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# Better Together: Building Strategic Library Partnerships

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## **Better Together: Building Strategic Library Partnerships**

*“When spiderwebs are woven together they can catch a lion”*

[Ethiopian proverb]

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### **Abstract**

Forming partnerships to achieve institutional goals is a growing trend both within libraries and in the broader academic community. Such partnerships allow the sharing of expertise, provide access to a wider range of resources than may be possible within one's own area or organization, and strengthen the library's position within the university. This paper reviews library partnerships and highlights the benefit of such endeavors for the libraries and their partner institutions.

The objective of this paper is to identify important areas of partnerships for librarians in Kenya. It explores important considerations on which the library draws up partnership strategies, identifies what libraries and their partners can gain from collaborating and also highlights how partnering libraries can mutually enrich and develop each other's services.

The paper further discusses some of the reasons why libraries enter into partnerships, managerial challenges that arise from partnerships and identifies ways of addressing these issues.

Methods: This is a literature review and commentary on this topic based on recent developments in this area incorporating evidence from a case study and participant observers.

Results: Visibility and access to the library in some unexpected locations as a result of partnerships, can serve as greater a function to the library as to its partner and the university community. The value in addressing this issue is to examine the creative partnerships, of which libraries can avail themselves in an effort to best serve their patrons. The partnerships should be examined at local, regional and international level.

Conclusion: Partnerships present libraries with new tools that would bring the most effective services to the library users at affordable costs. They are a reality as they provide libraries with opportunities to access new skills and technology.

Keywords: Partnering, collaborating, co-operating, academic libraries, partnerships

## **Background and rationale**

As libraries face increased pressure from limited resources, and funders, including governments, are looking for evidence of efficiencies and effectiveness, partnerships are increasingly used as a method to achieve goals and enhance services (Sarjeant-Jenkins & Walker, 2014). Partnerships are complex relationships that bring together the resources and expertise of different organizations to meet a common goal. They are not appropriate in all situations, and one of the first steps in forming a partnership is the determination of what common goal is to be achieved (Giesecke, 2012).

Partnerships can provide many new opportunities to libraries, including extending services to new groups of users (Wirth, 2007); building capacity to support institutional goals (Lackey, Swogger & McGraw, 2014); increase revenue opportunities and respond to changes in the funding environment (Duff, Carter, Cherry, MacNeil & Howarth, 2013); shared staff training and development (Nassali State, & Bjørkum Åsmul); or increasing access to information resources (Shaw, 2001).

Many libraries already collaborate with external partners, but very few have a strategic and professional way of working with partnerships. Developing and maintaining partnerships is not a skill typically taught in Library and Information Sciences programmes. Existing partnerships are often ad hoc, developed to meet a small or unexpected need, or based on personal relationships among librarians working at different institutions. For partnerships and external collaboration to make a difference, and to contribute continuously to the achievement of the library's objectives, they must be approached, implemented and evaluated in a planned and thoughtful way.

## **Research objectives**

By learning from an existing partnership, it is possible to determine principles and guidelines that may assist other libraries in developing viable strategic partnerships. As libraries at different institutions operate in similar cultural and organizational environments, it is efficient and effective to learn from the best practices of another institution. This paper undertakes to develop guidelines based on an existing functioning partnership between two academic libraries. Although the participant libraries are in two different countries, the principles should be generalizable.

## **Research methods**

This study incorporates two separate research methods: it is a case study, conducted using a participatory research approach. As a case study, it is an intensive and detailed discussion of the partnership activities of two academic libraries that are partners, with a particular focus on factors leading to success and failure. A participatory research approach involves a sequential

cycle of action and reflection that involves participants, rather than being a study of them conducted from the outside (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). In the case of this study, both of the investigators are also participants in the process of developing and implementing library partnerships. Observations and documents from both libraries were compared with findings in the literature, to develop this paper. The primary partners referred to in this study are Aga Khan University Library (AKUL) and University of Alberta Libraries (UAL).

