



People in the News

Susanna Lob

Susanna Lob is leading a project which has seen two university libraries (which missed over 25 years of development) make the most amazing transition. In less than a year, they have come from providing a few out-of-date textbooks to providing the world's best digital resources.

Susanna's background is in publishing, most latterly working for Oxford University Press where she was a passionate advocate for the importance of providing free or low cost access to online resources in developing and transition countries. To achieve this, she partnered with Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), a not-for-profit organization with a mission to increase access to knowledge through libraries in over 60 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

The collaboration was successful – so much so that Susanna joined EIFL as Manager of their Licensing Programme in 2009. Earlier this year, she took on a new role as Manager of Special Projects for EIFL's Licensing Programme – and her first project in this role is certainly special!

Funded by the Open Society Foundations' Higher Education Support Program (HESP), the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project came out of a wider HESP programme of higher education reform in Myanmar (also known as Burma) which began in 2011.

Learning has traditionally been by rote in Myanmar, and one of the key aims of HESP's higher education reform programme is to encourage critical thinking, particularly in the areas of journalism, politics and international relations, sociology and law. But how can students develop critical thinking skills if they are unable to access different points of view, and how can the curriculum be redesigned for the 21st century if faculty and students don't have access to 21st-century online subscription resources? That is where the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project came in.

Mandalay and Yangon Universities were once two of the most prestigious universities in Asia, and their libraries have wonderful historical collections. However, due to restrictions on access to information over the last few decades, tiny (four-figure) library budgets and foreign currency problems, they have very limited current collections. Also, when the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project started in December 2013, they had no access to the online resources that most of the rest of the world's universities would take for granted.



Kick-off meeting for the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar Project at Yangon University, December 2013



Susanna being interviewed about the project for Myanmar International TV news

The EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project is also very timely for another reason. Following student protests in the 1980s, undergraduate teaching at Mandalay and Yangon Universities was suspended. Instead, undergraduates had to attend specially-created universities outside the cities. However, after a wait of over 25 years, the two Universities were at last able to accept undergraduate students again in December 2013. The new undergraduates are all outstanding students who have achieved exceptional grades and who have very high expectations. There was much to be done in a short time to enable their access to the world's resources.

Susanna's first task was to license those much-needed resources, and faculty and students at Mandalay and Yangon Universities now have unrestricted online access to over 10,000 full-text journals and 130,000+ e-books. From multidisciplinary journal collections such as JSTOR and the Taylor & Francis Library to more specialist products such as HeinOnline for law, the resources have been specially selected to provide support for all subjects taught at the two Universities. (See the full list at www.eifl.net/elibrarymyanmar#eresources).



What a difference a few months can make! There is rarely a spare seat in Mandalay University's eLibrary room

Susanna says that the publishers involved have been wonderfully supportive, but licensing this wealth of content was only part of the answer.

In order to support access to the eLibrary, the Universities had to overcome a number of challenges. They had to apply to the Ministry of Education for a static IP address – a process that took some months as no university had previously done so. Bandwidth was another issue. Both Universities had a connection of less than one megabit per second in December 2013 – ensuring that the eager students had to spend a lot of time watching spinning circles. However, following installation of fibre optic lines, bandwidth has increased to eight megabits per second at Yangon University and to four megabits per second at Mandalay University. Of course, yet more is needed (particularly as demand for the eLibrary grows), and the Universities have applied for increased bandwidth.

Resource discovery was another important issue for the project – new users could not be bombarded with hundreds of URLs and the libraries did not have web pages. Susanna therefore arranged to license the EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS), which has now been customized for both Universities (see Figure 1).

“...the publishers involved have been wonderfully supportive ...”

The screenshot shows the University of Yangon eLibrary gateway. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: New Search, Browse Journals, Browse eBooks, Browse by Subject, Library Information, Sign In, Personal Folder, Preferences, Language, and Help. Below the navigation bar is the University of Yangon logo and name, with the mission statement 'Mission to renovate and upgrade'. The main heading is 'Welcome to our eLibrary', followed by a descriptive sentence: 'A wide range of scholarly e-journal and e-book collections, high quality reference information and academic databases is now available to library users at the University of Yangon through the eLibrary Myanmar project.' Below this is a search bar with a dropdown menu for 'Keyword' and a 'Search' button. Underneath the search bar are links for 'Search Options', 'Basic Search', 'Advanced Search', and 'Search History'. The 'Browse by Subject' section is divided into four columns: Humanities (Education, Geography, History, Journalism, Language and Literature, View All Subjects...), Social Sciences (Anthropology, Library and Information Sciences, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology, View All Subjects...), Science (Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Mathematics, Physics, Zoology, View All Subjects...), and Business, Economics and Law (Business and Economics, Law, View All Subjects...).

