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**SYReLIB - ENHANCING THE GLOBAL CONNECTIONS OF
SYRIA'S ACADEMIC COMMUNITY**

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Abstract

This is a brief report on a pilot project funded by the European Commission TEMPUS programme concerned with the modernisation of the university libraries in Syria and the enhanced visibility of the research outputs of the Syrian academic community. As background, it outlines the current state of the country's electronic and scholarly publishing, and the development of national and university computer networks. It reviews the project's contribution to introduction of automated library management systems with online catalogues and institutional repositories, and the expansion of journal collections. The issues likely to impact on further developments are discussed. Aspects of current professional education, including a shortage of qualified librarians with contemporary professional knowledge and skills, inhibit development. Other major challenges are the lack of effective strategic planning and poor management systems.

Introduction

Ebla, some 55 kilometers south of Aleppo, was the site of the discovery in 1973/4 of one of the largest and possibly the oldest collection of clay tablets, dating from the 3rd Millennium BC or earlier. This library contained not only legal documents, accounts, and stock lists, but also literary and historical texts. There is a clear indication of the cataloguing and arrangement used, and of its role in administration, teaching and research (Bradscher, 1985; Munthe, 1990). Whilst in some ways Syria thus led the way in the development of libraries, this initiative has not carried through to modern times.

The last 30 years have witnessed a major transformation in the way in information is transmitted, stored, retrieved and managed, and in the use of information to enhance learning. University libraries generally have responded to these changes by adopting new technologies and implementing new services to support learning and research in their institutions. However, Syria's university libraries appear to have changed little during that time. In part, this could be attributed to the limited demands that the national economy has placed on the universities as research centres to drive progress, and the outmoded approaches to teaching that have been permitted to exist.

Today, the Syrian government places great emphasis on education, and the Ministry of Higher Education is currently working on a strategy for the development of the Syria's state-funded universities. The Ministry is also expanding access to higher education by permitting the establishment of some 20-30 private universities, and monitoring their academic standards. In 2006, new laws relating to higher education came into effect in Syria, establishing standard requirements for Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees, intended to contribute to the development of graduates with skills more appropriate for the open, market economy that is intended. The government's commitment to the modernisation of higher education, and the Ministry's strategy for the upgrading of the Syrian universities, especially for accreditation purposes, has been supported by a €10 million grant from the European Union, which is aimed at improving pedagogy and management of teaching quality, to help produce graduates with the skills required in contemporary society. The Ministry also recognises that its academic community has become isolated from not only the leading edge but also

the mainstream of developments in almost every discipline, with implications for the knowledge imparted to students and constraints on potential interaction with international peer groups.

There is thus an urgent need for modernisation of the universities' libraries to meet the new demands for information services that the successful achievement of the government's educational goals will require. This is a brief report on a TEMPUS-MEDA Structural and Complementary Measure, supported by grant of about €150,000 from the European Commission. SYReLIB was a pilot project with two Syrian universities, which was undertaken from April 2007 to November 2008 by the Robert Gordon University's Department of Information Management, Middlesex University's Learning Resources service, and eIFL.net, an international consortium that supports national negotiations for commercial electronic information services and advises on the development of locally produced digital resources.

The principal objective of the SYReLIB project was the introduction of modern electronic library and information services in Aleppo University and Al Ba'ath University in Homs that could act as a model for other Syrian universities. As part of this pilot project, it was agreed to prepare some guidelines to provide a basis for future action in the universities in Syria. This report reviews the current state of scholarly publishing and university libraries in Syria, and specific issues identified during the activities of the SYReLIB project.

Background - publishing in Syria

Scholarly journal publishing is undertaken by the universities. These comprise papers written by the staff of the university concerned and papers from academics in universities in Syria and other Arab countries, but the distribution of these journals outside Syria is limited, and the scientific and other scholarly research work that is undertaken in the Syrian universities is consequently even less well known than it might be. For promotion purposes, academic staff are required to publish in refereed journals in Syria or abroad, in Arabic or any other language, and the minimum number of papers required for promotion to each level in the academic hierarchy has recently been doubled. The universities also publish the textbooks which are the basis for undergraduate teaching. At present publishing in the universities is based on producing printed texts from electronic media, but there has not yet been any attempt to use the Internet to make the texts more widely available on campus or globally.