## **Findings**

The library's partnership must align with both the library's strategic goals, and with the strategic directions of the partner (Kattau, 2012). Since academic libraries operate within the framework of their parent institutions, the partnership must also align with the strategic goals of the universities. In the case of the partnership between the University of Alberta Library, and the Aga Khan University Library, the strategic directions were different, yet the partnership was able to align with the goals of both libraries, and both universities. For example, one of the Distinguishing Outcomes from the University of Alberta's strategic plan states that "The University community benefits from seamless integration of services from libraries of all types resulting from local, regional, and international partnerships," which clearly establishes the basis for such a partnership. Similarly, the Aga Khan University Library's Mission states that one of their strategic activities is "Developing valuable linkages with other organisations/institutions to enrich the University's research and learning community."

(<http://www.aku.edu/library/ULO/Pages/Missionstatement.aspx>).

Once the potential partners have determined that partnerships fall within their overall strategic thinking it is necessary to be specific about what purpose the partnership could or should fulfill. These specific purposes could include working with another institution to bring together multiple human and financial resources to experiment with new opportunities, finding innovative solutions to shared problems, making more effective use of existing resources and gaining new skills and competencies. For example, one of the components of the partnership between AKUL and UAL is an annual workshop, conducted at AKUL by UAL staff members. This contributes to increasing the capacity of both libraries as staff members gain new skills and competencies. The AKUL staff members benefit from an intensive workshop focused on a topic of need for them, which in the past has included information literacy curriculum development, advocacy skills, research skills and the management of e-resources. The UAL staff benefit from working in a different culture and developing professional relationships in different countries, which builds their capacity in dealing with the challenges presented by an increasingly diverse student and faculty community.

A potential partner may be any library or organization that has similar needs. Partnerships may then be developed to meet those needs. The library may also have more than one partnership, with each focused on different needs, rather than expecting one partner to solve all of the issues that arise. For example, UAL has a partnership with several First Nations colleges, which serves

to create an information portal for material about indigenous people in Western Canada (<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/fnic/>). This meets a very specific need and is aligned with the University of Alberta's strategies to increase the success of indigenous students, as well as providing access to a particular information resource for other researchers.

The Aga Khan University Library has partnered with various libraries and the librarians regularly share best practices in information provision and service excellence. One of its partners is the library at Saint Luke's Mission Hospital in Kaloleni, Mombasa. Through this partnership, AKU library has been able to extend its expertise in health information. This arrangement has enabled the library to play a key role in enhancing rural health workers' access to nursing and midwifery education programmes. A similar partnership with Gatundu District Hospital provides AKU library with an opportunity to support the uptake of evidence-based practice in a rural hospital setting.

In addition, AKU Library has partnered with local Kenyan university libraries through the Kenya Library and Information Consortium (KLISC), the United Nations/World Bank/University Librarians Forum and Kenya University Librarians Committee (KULC). Library staff are members of the Kenya Library Association, Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA), American Library Association (ALA) and Special Library Association (SLA) among others.

One of the most important elements of a successful partnership is the development of a level of trust with each other. This develops over time, and requires a commitment of staff time to work with individuals from the partner institution. Each organization must be willing to invest the time necessary to build these relationships, and to allow staff members the opportunity to learn how to work collaboratively with colleagues at a different institution. The experience of the AKUL/UAL partnership is that it is important for many staff members to meet and be involved in the partnership, rather than just the Chief Librarians. To support the development of the personal professional networks that will knit the partnership together, AKUL sends a librarian to spend a period of time "job shadowing" at UAL. This is a highly structured activity, which involves the visiting librarian spending up to a month in one library, working closely with peers, and experiencing library life in a different institution. As well as learning, the visiting librarian is expected to do presentations about library conditions in their home country, and share alternative approaches to shared problems.

These immersion visits have resulted in an environment where there is ongoing communication between individuals, involving discussion of solutions to problems, shared material such as library guides and information literacy packages, and the search for aligning solutions to common issues such as negotiating with software vendors. This experience is aligned with the findings of Sloan and Oliver (2013), who state that trust both holds the partnership together, and

provides the lubricant that allows it to operate. Essentially, trust is the necessary condition that allows one partner to take action for the benefit of both.

