
A week in the life of a subject librarian – with a difference!

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Everyone knows what subject librarians do, or at least we hope they do: mainly research enquiries; collection development; liaison with academic departments; and information skills support, in training sessions, by providing workbooks, or by developing e-learning projects. Many of our users are distance learners who can never visit our library. So perhaps supporting a course based in Ethiopia is not so different to our usual activities after all.

I'm the Law Librarian at the University of Warwick, and in November 2008 I spent a week of my working life in Mekelle, in Northern Ethiopia. Other subject librarians have done this before, so you may have already heard their accounts. However, it was a first for me! The School of Law at Warwick is working in partnership with the Faculty of Law at Mekelle for the next four years, in a capacity-building project to set up a postgraduate law programme, with PhD candidates as well as an LLM course.



The first essential is to assess how such a course can be taught and resourced, so last winter I was involved in discussing this, and whether the local

infrastructure could meet the needs of distance learners. Eventually it was agreed that when the first visit of Warwick teaching staff took place, I should accompany them, to provide essentially the same sort of training as I do at home. I prepared bespoke versions of the online workbooks which I normally use with LLM students at Warwick, and information for the research students, all sent electronically in advance and distributed to the students by the staff at Mekelle.



I believe it was well worth the effort to visit Ethiopia in person. Most of the students have experience of using free websites and other IT facilities, but not such complex databases as Westlaw or LexisNexis, so personal explanations and assistance are essential. This is challenging when limited to three sessions of two hours each. I held one session for everyone, to explain e-books and e-journals, and the principles of database searching, and two 'repeat' sessions - for PhD candidates and LLM students respectively - on using law databases.

The challenges grew, as I found out that what I had been told about slow internet access abroad

was no exaggeration. Practice time was severely restricted when the Sudan gateway failed and sometimes the power was lost altogether. I was prepared for this, having talked to international students and Warwick lecturers about these issues; I also read a recent article on library services in Addis Ababa, which was helpful preparation before setting out¹.

Even when armed with demos on memory sticks and extra back-up floppy disks (on the belt, braces and blu-tak principle) it still feels bad when you finish a database demo and the power fails after twenty minutes of practice time! The students were further disadvantaged by a delay in their registration, so they could not immediately begin to get practice, after I left. Hopefully this is being resolved as I write. What really impressed me was the speed with which they worked when the internet permitted, and their efficient downloading of relevant material.

When considering how to support a capacity-building project, I would suggest the following points:

Advantages:

- students are likely to be very hard-working and willing to learn new things quickly;
- governments and NGOs are often keen to fund higher education – Mekelle has good new facilities;
- education is highly valued in developing countries - numbers of undergraduates studying law at Mekelle have doubled since the Faculty opened eight years ago;
- there is a growing number of well-trained professional librarians who are keen to exploit new resources and develop library services;
- the lecturers and I had opportunities to get to know the students very well, which should



make up for the fact that we can no longer talk to them in person;

- the librarian has an opportunity to work with lecturers and demonstrate that information skills are integral to research skills;
- any visiting librarian who is willing to work with overseas colleagues and learn from them will receive a very warm welcome!

Challenges:

- there are infrastructure issues;
- the visit may take up time in the midst of a busy term;
- time for training sessions may be very limited;
- training materials must be especially clear and comprehensive, as it is not so easy to explain any ambiguities later on;
- schedules may be more fluid than one is used to – I was happy to “go with the flow”;
- it is essential to support local librarians and students after the visit ends.



FUTURE PLANS

In the first phase of the project I am currently seeking detailed feedback from the Warwick Law School, which will be essential to guide me over the next two years of the course and may require changed approaches for Phase 2. Already I have decided that when I return to Ethiopia I will use memory sticks even more, as power is generally more reliable than the internet connection. When all technology fails, it is amazing how good it can be to talk, too.

As well as e-mail contact, I plan to contribute to the course forum, if and when that is set up, or may provide my own blog. Most databases provide online help, and some law databases offer online tutorials. I am confident that the local librarians will learn how to assist students quite rapidly, and the students will also help each other.



Having said all that, I still wish the students could just pop into my office occasionally! Sitting down to see where someone is having trouble with a database search can be so much easier than explaining it via e-mail. However, many of our home students behave exactly like distance learners – and not all of them work as hard as the Mekelle group have done so far. In that one week, the number of “hits” on Warwick Library web pages from students in Ethiopia shot up, putting them at number 5 in the top ten list of web page accesses from abroad. So amid many memories of kites soaring on the thermals, herds of donkeys on their way to market, the contrast of ancient and modern, rich and poor, and especially one of the warmest welcomes I’ve ever had, I will be concentrating on developing online guidance in 2009. I wonder where the Warwick Law School will send me next?

NOTES

- 1 Marie Paiva. *A quick glimpse at public and academic libraries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*, February 2008, http://www.against-the-grain.com/TOCFiles/20-1_Paiva.pdf [accessed December 2008]