Currently, electronic publishing in Syria mainly takes the form of games and a few e-books that are simple reference texts, and suffers from copyright piracy to such an extent that it may be a deterrent to investment in other forms of e-publishing by the local commercial publishing companies. However, at least one Syrian publishing company is steadily digitising its entire 50-year output of academic books against the day when it could safely and profitably sell the content on the Internet.

University Libraries in Syria

Regretably, outmoded forms of teaching persist in the universities in Syria, and are reflected in the services expected of university libraries. At present, a typical Syrian undergraduate student seems unlikely to have used a modern library before arriving at university, and may well graduate having relied solely on memorising the lecturers' notes and the prescribed textbooks. Independent learning is still a novel concept in the country, and the full implications of implementing such a system are not always fully understood. Recently, the Ministry attempted to initiate a move away from the current didactic teaching practices with their heavy dependence on the memorisation. However, there appears to have been a lack of the coordination necessary to implement such changes. This initiative faltered for a variety of reasons, one of which was probably a failure to understand the demands that this would place on the university libraries to provide the necessary support in terms of collections and user services.

The Libraries in the 4 established state funded Universities have book collections that are small by comparison with those of most European Universities, and especially so in relation to academic staff and student numbers. Aleppo University, for example, has only 0.5 million volumes, of which about 100,000 are in the central library and the remainder dispersed in small faculty libraries. Damascus University, which has a similar number of students (over 100,000) has about 180,000 books in the central library and about 130,000 dispersed in 9 branch libraries. Al Ba'ath University was established in 1979, and now has about 30,000 students, but does not yet have a central library, and its 20 faculty libraries each have only 2-3,000 books. Tishreen University has only 17,000 books in its central library, but disperses a further 43,000 in its 13 branch libraries. The collections of the university and faculty libraries appear to have developed on an unplanned basis, and contain much out of date material. In many disciplines, the collections also include substantial numbers of non-Arabic items, principally in English and French, limiting their use to those familiar with those languages. The recently established private universities and the new, fifth state funded university have very small collections.

Implementing OPACs

The collections have mainly been catalogued on cards. Inadequate cataloguing and the lack of union catalogues make it difficult to find particular items, even if they are available within a university, and prevent any attempt to share resources between libraries and between universities. Only one or two of the private university libraries in Syria have a modern automated library system, and the selection of a modern electronic library management system for the libraries of Damascus University has only recently concluded, some 30 years after it was first recommended (Francis, 1984).

From the SYReLIB project budget, both of the partner Syrian Universities have now been provided with an integrated library management system, NewGenLib, which was developed in India, and whose functionality is comparable to Integrated Library Systems produced by major international companies. It had already been in use in Syria for some time in ICARDA, the international agricultural research centre near Aleppo, and has the advantage that there is a local agent in Syria, Middle East Informatics in Aleppo, which undertook the arabization of NewGenLib, and which can provide continuing technical and training support. NewGenLib has since become an Open Source product, and has been selected for implementation in Damascus University Libraries, but its widespread implementation will require significant development of staff in both library and computer services.

Discussions in the School of Librarianship in Damascus University, and with some of the few senior Syrian librarians who had been professionally educated in Western Europe, revealed the inadequacies of the present Syrian library workforce in terms of contemporary knowledge and skills in the applications of computers in library and information work. Relevant training has been provided for 15-20 library staff in both universities, and both universities are now creating records in NewGenLib for some of the faculty libraries, mainly by copying catalogue records online from national libraries in other countries. Some of the training effort was wasted because library staff who had been trained were re-assigned to other (non-library) posts in the universities because they are not regarded as specialists.

Several uncoordinated efforts had previously been made to use computers to catalogue some of the library collections at Aleppo University, and these records have now been transferred to the NewGenLib system. More progress in creating new records has been made at Aleppo University than at Al Ba'ath University, which must in part be attributed to the efforts of the Manager responsible for all the Aleppo University's Library services. About 15-20% of the collections of Aleppo University Libraries are now recorded in the NewGenLib system, some 40 years after this was first recommended (Francis, 1980), and about 5% of Al Ba'ath University libraries are also online. However, there is, as yet, no clarity about how to progress the work of cataloguing the libraries' book collections rapidly after the SYReLIB project funds are withdrawn, particularly at Al Ba'ath University, where there is no

established post for a senior manager with relevant professional knowledge who could take responsibility for the development of all the university's libraries. Moreover, it became clear that the challenges in creating the database of staff and student records to implement the system's facility to record loans, and using it to support purchasing books and journals, were not fully understood because of the limited professional staff base in both universities.

