Commonwealth Professional Fellowship

The Wealth of Experience and Lessons Learned

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The Commonwealth Professional Fellowship (CPF) is a programme of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in association with the British Council. The Fellowship is aimed at providing a professional development opportunity for mid-career professionals from Commonwealth developing countries in diverse disciplines. Fellows who take part in this programme spend a period of one to three months in the United Kingdom to keep abreast of current trends and developments, and receive training in appropriate fields. Selection is based on the evaluation of submissions by participants about:

- the extent to which the Fellowship programme will ensure the transfer of skills relevant to the needs of institutions in the Commonwealth developing country;

- the catalytic effect of the Fellowship within the developing country concerned and the benefit to the host organisation or institution in the UK.

The news of our selection to participate in the 2009/2010 CPF sparked in us some expectations from the programme, which we translated into the following guiding objectives:

- To observe at first hand how a modern library is run.

- To learn skills that are becoming increasingly important in modern libraries.

- To improve our appreciation of the management of e-resources, and promotion strategies for teaching, learning and research.

- To develop leadership skills at library and institutional or organisational levels.

- To observe and learn from successful library-service models.

- To interact with fellow professionals in the UK and develop valuable networks and linkages.

Travel to the UK

We arrived in early January 2010 from Nigeria and Ghana in West Africa to the most adverse weather conditions we have ever experienced. The winter period in UK this year has been widely acknowledged as the most severe in recent decades. Our immediate reaction to the winter, being our first experience, can be compared to the experience of a live toad dropped into a basin of hot water – as one might imagine, the toad would attempt to jump out of the basin instantly!

We did not jump out of the winter because of our resolve to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Fellowship, but the weather conditions were overwhelming. The sight of the countryside from Stansted airport (where the British Airways flight had been diverted as a result of the bad conditions at Heathrow) to London, was something to behold. Whole streets and the terrain around the Kensington Gardens and Kingsbury area (where two of us were to stay) were spectacularly white, and we immediately tagged London a 'white city'. Interestingly, we later

discovered that a part of London is in fact called the White City.

Nevertheless we arrived to a warm welcome from Anna Jablkowska of Middlesex University, who, together with a representative of the British Council, had been assigned by our host institution to receive us at the airport. Anna's commitment, supportive role, and hospitality on our arrival and throughout the Fellowship period remains remarkable in our memory, and it was one of the significant ingredients for the success of our stay in the UK.

Professional experience

We arrived at Middlesex University on 9 January full of expectations and ready to learn new knowledge and skills, and to pick up any professional culture of value to us. We came into contact with our mentor, Alan Hopkinson, for the first time. His initial concern was to interact with each of us to determine our areas of specific interest and focus. This was to guide him in mapping general and specific programmes for each of the three of us and to arrange visits to other relevant institutions or organisations in the UK where we could receive unique or additional experience.

We spent the first week undergoing an induction programme with new students, registering as staff/students at Middlesex University, securing ID cards and sign-in identification for network access, and to become acquainted with the sections and staff members of the Learning Resources Service.

Our programme during the fellowship included the following activities.

In-house Library Staff Development Programme:

LSDP is a monthly professional skills-development programme of the Learning Resources Service, Middlesex University, in which the best practices of different aspects of library operations and services are highlighted. The programme offers a unique opportunity for discussions and the synthesis of ideas about professional trends and development issues and challenges. It is therefore an opportunity to gain the latest professional knowledge as well as serving as an induction programme for new professional staff. We participated during the period of our fellowship and gained fresh insights into systems and bibliographic services, the management of electronic resources, and collection development and liaison.

Seminars and Workshops at Middlesex University:

We attended information-literacy and English language literacy workshops. The purpose of the information literacy workshop was to introduce library resources to new students and to teach them how to derive maximum benefits from the use of different library resources. The English Language Literacy Scheme (ELLS) is for new students for whom English is not a mother tongue. Both workshops were interactive, with practical sessions. Apart from the insight we gained from the rich content of the workshops as participants, the methodology and manner of the presentations provide a unique experience that is worth replicating in teaching information literacy programmes.