The partnership needs to be documented with an agreement over both benefits and obligations for each partner. This ensures that the partnership continues beyond the employment of the principle representatives. In the case of the AKUL/UAL partnership, the original document was based on a review of the AKUL by the then Chief Librarian of UAL. As the partnership developed it was agreed to in a more formal fashion with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions. This documentation ensured that the partnership has continued to flourish despite changes in the senior staff members at both partners. This is aligned with the findings of Peterson & Fajardo, 2013. The level of documentation depends on the level of risk involved in the partnership, and the accountability requirements of each institution.

A library partnership is not just an opportunity to get together with colleagues and share – it must produce something that is of value to both partners. Specific outcomes need to be agreed upon, with a timeline, in order to provide a justification for the investment in the partnership, and to provide a basis for evaluation. Rather than start a partnership with a large number of proposed activities, it is better to start with something small and concrete, and then allow other activities to be developed as they arise. This allows for a high level of focus while the partners are learning to work together.

In the case of the AKUL/partnership, it started with two specific activities: developing the capacity of the print collection at AKUL, and developing the capacity of the human resources through skill development and training. The print collection activity started first, and only when it was established, did the partners move onto the second activity. As the partnership has matured, new activities have arisen and are being explored or adopted. The print collection development activity continues but is no longer the central activity or basis of the agreement, although it met the goals of both libraries: one needed to weed their collection, and the other was developing a new collection to support the development of a new faculty. By finding outside funding to pay for shipping, both libraries were able to benefit from this activity. Current activities include staff exchanges, training sessions, shared writing and publication, shared problem-solving and consulting.

Ongoing communication among staff members of the partners is an essential feature of the development and maintenance of a healthy partnership. As the AKUL/UAL partnership spanned continents, there was a great reliance on various technologies to facilitate easy and spontaneous sharing, including Skype, email, Facebook and telephone. This supports the findings of Shaw (2001). Frequent informal communication adds to the value of the partnership by providing opportunities for shared problem solving and exploration of new opportunities. The management of the partners must recognize that time spent communicating with partners is a value-added activity for staff members and for the library.

As with the management of any library project or activity, ongoing assessment or evaluation is an important step. This provides information for a number of purposes, including promotion of the library within the institution, accountability for the investment of both human and financial resources, and opportunities to improve or develop the partnership (Sayed, 2013). Each partner will need to do their own evaluation of the value of the partnership as related to the investment. The outcome will depend on the goals that each partner had for participation in the partnership – it is for this reason that the purpose of the partnership and the planned activities must be clearly delineated at the beginning.

A major challenge that is faced during the development and implementation of a library partnership is often a sense that it is not beneficial for the library, and in fact wastes resources that could be better used to serve local users. This may be expressed both by library staff, and by the university community. For this reason, it is essential that the management of both partners be able to express clearly and succinctly the benefits to be gained by the partnership. Information gained from the evaluation should become part of the libraries communication and promotion strategies, and all staff members should be able to answer questions about the partnership clearly.

### **Relevance/impact on policy and practice**

As libraries are increasingly encouraged to seek partnership opportunities to manage new challenges in the Library and Information Science environment with limited resources, there is a need for some clear recommendations on how to develop and implement partnerships. Like any collaborative activity, working with partners requires an investment of both financial and human resources, and it is essential that this activity be carried out in the most effective and efficient manner possible. This article seeks to address that gap in the literature by summarizing lessons learned from a long-standing and successful partnership.

### **Conclusion**

Partnerships can bring many benefits to libraries, but the development and maintenance of partnerships and other collaborative activities is not a skill that is generally included in Library and Information Science curricula. By following some clear steps that allow the library to determine its intentions, find a partner, document the nature and expectations of the partnership and evaluating its success, libraries can be successful in seeking and developing partners to meet their needs. By supporting the partnership by allowing time for the development of trust, and providing both avenues for communication and time, library management can support the ongoing success of the partnership. The steps are summarized below.

1. Align partnerships with your library's and your institution's strategic directions.
2. Determine the purpose of the partnership before you undertake it.
3. Invest in the time necessary to develop a trust relationship among staff members.
4. Document your partnership.
5. Define specific activities for the partnership.

6. Support ongoing communication among staff members of the partners.
7. Evaluate the benefits of the partnership for each participating member in order to promote the library and to support continuous improvement and development.
8. Communicate the value of the partnership as part of the library's regular marketing and promotion activities.

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