in universities. About half of the participants work in developing countries in Asia. Each program takes place mainly in Brussels, Belgium, for about three months. One program has been organized each year, on average. Up-to-date information about the aims and contents of the programs can be found on the WWW site <http://www.vub.ac.be/BIBLIO/itp/> Some considerations regarding the programs have been published more formally (Nieuwenhuysen & Vanouplines, 1997, 1998; Nieuwenhuysen, 2003a, 2003b). In the course of the evolution of this program, we have continually investigated how to improve it. Here we report the outcome of this ongoing work up to now. Our hope is to exchange views and ideas with colleagues involved in similar programs as participant or as organizer.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How to obtain financial support to organize this kind of training programs?
2. How to organize the management, evaluation and improvement of the program?
3. How to exploit the fast evolution of information and communication technology and services in the announcement of each new program?
4. Same question for the communication with participants before and during the program.
5. How to improve the practical use of computers and Internet by the participants, in view of the fast evolution of hardware and internet access services?
6. How to cope with the significant differences in background and aims of the participants?
7. In which directions do the library and information professions evolve and how to adapt the program to this evolution?

8. Which types of learning methods and experiences are the most efficient and effective in this kind of program?
9. It is now widely recognized that in an international educational program, the teachers should adapt their mode of delivery and the contents of their teaching to the students and their local environment, needs and priorities (see for instance Johnson, 2009). How to realize this in practice? Here we face the difficulty that many experts who are potential teachers have no clear view on needs for development and have no time to adapt and extend their expertise to meet the expectations of visiting students.
10. How to assist the participants in converting their intense, concentrated and slightly confusing experience into some structured framework that can serve hopefully in future applications?
11. How to motivate the participants to translate the experience gained during the program into concrete implementations in their home institute?
12. How to deal with the reality that there is not just one solution for each professional challenge, while participants want to take home concrete and affordable solutions for one or several local needs in their home organization?
13. Assessing the progress made by each student can be valuable for the student and also for the organizers of an educational program. What can be the function of assessment of each participant in an informal and short training program?
14. How to stimulate interaction among the participants and to provide a basis for future professional and social-cultural contacts?
15. How to exploit the program not only for professional development, but also as an eye opener to other cultures (culture of other participants; culture of the region where the program is organized; culture of various experts who contribute to the program)?
16. Follow-up of progress made by participants in their home organization after their return is desirable, but how to realize this?

METHODS

The training programs (including management meetings, discussions with participants and teachers and their feedback, formal evaluations by the sponsors...) serve as lively and concrete laboratories to investigate in practice how we can improve similar programs in future editions. This is accompanied by a follow-up of the published literature on education in library and information science.

FINDINGS

1. This is one of the few international training programs that are financially supported each year by the federal government of the country, Belgium. For the first editions of the program, this support was requested directly to the appropriate department and after a positive evaluation a budget was allocated. Rules, regulations, guidelines and experience were nearly absent. Progress was made through improvising and through learning by doing. In view of the substantial funds involved in university development cooperation and in view of the lack of experienced personnel, the government decided later to channel funding through the council of universities, named VLIR. There, a special section has been created, devoted to international university cooperation (IUC), with a professional staff and guided by professors from the universities in the region. This is named VLIR-UOS in Dutch and VLIR-IUC in English. These days the version in English of their WWW site can be found at <http://www.vliruos.be/index.php?viaintro2=y&language=EN&navid=587> Experience has been built up and processes have been structured and formalized over the years. The ~~International Training Programs~~ are now one activity, besides many others such as international Master study programs and cooperation programs between universities in Belgium and a few selected universities in development, mainly in English and Spanish speaking regions. Academic competition has been implemented more seriously in the selection of programs that receive funding, to increase the quality of the selected programs as well as the respect for the selected programs and their managers and coordinators. So we have observed an increasing pressure over the years, to demonstrate the benefits of a

proposed training program. Related to this, recurrent funding for a few consecutive International Training Programs is NOT provided. So funding can only be obtained after rigorous application and selection procedures for the organization of a single program. In other words, continuity and building up experience is not assured in this way. This probably discourages professors to apply for this kind of funding. A lack of enthusiasm to propose a training program is also enforced by the low level of academic respect gained by organizing such programs. Ideally the programs in university cooperation are seen as an opportunity to increase research potential and output, by attracting well motivated and well prepared doctoral student researchers from a developing university or by exploiting specific, exclusive, local research opportunities linked to local problems or the local environment. However, such opportunities and advantages are absent in the case of short term training programs. Nevertheless, in general MORE proposals are made each year for a new training program than can be accommodated by the funds that are made available by the government. Therefore proposing a new International Training Program means also entering a competition among professors who have all submitted other proposals. Over the years we have observed several handicaps in obtaining funds for training in library and information management:

2. The members of the jury are mainly professors who are not involved in professional information management at a university level. So they are not all well aware of the technicalities, the many options, the required funds, the fast evolution and so on, in this area, while all these factors form the basis for the high need for training. Information management is not well visible and tangible and is not directly useful; improving information management is required to support other academic activities, but does not yield directly useful results. In the words of Johnson (2009), we risk to be faced with "adverse reactions to time and effort being allocated to something that they perceive as of marginal importance" and with the perception that "costs outweigh the benefits", because library and information science is "unable to present an irrefutable case for its impact in society". On the other hand, most proposals for training programs can promise almost immediate, useful output in the form of improved knowledge and skills in more directly applied areas like agriculture, medicine, telecommunications, ecological management, and so on. Nevertheless, funding has been obtained for each of our proposals. Again Johnson (2009) writes on the need to "focus the efforts of schools of library and information studies on matters that are seen to be of unquestioned significance". In agreement with this, we recommend that future proposals in the domain of information management are NOT made anymore as proposals of some independent program that can perhaps / eventually support all kinds of academic endeavours that remain invisible in the proposal and even during the program, but instead as one component of a larger project that aims at a concrete, more visible realization that can be considered as significant by a broad base of supporters. Recently a new International Master study program has been sponsored and set-up in Europe in the framework of the larger Erasmus Mundus educational programme that is co-ordinated at the level of the European Union. This program targets students from Asia and Africa. A description has been given recently by Maceviciute (2011) in a wide view of contemporary library and information studies. This start-up is encouraging as it demonstrates and proves an interest in up-to-date international programs in this subject field; an interest that is great enough to create substantial budgets for the organization and for scholarships. This can serve in the future as a justification and motivation for sponsors and organizers to proceed with offering shorter international training programs as discussed here, as a related action with similar aims and target audience, but in a different, more compact format.
3. The management of the program has started with mainly a local, informal, and individual approach. This has evolved into a program with input by a formal Steering Committee that consists of two members from three universities in the region, both practitioners and scientists, who have all some experience with developmental work. This Steering Committee reports to the department for international university cooperation of the council of universities, VLIR-IUC. An organization in this way offers several advantages:
 - This provides the sponsors with a greater guarantee for a rational management.
 - This offers sharing of responsibility, so that the coordinator is not completely alone responsible for accommodation of participants, contents, financial aspects, etc...

4. Methods to announce the first programs were sending brief letters, posters and faxes directed to only few addresses, mainly of embassies of Belgium in developing countries. This has evolved to sending email messages and maintaining a WWW site. Emails give detailed descriptions of the coming program and the associated scholarships; further they include WWW links to relevant additional information on the WWW. These email messages are addressed to hundreds of individuals, organizations and email groups that distribute further. Compiling and managing the list of email addresses has become a significant activity in the organization; obsolete addresses that are detected by bouncing messages are deleted and new discovered addresses in the target community are added to the mailing list. A WWW site <http://www.vub.ac.be/BIBLIO/ijp/> gives up-to-date information to potential participants. Also it provides the schedule of past programs to confront potential participants already in a virtual way with the reality of a concentrated program. More importantly, during an ongoing program, the same WWW site gives participants an up-to-date version of the schedule. This is built in such a way that the material can also be printed well readable and that it can serve as an important part of the financial report and activity report, which are required by the sponsor soon after the end of a program.
5. The method to communicate with participants, before and during a program, has evolved from brief letters, faxes and posters to email and a WWW site that is continually updated. Communication by email with future participants has improved over the years, in parallel with the positive evolution of Internet access. However, the availability of electricity, computers and Internet, is still limited in some of the organizations where the future participants are active. As a consequence, even a simple method like email is still not a perfect tool for communication. During an ongoing program, printouts of the schedule are not made anymore to reduce costs and to make participants aware of the power of Internet-based communication. The flow of information between organizers and participants during a program works quite well. Most participants have no previous experience with this way of planning, scheduling and working. Most are surprised by the strict adherence to timing and planning, even though this is flexible and well adaptable to changing circumstances. So we consider this way of working also as an interesting learning experience for the participants.
6. Applications of computers and Internet have become more important for communication during a program, as written above. Computer applications started by usage of some public access desktop computer in the university library or in a dedicated pc room, with fixed network cables on campus. This has evolved to usage of a personal notebook pc with wireless access to Internet on campus and access to Internet in the private rooms of the participants in the evenings and week-ends. Each participant is requested to bring a notebook pc equipped for Wi-Fi Internet access to the program; if this is impossible, then such a pc is provided soon after arrival on campus. In that case a participant can rent or buy the pc at prices lower than the normal market price. A small additional scholarship is foreseen to cover these costs.
7. Each program confronts the organizers and the participants with significant differences in cultural and professional backgrounds. This can be seen as a negative obstacle that hinders progress, but we prefer to exploit this as an interesting confrontation with the reality that we all have to live and work in an increasingly diverse international environment.
8. Many schools for library and information studies in the world still focus on traditional, classical core components like classification or organization of information and cataloguing of books and other objects. However, in recent years information and communication technology has changed the way libraries function in their intermediary role between information provider and information consumer. This evolution has been described recently for instance in a case of curriculum redesign in Kuwait by Sajjad ur Rehman (2010). From this paper we can cite "Libraries desired information professionals with broad and in-depth technology skills to satisfy the need of customers whose expectations have risen during the last few years." Many study programs have not evolved as fast as reality outside the schools. For instance, this has been described for the region of South Asia by Phuritsbam and Purnima Devi (2009). Therefore our training programs have always tried to function as an eye opener and even more than that, in several ways:
 - in the first place by the study contents offered, but also
 - by providing personal notebook computers and wireless Internet access, and