Organised Talks:

Several training sessions in the form of talks and discussions were arranged for us, with different library staff having responsibility for key tasks and projects. These included several sessions with the library systems manager, who is responsible for the management of the back-end operations of Horizon (the library management system in use at the Middlesex

University), the Eprints (software used for the research repository), and the deployment of software and tools for the management of e-resources such as ATHENS, EZproxy, Serials Solution and Shibboleth. This information, and related discussions, about e-resources management tools was very significant in our desire to learn new ways to promote and deploy e-resources for teaching and research.

The management of the research repository was another key area where we had stimulating discussions on procedures for its implementation, content management and maintenance. Research repository has become a popular feature in higher education in the UK, as we observed from visits to several higher-education institutions. We hope to draw on the experience gained to provide the required impetus for more active work in this new area of information service in our home institutions.

During a session on inter-library loans, we learnt of the use of Winchill software for inter-library loans and of the value of Zetoc, which provide access to the British Library's electronic table of contents of about 20,000 current journals and 16,500 conference proceedings per year.

Study Visits and Tour of Libraries:

We embarked on organised study visits, both as a group and individually, to several libraries in and outside London: the University of East London, Dockland; the Bodleian Library and Balliol College, Oxford; the London School of Economics; Kings College, London; University College London; the British Library; the University of Salford; Cambridge University; Bournemouth University; Royal Holloway University; and the Tate Gallery and Archives. Our visit to these different libraries helped us to assess and appreciate the adaptation of similar technology in a variety of locations and at different levels of library service practice. Notable observations arising from our visits to these libraries include:

• The changing character of libraries and collections. While attention is shifting from collection to connection in many of the libraries we visited, libraries like the Bodleian Library and the British Library still regard their vast and monumental collections as treasure.

• The standard practice of arranging libraries into group and private study zones, or silent and social study zones, was noticeable. This is contrary to the traditional practice of regarding the library as a completely quiet area that is still prevalent in most libraries in West Africa.

• The popular use of the Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID) technology in all the libraries, which improves customer service for library circulation, creating labour savings and an enjoyable experience for both patrons and staff.

• The concept of self-service and extending library opening hours to 24/7.

• Closer integration of library information service provision with information-technology departments and classroom-learning experience. The once clear distinction between knowledge transfer in the classroom and information service provision in libraries is fading away. Library–classroom linkages are getting stronger. The closer integration of the library and the information-technology department, and total merger in a few instances, is a welcome development but, in our view, this portends great leadership challenges to the library.

- The prevalence of research repositories in all higher-education institutions in the UK. The use of Free and Open Software Systems (FOSS) to manage repositories is also a common feature. This has great potential, but is yet to be fully exploited in libraries in developing countries, partly because of a lack of technical skills.

  Discussion of our library visits would be incomplete without special mention of the two weeks of enriching and rewarding experiences we had at the University of East London in Dockland. It was a period of detailed discussion on digital repositories, the management of e-resources, the East London Theatre Archive project, and learning from the UEL's experience of library management systems replacement and evaluation processes.

CILIP Meetings and ILIG Informal Meeting:

We consider the opportunity to attend meetings of CILIP a unique one. The fellowship offered the unique and exciting opportunity not only to attend these meetings but also to share our professional experience at an ILIG 'Informal'. We attended two evening seminars on 'London Transport' and 'Health Information Delivery in East and Central Africa'. We also attended a library-management-software exhibition organised by CILIP, which provided an overview of many of the library programs being offered in the UK today.

Visits to related professional agencies and bodies:

These included a meeting with the Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium and a visit and meeting at the headquarters of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publication (INASP) in Oxford.

  The development and operation of a consortium of the magnitude of SUPC is exemplary. With its wide scope, covering books, journal subscriptions, e-books, consumables and equipment including computers, the benefit to members is huge. The SUPC serves as a model library consortium to learn from, and its approach and operations are commendable for developing countries.

  Getting to know the scope and operations of INASP, particularly the relationships that it maintains with partner and network countries, was quite revealing. Our visit also offered an opportunity to learn about, and take advantage of, the full range of e-resources that are made available free to libraries in low-income countries.

