International Co-operation - The Benefits of IATUL Membership

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1. Introduction

The International Association of Technological University Libraries was founded in 1955 with the objective to promote the exchange of experience, and improve co-operation and communication among libraries of technological universities from all countries.[1,2] The impetus for starting this organization came from a realization that libraries serving science and engineering clientele have a common bond and that by sharing their experience, exchanging their views, and developing a collaborative approach to solving problems, they can improve their information service to their clientele.

In 1961 the first of five triennial conferences took place in Delft; since 1975, the year of the Zurich conference, these meetings have been convened every two years. In the alternate years, meetings, small-scale seminars on specific topics, are organized by individual members of IATUL. The membership of the Association has been steadily increasing. In recent years more libraries outside the traditional West European geographical region have joined the ranks. In particular, the libraries on the North American continent are showing more interest in this international organization, and, since 1985, have held a regular regional seminar each year. Besides North America, several libraries from other parts of the world have applied for membership.

2. Why IATUL?

On the international scene there is IFLA, FID, and also the library/information activities of UNESCO. The question may be asked, is there really a need for an international organization like IATUL? The experience of almost 35 years shows that there is a place for such an organization. Without IATUL there would not exist the close relationship that has developed among the individual members, and also an effective informal international network, that is very beneficial in solving problems and stimulating dissemination of know-how in the fields of library management and technology.

Further, IFLA is primarily a federation of library associations, as the name implies: but the same can be said about UNESCO/UNISIST and FID. They also have sections for university or specialized libraries serving science and engineering clientele, and, recently, a collaborative effort has been initiated

between IFLA and IATUL. This agreement was described by the IATUL President, Dr Dennis Shaw, in *Inspel*[3] and in the Presidential address to this conference.

Also, in these international federations it is seldom that academic technological libraries are represented by directors or senior librarians: IATUL, on the other hand, is an organization of libraries represented by directors and senior staff members. Because of their special nature these libraries all over the world have very much in common. The resources they are housing, the services they are offering, and their clientele with their unique information-gathering habits, make these libraries, in many respects, distinctive from the non-technological libraries. The emphasis on periodical literature, frequent use of technical and research reports and other 'grey' literature, including standards, specifications, and patents, heavy reliance on the use of computerized databases, and service to industry are among the special characteristics of these institutions.

Their similar interests and responsibilities led the technological libraries to realize there was a need for this international organization, IATUL. The biennial conferences, seminars, and other meetings provide a forum where library representatives can exchange their views, share their experiences, forge personal friendships and international understanding, and develop co-operative approaches to solving problems.

3. Library co-operation

In spite of the multiplicity of national languages, co-operation among European libraries has been quite successful. Besides the bilateral and multilateral collaborative efforts among western European libraries, OECD set up a commission dealing with a subject of interest to librarians in a larger perspective, the flow of scientific information.[4]

An excellent example of an organization devoted to co-operative effort for the solution of common problems is LIBER. Although the initial expectations have not matched the hopes of its founders, the report by H. A. Koch at the 1987 Essen Symposium indicates that close co-operation with other related research library organizations has been established.[5]

Another example of West European and transnational co-operative effort is INTERMARC, which is based on American MARC II, adopted by the British Library. The success of INTERMARC helped to stimulate other co-operative ventures between West European libraries.

The socialist countries of central and eastern Europe similarly co-operate through bi- and multilateral efforts in their geographical area and also through COMECON, which has established the International Centre for Scientific and Technical Information devoted to library and information activities. Through this organization the member countries develop methods and equipment to bring the national information systems closer to each other. They also function as a joint ISSN centre for the member countries in relation to UNISIST.[6]

The co-operative efforts on the North American continent are many and varied. Unfortunately, in most instances they include only the USA and

Canada. One of the early efforts in the USA was the Farmington Plan, a co-operative acquisition and resource sharing venture. The Center for Research Libraries, which was established by scholarly and research institutions to enhance the accessibility of information resources, is one of the best known co-operative efforts. More recently, OCLC and RLIN have appeared on the scene and have become indispensable in the librarian's daily work.