Introducing electronic journals

Journal collections are noticeably inadequate. For example, Aleppo University libraries subscribed to only 325 printed journals, and the number available at Al Ba'ath University seems to have been even less. Damascus University receives about 500 journals in Arabic and 500 in other languages. Most of journals available are received through donations or subscribed on a non consistent basis. Syrian academics who had been educated abroad to a high level were thus unable to make further progress because of their inability to access current information to support their research. The last year has seen the introduction of some electronic journals, part of the Elsevier ScienceDirect service, funded by the Ministry of Higher Education on behalf of all the Syrian state universities, and Tishreen University has a subscription to ProQuest. One-year licences for the e-journals offered by Gale Cengage's GeneralOneFile, Cambridge University Press and BioOne were acquired by the SYReLIB project, adding over 11,000 titles in total, at a substantially reduced cost negotiated by eIFL. In addition, awareness of the many high quality 'Open Access' journals that are now published on the Internet and other databases for which no subscription is payable is being raised through the development of links from the universities' web pages. A model web page with these links was developed by one of the project partners, but despite re-iterated advice may not yet have been installed within the universities' web pages because of lack of familiarity with the concept of linking to electronic resources, or simply because of lack of technical staff time.

Training in the use of these electronic resources has been provided for some university library staff, and the potential benefits have been presented to small groups from the academic community. The training that has been provided was well supported by research students, but attendance at training sessions by academic staff was poor. Only a limited amount of time was available during the SYReLIB project to provide training. Much remains to be done to familiarise the majority of the Universities' community with the new resources and how to make effective use of them, and further progress is handicapped by the shortage of qualified library staff. There does not appear to be the capacity or capability in the university libraries' staff to expand the training effort to ensure that all academic staff and students are aware of these new resources.

The price of the journals purchased with SYReLIB project funds was negotiated by one of the partners, eIFL.net. Discussions about the creation of a national consortium to purchase electronic journals for Syrian libraries have not yet made much progress, and it is not clear who will lead the negotiations for the renewal of the national licences. The project partners became aware that administrative and financial management systems at Tishreen University seem to have presented a major barrier to the renewal of subscriptions to some electronic journals. Effective management of electronic journal subscriptions could be put at hazard by the endemic failure to delegate clear and sufficient authority and responsibility for the libraries' acquisitions budget to senior library managers.

e-theses

NewGenLib includes an Institutional Repository module that is compatible with international standards for Open Archives. Al Ba'ath University had developed its own software for a Repository system, and has stored electronic versions of some recent theses, but their system does not appear to have been entirely compatible with international standards. At Aleppo University theses approved during the last few years were held on CD-ROM. Some training was provided for library staff in the implications of implementing Institutional Repositories, and both university libraries have begun to

upload their PhD theses into the new Repository so that they can be seen on the Internet. About 900 records have been created at Aleppo University. The universities' journals are currently printed from electronic text, and could also be included in the Repository. This would place an increasing amount of Arabic language material on the Internet, which would also support changes in teaching practices. At present there does not appear to be any consistent attempt to collect other staff publications that appear in journals published in other universities or countries. Again, however, progress is limited by a lack of expertise in electronic publishing and in specific skills such as metadata creation.

IT Networks and user capabilities

The number of users of the Internet in Syria is small but growing rapidly, and was estimated at 3 million in 2006 (out of about 20 million inhabitants). Use of online services in Syria in general and in the universities in particular has been inhibited by the national network's telecommunications bandwidth, and limited provision of networked PCs on campus.

The Ministry of Higher Education initiated the development of the Syrian Higher Education and Research Network (SHERN) (Askhita, 2003), and now hosts the committee that coordinates it. Significant progress has been made in establishing networks around the university campuses and increasing the number of networked PCs available. Efforts to enhance the Network's bandwidth are being led by the Ministry of Telecommunications and Technology. The bandwidth currently available is generally 2 Mbs, but it is expected to increase to 6 Mbs soon, and then to 34 Mbs which will make the international databases more speedily accessible. Currently the universities are compelled to use other networks, which are subject to controls that inhibit their use to access external data services. However, there appears to be no coherent plan at national or local level that integrates the steady development of campus networks, computer laboratories for teaching and independent learning, networked PCs in the university libraries to facilitate independent research by students, desktop provision for the universities' academic, professional and other support staff, and the availability of suitable Arabic language content.

