



A day in the life of a library director Laila Vahed

Laila Vahed's Library, at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), one of South Africa's 25 public universities, is in a semi-rural setting on the outskirts of Richards Bay on the east coast.

Chairing the Board of the South African National Library and information Consortium (SANLiC), as well as heading up the Library and her family of girls, means keeping many balls in the air: an arduous task, but the key to survival, as a glimpse at Laila's busy life illustrates.

It's almost 2:00 as I hit the send button on an e-mail to Glenn. Is it the beginning of the day or is it the end of the previous day? No . . . it's the end of the day, because I've yet to get some much needed shut-eye. This is the last one tonight, or this morning.

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The e-mail is from me with my hat on as Chairperson of the Board of Directors of SANLiC. The consortium negotiates e-licences and pricing on behalf of public universities and research councils in South Africa. This is not my day job, so it doesn't pay me a salary or even an allowance. Glenn Truran is employed as the SANLiC Director, and he has been bugging me to respond regarding the Elsevier negotiation for Scopus, noting that this will be the forerunner to our renewal of ScienceDirect, and everyone knows that Elsevier plays hardball. By bugging, I do mean several e-mails with gentle reminders, as well as a couple of WhatsApp messages!

I want to throw that mobile phone away as it's buzzing in my ear, serving now as my alarm clock. It's 5:30 and I've not had enough sleep. I'm tempted to ignore it, but I realize that Kiara will be late for school, so granny has no choice. I have taken care of Kiara, one of my three granddaughters, since birth. Now 11 years old, she is firmly a 'preteen'. I border on quipping that one of us will live to tell the tale! I crawl out of bed, get Kiara awake (which in itself is mission impossible), load the washing machine, take out the garbage, pack away stuff in the kitchen that did not get done the night before, and tackle a multitude of minor household tasks, cursing that I'm not more organized so have left all this for the morning. With much pushing and prodding, including raising my voice a couple of times (because I'm not exactly a quiet granny), we finally fly into the car and get to school in the nick of time.

95 I then start the 45-kilometre drive to my office at the University of Zululand Library, which, due to traffic, equates to on average one kilometre per minute. On the drive I contemplate my day in the office and formulate a to-do list of several points in my head. Of course, it has not occurred to me that the actual office day will only be about eight hours long.

As I walk into my office, I'm greeted by my right-hand woman, Indrani, my secretary, without whom I know I would be dead. A coffee follows, together with a reminder that a meeting with the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Innovation (DVC RI) is in 45 minutes.

I brush over my electronic notes for this meeting. I am presenting to the DVC RI a new budget formula that I have devised for the distribution of funds to academic departments specifically for books and multimedia, which includes print and electronic. The previous formula included research output but, now we have grown our e-resource package budget to some 85 product bundles, we feel that the researchers are adequately covered, for the time being at least. As I walk across the campus the sun is blazing. It's a perfect Zululand winter's day. The presentation goes smoothly, the DVC RI is happy, so I can go on to present it to Library Committee in about ten days' time.

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winter's day.'

A myriad of messages await me in the office when I return some two hours later, but I am hijacked by Mike, the head of the campus physical works division, who has come to see me after several of my complaints. Under normal circumstances, Indrani would have given an unexpected visitor 'the boot', but she knows we have been waiting for responses from this man, so she shows him in. We discuss the erratic air-conditioning problems and then walk down to the basement, where we are in the process of turning the space into a multifunctional area, to be named the 'Info Cellar'. This will house our print journals and provide access to electronic journals and inter-library loans. The area had been used to store little used and old material, but had become a dumping ground. This conversion, which I have planned over several years, will give us 1000sqm of functional space. The electrician has installed unsuitable power outlets on the desks, and I manage to convince Mike to have the points changed – I literally show him pictures of what we need – and we inspect other finishes and aspects of the conversion. Mike is most impressed, though when I started with this project proposal, he was sceptical.

Indrani comes to drag me back upstairs as my next appointment is waiting. The folk from EBSCO have flown in from Johannesburg. My appointment is to meet and greet, discuss some URL issues and pending renewals. Foreign exchange rates are killing us, and our vendors need to see the bigger picture. So it's a combined discussion with both my hats on as Library Director and as Chair of SANLIC.

The EBSCO folk head off to the training venue and I turn my attention back to e-mails. Glenn has come back with proposed dates for Elsevier negotiations. I talk to Indrani and respond with my availability. I'm still responding to e-mails when 'Outlook' buzzes with a reminder for me to go through applications sitting in a file on my desk in preparation for a shortlist committee due to be held the next day. So I drop the e-mails and turn my attention to reviewing the applications. I'm on the third one when Indrani buzzes: I have to take a phone call from ICT regarding computers for the Info Cellar. They have arrived and are being configured, but they are still waiting for the anti-theft cables, therefore installation will be delayed. (So, what's new!) They wanted to phone me and not just e-mail me because they knew I was expecting delivery in two days and they needed to reassure me that the delay is unavoidable. (Yeah, right!)

I'm into application seven when Indrani comes in to remind me that she needs to complete documents with me for the Library Committee meeting agenda. So I drop work on the applications and switch my attention to Library Committee submissions. I make a few edits on the quarterly report and other submissions, and they are good to go: printed, signed and sealed and finally off to Committee.

No way can I get back to the applications file because I'm now off downstairs to a scheduled meeting with a few information librarians. They are working on the programme for Research

96 Month and need my input. Research Month is when we collaborate with the Research office to jointly host activities and events at an intensive level, the aim being to promote research by the academic cohort. We pore over the programme, together with other team members, editing and changing until it suits all of us.



Laila surrounded by some members of her trusty support network (On left of Laila, pointing: Indrani, secretary; on right, seated: Lyudmila, head of the Information Librarian Unit; and from left to right, information librarians Bongi, Zodwa and Grace).

I leave the information librarians to complete the task and head out to an appointment in the human resources (HR) division about my new staffing proposal for 2016. HR knows all about libraries and cannot understand why we need new posts when computers can do all the work! Same argument every year! Armed with pages of notes in support of proposals, we meet, and I painfully lead them through discussions about what we do. It's again going to be a wait-and-see process because the university cannot afford all the new posts that are being requested by all the departments.

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Back in my office, I can only answer a few more e-mails when 16:00 hits. The office day has ended, but the to-do list in my head remains untouched. I pack up the applications file to complete at home. Staying in the office is not an option as I have to collect Kiara before 17:00. I yawn uncontrollably on the drive home, but arrive in one piece at school, where Kiara has been at the homework centre after the end of the formal school day.



At the end of her office day Laila collects granddaughter, Kiara, from school.

- 97 Dinner gets cooked and eaten, homework gets checked, and I'm then dozing on the sofa (while supposedly watching a 'soapie') when Kiara comes to say goodnight. I reluctantly leave the sofa, pull out the file of applications, and look over them aided by several cups of coffee. Then it's back to e-mails and soon I notice it's somehow 1:39. What day is it? Does it matter? It's the cycle of everyday life.

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