- by offering a continuously updated program schedule over the WWW and by running other aspects of communication mainly through email.
9. The program has taken off as a classical, relatively uncomplicated academic program with a mix of theory and practice. Then it has evolved into a program that still offers classical activities on campus, but mixed with participation to externally organized "real" workshops and conferences, with assignments, with group work, and so on. An important and growing component is a series of well planned and structured one-day visits to outstanding libraries in the region, culminating in a final summing-up session. More concretely, the participants are supported and encouraged during the library visits with a list of points that deserve attention in an evaluation of a library service; that list assists them in their analysis of each library, in their interactions with locally active personnel and in making their report. In view of the importance of such a list, it has been added to the schedule of the most recent program on the WWW site. In recent programs, this component has been guided by an experienced academic librarian. Such brief study visits can be realized well in practice in a country like Belgium that is small, densely populated, with many competing universities and libraries within 100 km from the capital Brussels. The comments of participants have always been positive and they even ask to spend more time to this kind of activities. This agrees with the profile of participants who are less interested in information science and more in library management practice. So this component and type of learning experience deserves even more attention in a future similar program.
 10. The first training programs of this series were organised years ago. At that time, the whole idea and strategy of internationalization, with international travel, international collaboration, visiting students and so on, was not as prominent as today. So most contributors had difficulties to adapt to the needs of the visiting students/participants. Improvement has been fast over the next years:
 - Internationalization has become more common in all universities.
 - Special departments for international relations have been set up in many universities.
 - Each of these departments is supported not only by the local university, but also by the section for international university cooperation of the council of universities VLIR-IUC.
 - A board of library and information experts has been set-up by VLIR-IUC. The members exchange experience about library practice in developing countries and they discuss needs and priorities in live meetings in Brussels. This leads continuously to increased awareness and higher expertise.
 - In the framework of VLIR-IUC, several institutional cooperation programmes have been set-up, each one made up of a few projects, and quite a few of these include even a project that is explicitly dedicated to library development or to ICT development with support for improving access to scientific information. The experts active in these projects have of course learned about priorities in their counterpart universities, mainly by going through planning sessions and concrete actions. Some of these experts have later contributed to the training programs that form the subject of this paper.
 - An increasing number of colleagues working outside of Belgium with experience in library work in developing countries have discovered our training programs and have communicated with the organizers. This has led to contributions to the program by several of those experts.
 11. It is desirable to assist the participants in converting their intense, concentrated and slightly confusing experience into some structured framework that can support progress in their work. We have implemented various approaches:
 - Even before the concrete start of the program, each participant is requested to formulate wishes and expectations concerning the anticipated program.
 - At the start of the program these expectations are presented to other participants and to invited experts in the form of a poster session. Most of the participants do not yet have experience with creating a poster and with communication related to such a poster. Furthermore this is scheduled as soon as possible in the program, when the participants still do not know well how to behave and what is expected from them. Therefore, a relaxed, informal, easy going atmosphere is created by the organizers, as well as possible, for instance by providing typical, local snacks and drinks.
 - During the program, the visits of libraries are guided by one experienced professor who offers the participants a structured framework of how to assess what they experience during

their visit; furthermore, after all the visits, each participant should deliver a well structured report of what they observed and experienced.

-- Early in the program, the participants are requested to make an analysis in the course of the program of the strong and weak aspects of the organization of the program, and more importantly of the strong and weak points of their learning experience. The participants report on all this just before the end of the program to the coordinator. These reports are also made available to the Steering Committee as they can help us in further improving the program.

