

Transforming libraries in Myanmar: the eLibrary Myanmar project

Education reform in Myanmar, particularly in higher education (HE), began in 2011. After many years in a closed society, HE was in dire need of co-operation and collaboration with international institutions and organizations. In 2013 Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) began to work with the Ministry of Education to support HE with the provision of rich online resources. EIFL's eLibrary Myanmar project received funding from the Open Society Foundation's Higher Education Support Programme. During the period of transition to democracy, the whole of Myanmar had to face many challenges. At the same time, there were a lot of chances and opportunities. For example, introducing the use of e-resources to teaching and learning was a key opportunity to improve the quality of education and research.

Based on a breakout session presented at the 39th UKSG Annual Conference, Bournemouth, April 2016

Introduction

All my working life I have been a librarian in Myanmar, since 1985. The years before 2011 were very dark, with all information cut off. Librarians in Myanmar worked in what felt like an enclosed society, and libraries in Myanmar were lacking new and updated materials and facilities in those days.

I stayed a librarian during those bitter days because I believed in the power of access to information. For universities, the impact of being cut off from the international community was distressing: scholarship and teaching stagnated, university infrastructure decayed, library collections were limited, there was a lack of international academic journals, facilities and equipment, and books were outdated.

To me, it felt like university libraries were storehouses that had not been used for decades. Moreover, teachers and students could not get up-to-date books and international academic journals in this closed society. I was worried about how, in that situation, teachers and students could improve their teaching, learning and research, to catch up with the rest of the world.

What is the eLibrary Myanmar project?



The development of the higher education sector depends on academic libraries. That was why the eLibrary Myanmar project¹ was initiated in December 2013. Work began with the two main universities: the University of Yangon and Mandalay University. These are the oldest universities in Myanmar's modern education system and the best known in Myanmar. The universities now offer mainly undergraduate courses, which produce outstanding students, alongside postgraduate degree programmes (bachelor's, master's, postgraduate diploma, and doctorate) in arts and science, political science, international relations and law.



MYAT SANN NYEIN

Local Co-ordinator
Yangon
EIFL eLibrary
Myanmar project

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Later, other universities started approaching the project team, and we could not say no. As a result, there are now seven partner universities: the University of Yangon, Mandalay University, the Yangon University of Economics, Dagon University, Yadanabon University, East Yangon University and West Yangon University. Among those, two universities are located in suburban areas, 30 miles away from downtown Yangon.

Around 166,000 students and 4,000 academic staff in seven universities in Myanmar are currently getting access to a world-class online library containing databases, newspapers, 140,000 e-books and 15,000 e-journals, which have a high commercial value. New and updated course books and academic electronic articles are available to them online.

University libraries in Myanmar have increased internet bandwidth and ICT availability in an effort to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving and technologically advanced work environment and have developed a modern library environment in the higher education system in Myanmar.

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Aims of the project

The main aims of the project were very clear:

- *availability*: to enable access to a comprehensive package of core 'commercial' e-resources
- *discoverability*: to make it as easy as possible for users to discover and access e-resources
- *usage*: to ensure that e-resources (both commercial and open access) are used effectively for the benefit of teaching, learning and research, across all disciplines
- *sustainability*: to assess options for long-term development and sustainability (e.g. opportunities to build a library consortium).

Challenges

There were many challenges to the project, however:

- the role of librarians and libraries had been ignored for five decades
- the importance of libraries and the enhancement of librarians' capacity had also been overlooked
- low bandwidth (but there was no internet at all before the project!)
- difficult for institutions to get static IP addresses
- unreliable electricity supply, especially in summer
- users want a unified search, i.e. Google
- rote learning had been the norm for decades
- some librarians and faculty had poor IT and information literacy skills
- very few libraries were equipped with quality books and most books in Myanmar libraries were outdated or damaged
- very little investment had been made in library development and there is budget constraint on foreign exchange currency by government institutions
- out of 150 universities, most do not have access to the internet, though a few universities have it with very low bandwidth

- no library consortium existed in the past; library co-operation was not encouraged
- lack of an ICT team in the university to oversee the ICT policy and development.

But, levels of enthusiasm are high, and the desire for change among the faculty and librarians is overwhelming, and has given the project great momentum.

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Access to e-resources

To start with, Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) negotiated pricing and licences for a comprehensive range of commercial e-resources; over 40 commercial e-resources are now available to users at seven universities in Myanmar. Free access has been negotiated for the majority of the e-resources in the arts and science subject areas.

Project activities

First step: training for librarians

Librarians were interviewed to identify those with the aptitude to become trainers, and these formed an advanced group of master trainers. Training was then provided to all library staff – everything from basic information literacy (how to use e-mail, etc.) to an introduction to online resources (how best to search, etc.).

Additional training for these advanced groups of librarians was offered – including advanced search/information literacy skills, presentation skills, the importance of building close links with faculty, how to create library Facebook pages to communicate with users and how to market individual databases on its Facebook page.

A long-term action plan was developed to help build the capacity of master trainers to do cascade training with faculty members and students.