Figure 1. Yangon University's new eLibrary gateway

222 However, there is no point in having access to resources if no one knows how to use them. So, working with two local Project Co-ordinators in Yangon and Mandalay, a programme of training and awareness-raising began in April 2014. There has been huge demand from librarians, faculty and students and, by the end of August 2014, training sessions had attracted over 2,500 participants.



Local Project Co-ordinator, Myat Sann Nyein, shows students and faculty from the Geology Department, Yangon University, how to access eLibrary Myanmar resources on their mobile devices. "What we learned from the e-resources training is like a treasure of knowledge for all the teaching staff from our department; new technology, new strategy, new skills."



Training in Mandalay University's eLibrary room



Training session for the International Relations Department, Yangon University, which was attended by over 100 faculty and students



Librarians at Yangon University learn how to set up e-mail accounts. Hlaing Hlaing Gyi, Chief Librarian of Yangon University Library, explained, "Some of my staff were reluctant to touch the computer keyboard in the past and now they are very keen to use the computer."

The initial focus of the training was on librarians, and Susanna says that at first they were understandably nervous. They had very limited, if any, computer experience and no experience in searching for information online. The local Project Co-ordinators have not only provided training on resources and online search techniques, but also on how to set up e-mail accounts and Facebook pages.

223 These librarians are clearly fast learners! Having set up their first Facebook page at the end of May 2014, Yangon University Library already has over 2,300 friends and they now post very regularly to promote awareness of the digital resources. Librarians are also already starting to share their new knowledge and skills, and are helping Project Co-ordinators to provide hands-on training to faculty and students.

Susanna says the librarians are loving the experience and growing greatly in confidence. Previously, they never visited academic departments, but now they are proud to be training their highly esteemed professors. This is a very exciting time for them, making rapidly the same shift that has taken place more slowly in the rest of the world as librarians have transitioned to research support professionals.

The usage statistics prove that all of the work in licensing, network provision, resource discovery, training and awareness-raising has paid off. Over 5,000 searches were recorded in the EBSCO Discovery Service in July 2014, an increase of almost 3,000% on the March 2014 figure*, and there were over 3,500 full-text downloads in July 2014 compared to 248 in March 2014.

"...an increase [in searches] of almost 3,000%* ..."

Access to these digital resources will not only improve learning and teaching, it will also open up new opportunities for research. Not surprisingly, research output in Myanmar has been low. It is difficult to imagine how one could undertake innovative research without knowing what others in your field have already done, or how to publish research outputs without access to journals and the knowledge of where to submit.

There is of course much still to be done, and workshops which draw on EIFL's expertise in other key areas such as open access, copyright and consortium-building are planned for 2015. Iryna Kuchma (Manager of EIFL's Open Access Programme), Teresa Hackett (Manager of EIFL's Copyright and Libraries Programme) and Monika Elbert (EIFL's Consortium Management expert) will all visit Myanmar to run workshops.

Opportunities to roll out the project to other universities are also being explored, and it is hoped that four additional institutions will be able to participate by the end of the year.

English is still a challenge for many of the librarians, but Susanna hopes that as their language skills improve, she can arrange for some to visit English-speaking libraries, so that they can gain and take back a wider experience (details at end).

"Working on this project has been a huge privilege and pleasure", says Susanna. "Through the enthusiasm and dedication of our local Co-ordinators and our colleagues in Myanmar, we have been able to achieve a huge amount in just over six months, and the feedback from librarians, faculty and students has been fantastic."



Susanna gets feedback from students during a focus group at Mandalay University

* There was an error in the first published version which suggested the 3,000% increase was per month. The increase was in fact for the month of July compared with the month of March.

224 Susanna, EIFL and the Open Society Foundations' Higher Education Support Program should feel justly proud of this amazingly transformative project, one that has delivered such tangible results in such a short time. As a Myanmar librarian said to Susanna: "We were in a room looking out through a small window, now we have been outside".

If any librarians reading this might be interested in hosting a librarian from Myanmar at their library and providing a work experience opportunity, please do get in touch with Susanna (contact details below).

When not immersed in the world of the international knowledge community, Susanna still loves to travel. A recent highlight was volunteering at an elephant orphanage in Sri Lanka and learning lots of new skills – everything from mucking out to bottle feeding – with lots of fun splashing about in the river in between!



For enquiries about hosting a librarian from Myanmar in your library and providing a work experience opportunity, contact Susanna Lob:

E-mail: susanna.lob@eifl.net

Information about the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project is available at www.eifl.net/elibrarymyanmar

A BBC News report about the project is available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-26823187>

Information about EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) is available at www.eifl.net

Article copyright: © 2014 UKSG. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original is credited.