12. As soon as possible during the program, the participants are requested to evaluate almost permanently what is learned and to consider how these lessons learned can be transformed into recommendations to their colleagues and managers in their home base, or even into concrete implementations, when they have returned. A presentation of their ideas and conclusions is expected just before the end of the program.
13. Most participants do not start a career as information scientists, but as a part of and involved in practical library and information services. Therefore they are less interested in theory than in practical recipes and tools that they can take home to make a positive impression on their peers and managers. In view of this situation, we offer (on the one hand) a mix of relatively abstract theory with (on the other hand) very concrete information management skills and tools (such as knowledge about concrete open access information sources as well as computer programs). This turns out to be a compromise that is accepted well by most participants.
14. In the first editions of the program, assessment of each participant was not explicitly and formally included, because the programs do not lead to a formal diploma / degree. But it is well known that some assessment announced in advance can help to motivate a student. Even better, assessment with feedback to the student helps her or him to evaluate their progress and level among their peers. Furthermore, this is ideally followed by "responding appropriately to issues identified" (as written by Johnson, 2009). Therefore, we have made assessment of the performance of each participant more significant and formal. Even, the certificate given at the end of a program to each participant can take two forms: either a simple proof of attendance during the program or a declaration of an active and successful participation to the program. Only a small number of participants are not touched by the evaluations. So in general, more assessment has the expected positive outcome.
15. Several methods have been implemented and evaluated to stimulate interaction among the participants. This is done in the hope that it will lead to future professional contacts or (in terms of VLIR-IUC) to some "South-South co-operation". The following turned out to be quite positive:
 - The poster session at the start of the program, described elsewhere in this text.
 - Scientific group work in the field of bibliometrics / informetrics, which has even resulted in scientific publications in an open access journal.
16. Group work in the analysis of strong and weak aspects of the organization of the program and of the contents of the program.
17. Most recently, easy but brief and superficial interaction among participants through the social network site Facebook. At the end of recent programs, the participants have always requested more group work. So they seem to enjoy and appreciate the international encounters. Therefore, in future similar programs more group work should be organized.
18. Besides the scientific and professional aspects of the program, the more cultural, social aspects turned out to be quite significant. Each participant is confronted with the strange local culture and with the culture of the other participants. Productivity in this area has been stimulated as follows.
 - A photo contest is organized on the subject of their confrontation with an unknown culture.
 - A photo contest is organized on the subject of their meeting with other participants (with another background).
 - An increasing number of experts from universities and organizations outside of Belgium are included in the program. These persons bring their own social, professional and didactical culture with them. Contributing experts have come mainly from universities in the region of course, but also from organizations further away in Europe (The Netherlands, Italy, UK...), the USA, South America, Asia and even Australia.

- The participants are encouraged to plan and organize private trips during 2 or 3 days to interesting nearby cities like Bruges in Belgium, Amsterdam in The Netherlands, Paris in France, and Köln in Germany. These can all be reached easily from Brussels by train. More recently even further places are visited, such as Barcelona in Spain, as the costs of flights from Brussels in Belgium to some destinations has become surprisingly affordable.
 - A farewell meeting is organized to which each participant can contribute with their ethnic dress and foods, and with the projection of photos.
19. Follow-up of the participants after their return to their home institute is desirable. Suitable activities to build on their learning experience during the training program can be: answering their questions and commenting on their plans and reports (all by email), visits to their environment and consultancy. However, all this is time consuming and costly. The budget to organize an International Training Program does not include a separate, explicit part for follow-up, and reports of any follow-up are not expected by the sponsor. Nevertheless, the importance of follow-up is explicitly underlined by the sponsors, by the academic committee that evaluates proposals to organize training programs, and by the co-ordinator. So this situation is somewhat inconsistent. This is understood by all stakeholders, but a satisfactory solution is not expected soon.

At least for some participants and their home organizations, follow-up is more than a theoretical concept. Indeed, some participants work in the universities that have a cooperation agreement for 10 years with universities in Belgium, and in some of these there is an explicit project to improve scientific communication or access to scholarly information sources or library management. In those cases, a more continuous cooperation can incorporate the desirable follow-up. Conclusion from this is that synergy between International Training Programs and cooperation with a small selected number of developing universities is desirable. This insight has been shared by the organizers of the program and by VLIR-IUC. As a consequence, a proposal has been submitted to organize a training program aimed at personnel working in information services of the universities that are involved in a co-operation with universities in Belgium through VLIR-IUC. This proposal was approved. So in 2009 such a special program has been running between two normal, regular International Training Programs. Of course the experience was very similar to regular programs, but the added advantage was more communication between peers in the universities involved, including the universities in Belgium, which are all involved in the ongoing cooperation programs managed by VLIR-IUC.

CONCLUSION

Investigating and experimenting has yielded improvement of an international training program in library and information science that has been organized in Belgium. The result is a program that is now well known internationally and attractive for many young professionals from all over the world.

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