Enquiry desk Services:

The opportunity we had to work at the enquiry desks of the Learning Resources Service, Middlesex University, and at the University of East London library provided us with insight into the common problems that students encounter in the use of these libraries, and, to some extent, the attitude of students towards these libraries' philosophy of self-service. For example, casual observation showed that students enjoy their experience with these self-service systems. Many more students appeared to check books in and out through the RFID than approached the desk for the same service. However, there were instances of students requesting assistance to use facilities such as the scanner and the OPAC within the same period. The issue of self-service in UK libraries is interesting to us because it is contrary to the standard practice in our home institutions where virtually all library services are still staff-mediated. Furthermore, not many libraries would be willing to risk shortening the life-span of their treasured facilities or equipment as a result of their being handled by mostly inexperienced and unskilled users.

4.0.   Cultural and Other Experiences.

Our experience during this fellowship supports the common saying that experience is the best teacher. What we have read from books and heard from other people about the UK cannot in any way compare to what we have experienced:

- The metropolitan nature of the city of London with its attractions and compelling offerings of fun. The complex transport system, including the road and underground rail systems, is overwhelming to a new visitor; it is no strange experience to see visitors attempting to find their way around. Signage is at times difficult to understand at first glance, though most Londoners are very helpful. The auto-driven Dockland Light Rail (DLR) system is a delight to ride in. The array of shops and restaurants on virtually all the streets, with a pastry aroma everywhere, can become an allure to over-eating!

- The magnificent and historic Victorian architecture in Central London is captivating. The streets are well laid out, with good and clean roads and visible evidence of a maintenance culture with work always going on.

- The prevalence of recreation and green parks adds to the beauty of the city of London. There are a variety of museums and tourist attractions.

- The uninterrupted power and water supply is remarkable to us, even though some Londoners tried to inform us that it is not always the case.

- The diversity of people from different parts of the world is easily noticeable in the UK.

- The reading culture, particularly among adults and the elderly, as demonstrated in the tube trains is inspiring, though the same observation cannot be made of the youth.

- The freedom of smoking and frequency of encountering cigarette smoking on the street is something we deplored.

- The opportunity to travel to Oxford and Manchester on study visits also offered us an opportunity to explore popular landmarks in those two cities. In addition, we visited other places of interest such as the national heritage site in Lacock village, Stonehenge, Warwick Castle, and the historic town of Stratford on Avon.

Benefits and Effects of the Fellowship

The CPF programme contributed immensely in exposing to us new knowledge and professional trends, introducing new library service concepts and new technologies and tools for efficient and effective information resources management capable of engendering improved customer service, labour savings and an enjoyable experience for both library patron and staff.

It has provided the opportunity for us to build capacity and fill gaps in our professional education, and has promoted the development of networks and new linkages and friends. This is important because relationships have become 'social capital' that can no longer be ignored. We have developed 'intra and inter networks' – with other fellows from Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya, and with individuals in institutions in the UK. This has the potential of expanding our individual net worth and scope of influence.

The effect of these benefits has left us in a situation comparable to that of a man confronted with eating an elephant. The question arises, 'Where do we start?' Our response to this is, 'Start anywhere.' Therefore, on our return to our home institutions, we plan to start by taking small but progressive steps in areas such as these:

- Library staff development programmes and information-literacy programmes to transfer the knowledge we have gained to colleagues at institutional level and professional association level.

- Local adaptation of many of the useful learning materials and documents on resource promotion provided by the libraries we visited.

- To advocate and promote the key selling points of consortia like that of the Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium among institutions of higher learning in our areas of influence.

- To commence the development of a research repository, taking advantage of free and open software.

Conclusion

We can conclude without doubt that the fellowship programme has been a hugely rewarding and enriching experience. It has given us the most exceptional and exciting moments of our careers. The programme enabled us to meet people we never thought we would, and to learn new things.

At the end of the fellowship, we took deep a breath, relaxed and reminisced over our experience with our mentor, Alan Hopkinson. We identified the key ingredients that contributed to the success of the programme: a good travel and programme plan; a comfortable and friendly atmosphere in at least two of the three rented accommodation in London; excellent and timely support and information from the British Council and the Commonwealth Fellowships Secretariat; and the vast network of our mentor which enabled us to have a wide variety of experiences.

However, the variety of experiences we have had has left us bombarded with many new things that we needed to know and learn about but which had little or no time to explore in detail. This, we believe, will provide us with learning challenges to pursue further when we return to our home institutions.

Note on the Contributors:

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