4. World-wide co-operation

So far, the more formal forms of co-operation have been reviewed. They are very important and have significant impact on the improvement of member libraries' services to their users. At the same time, as M. Hill warned at the 1979 IATUL Meeting at Enschede, there are also some pitfalls in co-operative activities among libraries arising from the difficulties of the overall manage-ment and administration of co-operative projects when there are different levels of decision-making authority of the participating members.[7] Not every institution may feel ready for co-operative ventures.

But there is also another meaning of the word co-operation — 'to associate with another or others for mutual benefit',[8] and that should be the reason for those who have not considered, perhaps initially or not at all, a formal co-operative effort with the member libraries of IATUL, to join this organiza-tion. Informal co-operation means communication, participation in meetings, personal contacts, and verbal or written exchange of experience. It is also one of the important factors that contribute to international understanding.

As has been stated earlier, from its small beginnings in 1955 IATUL has grown to a membership of over 160 libraries from around the world. More libraries from the North American continent are members than ever before and there is also a steady increase in membership from developing countries. Nevertheless, there are still quite a few libraries with strong science/engineer-ing programmes on the North American continent that have not joined IATUL, perhaps a few in Australia/New Zealand, and there are a number of key libraries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that could be, and ought to be, members, plus, of course, the technological libraries in the emerging societies of the Third World.

Most American and Canadian academic libraries are in the forefront of library automation, using computerized circulation systems, online public access catalogues, automated acquisition systems, CD-ROMs, online database searching, and in the use of personal computers by their staffs. The use of bibliographic utilities such as OCLC and RLIN is widespread and has improved tremendously bibliographic access for the library users. Increased support of reference services and bibliographic instruction, improved collections manage-ment, new facilities and specialized services such as patent information, have significantly upgraded the use of libraries by students, faculty, and staff, as well as by non-university users. The emergence of fee-based information ser-vices to industry, business, and the general public in several institutions have improved substantially and speeded up access to information sources for this special category of user.

A similar situation exists in Western Europe. These libraries not only exchange their experiences among themselves but also can offer advice and consulting experience to others who have not yet gone through this phase. At the same time there is a growing interest in library and information developments in Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. There is potential for quite a few members from the USSR, several libraries from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and, it is to be hoped, Rumania. In the Middle East there are several potential members in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and in south-eastern Asia the emerging technological powers should be represented. Last but not least there should be a larger representation from Latin America.

One other factor that might contribute to an increased interest in international activities ought to be mentioned. As is well known, the USA is in the midst of a 'competitiveness' era. In 1987 the National Academy of Engineering issued a report that specified four areas in which focused and improved US efforts are needed. One of them, to most librarians' and information professionals' delight, considered by the report as a key item, was 'gathering, disseminating, and assimilating information from abroad'.[9] It is to be hoped that this important statement will help some US libraries to rethink their role, vis-à-vis international co-operation.

Perhaps the question of achieving a full potential membership deserves the consideration of establishing a position of a 'membership chairperson' and charging that person with initiating contacts with all potential members and attempting to bring them into the IATUL family.

The fact is that IATUL has a lot to offer its diverse membership. A director or senior librarian of even the most sophisticated library can benefit from visits to other libraries and exchange of experience with colleagues from other institutions. The representatives of the less advanced libraries can benefit even more by learning about the advanced library systems and can plan their future services, avoiding the pitfalls into which some of the trail blazers have fallen occasionally. There are also other benefits to be derived from participation in IATUL, e.g. improvements in, and co-ordination of, the education of library professionals, education of library users, assistance in the acquisition of 'grey' literature, and last, but not least, donation of duplicate collections in the libraries of the developed countries to the libraries in developing countries. The list is endless; one only need look at the themes of IATUL meetings going back to 1956 to realize the valuable contributions that have been made by the members in an effort to improve library services.

Ultimately, all of these activities will benefit maximally the most important element of service, the users of the IATUL members' libraries.

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