To facilitate the modernisation of teaching methods, it has been decided that all university students should be required to take a course that incorporates the basic skills in using computers, for example by studying for the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL), for which the Syrian Computer Society is the local agent. However, there does not appear to be the teaching staff capacity to deliver this ambitious goal. Moreover, the constraints on the provision of these facilities by the limited availability of space in the existing university buildings does not appear to have been fully recognised. Teaching the course is also likely to overload the available computer laboratories, which is being only partially addressed by purchasing some additional PCs. The consequences for the use of the computer laboratories for other teaching or for independent use by students do not appear to have been fully recognised. In introducing networked information resources, no thought has been given to developing the staff or students' skills in finding information and using it effectively (usually referred to as 'Information Literacy'), or who might do this. In the absence of qualified librarians, this seems unlikely to happen in a structured or comprehensive manner. A particular challenge in developing these skills comes from the students' limited ability to read material in Western European languages, particularly English, which currently dominate scientific and scholarly publishing. However, no thought has yet been given to the production or acquisition of Arabic language information content, which would stimulate use of the networks.

Human resource development for libraries

Although belated, the developments now taking place are welcome, but it is clear that the necessary professional and managerial infrastructure does not exist to enable the Syrian university libraries to take full advantage of these new systems and to develop appropriate services. Syrian libraries and information services are generally disadvantaged in exploiting new technological tools not only by a

lack of equipment but also as a result of a shortage of staff who are both computer and information literate.

Education for librarianship and information sciences in Syria is provided by a 4-year undergraduate programme in Damascus University. The Department's staff also teach a course recently established in Tishreen University, visiting Lattakia on a daily rota. The courses do not enjoy a high status, and enrol students from the lower end of the spectrum of those admitted to university, who have little choice of subject and who are unlikely to have a strong commitment to the profession. Nonetheless, about 500 students are expected to be admitted each year in Damascus, and 200 in Lattakia. A significant proportion of students fail to complete the course.

The recently revised curriculum of the Department of Librarianship in Damascus University appears to cover the main subjects that might be expected in a course on librarianship, but has an admittedly theoretical bias. The initial lack of practical aptitudes in the Department of Librarianship's graduates seems to be a cause of general concern. However, the Department has few of the resources that might be expected to enable its students to develop more adequate skills in the use of networked information. The Department's computer resources - about 20 PCs for nearly 2,000 students - are wholly inadequate.

Despite the large number of students who do eventually graduate in this subject, relatively few of them are employed by libraries in Syria because of the size of the current job market, but the potential for students' information handling skills to be applied in other occupations does not yet appear to have been recognised. With some further enhancement, the curriculum could be diversified to create a second track with a new emphasis on information management, the students could be well equipped to manage a variety of information related tasks, such as those likely to be created by the Ministry of Health's new Health Information Data system.

Library staff who are not graduates in librarianship are often graduates in a variety of other disciplines. They generally suffer from a limited perception of their role, and enjoy low status. In the state universities, library staff appear to be regarded as part of the general professional and support staff of the universities, rather than treated as specialist professionals, and can be moved at will to other kinds of employment. It was noticeable that there are some library staff in whom commitment and enthusiasm are evident, and there appears to be a need for a small number of staff to be given suitable opportunities to develop to a greater extent than is possible through in-service training. The pattern of study in Syria does not provide opportunities for graduates in disciplines other than librarianship to enrol directly into a professional Masters Degree programmes in Librarianship and Information Management. Changes in the universities' normal entry qualifications for Masters Degrees (which require completion of an undergraduate degree in a related subject), and the development of an appropriate curriculum and pedagogical approach would be required for the introduction of a similar programme in Syria. The staff of the Department in Damascus University recognise the need to develop individuals with the higher level of competence required for leading development in the universities' libraries and other institutions' specialist information centres. The Department has approval in principle for a Masters Degree programme, but only for one that offers advanced training for graduates from its own Diploma programme in librarianship.

Staff capacity in the Syrian university libraries varies widely, heavily constrained by a lack of social mobility. There appear to be a number of the Damascus University Department of Library and Information Studies' graduates employed in the private universities (which offer higher salaries than the state universities), as well as some senior librarians who received their professional education in western Europe, probably mainly under a government initiative announced in the early 1980s (al-Mazraani, 1983). However, young people in the provincial cities generally seem reluctant to leave home to study at university in Damascus, and students who have completed the course in librarianship in Damascus appear reluctant to seek employment in the provincial cities. Damascus University is thus able to recruit easily from amongst the graduates of the University's Department of Library and Information Studies. However, only about 8 are employed in Al Ba'ath University's 20 faculty

libraries, and there is only one person employed in the libraries of the University of Aleppo who graduated from the Department in Damascus. Plans for the establishment of a librarianship course in Aleppo in 1984 (al-Mazraani, 1983) seem to have not come to fruition. The SYReLIB project prompted some suggestions that a Masters Degree programme might be initiated there, but – without anyone to teach the course - the proposal was probably impracticable in the short term, and attempts were made to focus attention instead on the possibility that selected library staff might be permitted to be eligible for the University's scholarships for education abroad.

Staff in the Department of Library and Information Studies are well aware of the need to further revise their portfolio of courses, curricula, and teaching methods to enable the Department's graduates to make an effective contribution to the modernisation of the country's libraries and information services, but struggle to achieve appropriate changes not only because of a lack of adequate resources and the overwhelming number of students directed into the Department by the current admissions system (which is under review nationally), but also their relative isolation from the mainstream of professional developments. Several of the younger members of staff have, however, been selected for postgraduate training in Britain and France, funded by the Syrian government, and will clearly make a valuable contribution on their return. However, it will inevitably be some time before they are able to make a significant contribution to development.

National planning and coordination

Many countries have seen the advantages of coordinating the efforts of its publicly funded library and information services. Currently, no such body appears to exist in Syria. Damascus University was once designated as the centre for Syria's Directorate of the Universities' Libraries, but this role persisted only during the early development of the newer universities and their libraries. The government's National Information Center has been collecting and preserving documents electronically, and in 1994 supported the creation of the National Coordination and Cooperative Committee for Information to work with existing organizations to create and maintain a national database with a uniform documentation system, but does not appear to have a remit that includes research outputs. The Assad National Library operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture as a reference library open to university students (Al-Lahham, 1994), and has placed its catalogue online. However, it is not clear whether it coordinates its collections with the university libraries, even though it might be expected to act as the research library of last resort within the country.

The Assad National Library receives Syrian printed publications by legal deposit. The SYReLIB project's establishment of the country's first Institutional Repositories highlights the need for the long term preservation of electronic media. The copyright legislation in Syria appears to cover electronic media, but there do not appear to be any arrangements for legal deposit covering electronic publications, nor any plans to create a national electronic archive to provide a permanent, secure environment for locally produced electronic content.

Sustainability of developments

As a pilot project, SYReLIB was completed successfully. The equipment promised was installed and is operational, and the electronic resources were provided. The limited training necessary to support these was provided. A report on future strategy was drafted, and its contents were outlined to the Deputy Minister of Higher Education and to senior university staff. A proposal to TEMPUS to complete the catalogues in Aleppo and Al Ba'ath Universities, and to expand the cataloguing project and electronic resource provision to the other state funded universities and selected private universities in Syria was submitted to TEMPUS. Internal politics led Tishreen University to withdraw from participation, without warning, after the proposal was submitted. Nonetheless, it is understood that the project was assessed and approved in principle, but sufficient funding was not available within the TEMPUS allocation for Syria.

Changes in university library provision and services would support approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that place more emphasis on independent study, but will also be driven by them. If the project's work is maintained in some way, it will underpin the wider efforts of the Syrian government to modernise its higher education system, with implicit benefits for economic and social development. The challenge now lies in expecting university library services in Syria to accomplish, possibly in a short time span, what it has taken European Universities' libraries some 30 or 40 years to achieve. The issues identified in this pilot project need addressing to enable the Universities in Syria and their libraries to achieve modern standards in the provision, use and dissemination of information in support of teaching and research. Fundamental weaknesses in Syrian Higher Education would need to be overcome. These include poor management systems, with insufficient delegated authority matched by a reluctance to take responsibility (or a lack of familiarity with doing so), and insufficient technical staff in the computer services

The relative deficiencies of the libraries in Syria compared with similar universities in Europe could be explained by a number of factors, including dependence on textbooks for teaching and reliance on didactic methods which inhibit academics' and students' interaction with the libraries' collections and services, as well as less involvement by academic staff in research and publication. The government's intention to modernise teaching, promote research, and introduce new electronic media could therefore lead to significant changes in the potential demands on library services, the assistance required from librarians, and the skills required by them, but the requirement for strategic planning to implement these changes has not been fully recognised at government level or in university managements. The shortage of qualified librarians with an understanding of modern library practices and the status, knowledge and skills to advocate the implementation of the necessary changes in a coordinated manner has been and could continue to be a severe handicap to the country's social and economic progress.

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