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Second step: training for faculty and students

Information literacy and information research skills training enabled academics, students and researchers to make the best use of e-resources and get reliable and credible information and data for their studies. This included raising awareness of the e-resources available to them and showing them why, in order to succeed, they should use scholarly e-resources. The training provided took the form of:

- IT and information literacy skills such as e-mail etiquette, social media, working online to use e-resources effectively
- understanding of the changing landscape of scholarly communications and new forms of research evaluation
- two-day training sessions – 'Introduction to e-resources' and 'EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) hands-on training' – provided to faculty and students in each and every department of the participating universities
- advanced librarians gave database presentations and provided hands-on support during the sessions
- training targeted at different subject areas and tailored to meet the needs of participants in terms of content and level of skills
- publisher presentations and demonstrations
- a series of lecture programmes on 'Digital Information Literacy' was arranged, and e-resource awareness was promoted with visiting professors, to keep abreast of new developments
- library induction sessions were offered on a monthly basis.

General awareness raising and advocacy

Facebook pages were set up and managed by librarians who are now posting regularly about e-resources, training, etc.

The universities and librarians have also been encouraged to develop a university website which includes user-friendly library web pages with information about services, print and electronic collections of the eLibrary. (A university web page improves the image of the institution with the academic society around the world.)

The EIFL local co-ordinators also encourage and support librarians to advocate on behalf of the project, and head librarians now have the confidence to raise issues directly with university rectors, resulting in new computer equipment, improved bandwidth, air conditioning units, etc.

Study tours and programme

In 2015 three senior librarians, three pro-rectors and one professor/head of department in priority subject areas, from the University of Yangon, Dagon University and the University of Mandalay, visited Hong Kong University's Summer Education Programme. This enabled them to see what can be achieved through effective access to e-resources, collaboration between librarians and faculty, and collaboration in a library consortium, and inspired participants to work to transform the libraries and librarians in Myanmar.

In 2016 eight librarians from seven universities in Yangon and Mandalay and two local co-ordinators from the eLibrary Myanmar project had the exciting opportunity to see in detail the work of the academic institutions in Hong Kong University.

Myanmar Academic Library Consortium

University libraries in Myanmar have not previously worked together as a consortium, and it is hoped that, by doing so, it will result in many benefits for academic and library communities. For one thing, continuing subscriptions to e-resources in the longer term will be essential for teaching, learning and research in Myanmar and it is important to start planning for sustainability now.

'it is important to start planning for sustainability now'

As part of the eLibrary Myanmar project, we formed the Myanmar Academic Libraries Consortium (MALC) with nine universities as founding members. MALC focuses on increasing the skills and capacity of librarians with respect to licensing and e-resource management, the need to liaise with academic staff to raise awareness and improve skills, and the need to sustain access to e-resources.

Therefore, MALC will benefit the library and academic community in Myanmar, e.g. significant cost-savings can be achieved through collaboration and it can help to ensure the sustainability of new services such as e-resources available through the EIFL eLibrary Myanmar project.

To bolster the capacity to manage a consortium, EIFL ran a consortium-building workshop in August 2016 with the university librarians participating in the project.

Open access in Myanmar

Scholars in Myanmar are very keen to make their own content available. The key is open access (OA) – unrestricted online access to peer-reviewed scholarly research, a concept widely known internationally, but little known in Myanmar. Since learning about open access, the Universities of Yangon and Mandalay have formed working groups and have had workshops for the development of institutional repositories and OA policies, and EIFL conducted DSpace training (giving an overview of the use and management of this open source software repository application) in March 2016.

A repository will very soon provide a state-wide platform for saving, discovering and sharing – free of charge – the instructional, research, historic and creative materials produced by the Universities of Yangon and Mandalay.

'a state-wide platform for saving, discovering and sharing – free of charge'

EIFL supports a plagiarism checker for the Universities of Yangon and Mandalay and also provides guidelines for copyright and advocates for 'fair use'. It has provided recommendations in drafting a copyright law to the policymakers, for example, and has arranged for a Myanmar representative to attend a copyright seminar in Nepal.

Achievements

The project has resulted in a huge increase in the skills, capacity and confidence of librarians. Librarians have become master trainers and are competent and confident to do cascade training. Librarians are getting out of the library and building close relationships with faculty members, and giving subject-focus presentations/hands-on training to faculty and students on a monthly basis.

'a huge increase in the skills, capacity and confidence of librarians'

The profile of libraries has also increased within the academic society by means of:

- the development of a group of master trainer librarians at each university who are competent and fully confident in supporting students and faculty in the use of e-resources
- power-user groups in each university, skilled to support their colleagues at each faculty department in the use of e-resources
- the creation of *Subject Guides*, that include licensed and OA resources, produced jointly by librarians and faculty
- the creation of a university website with up-to-date information on databases.²

Finally, the project is a catalyst for change as shown by:

- investment by universities in technological infrastructure (new fibre internet lines; eLibrary training room with computers, laptops, etc.). University of Yangon ADSL internet access for 20 departments with limited bandwidth. After launching the eLibrary project, they installed a fibre network with 30 Mbps for access to e-resources. The university administration arranged eLibrary training rooms with more laptops and more computers for students and faculty members
- usage statistics are high since we have been doing a lot of training for librarians, faculty and students with step-by-step guides over the last two years; a great deal has been achieved. They post regularly on new Library Facebook pages (University of Yangon Library – over 8,300 friends since May 2014)
- within two years over 10,000 faculty, librarians and students have been trained how to use high quality e-resources effectively.

Conclusion

Significant results have been achieved with great support from the Open Society Foundation and EIFL for accessing e-books and e-journals in seven universities. The capacity of librarians and their mindset have been changed significantly with a series of workshops and training on EDS and over 40 individual e-resources.

The eLibrary Myanmar project is a milestone for librarians in Myanmar and they are now leading the way in helping faculty and students access high quality resources. The project provides a modern library environment for the HE system in Myanmar. Therefore, access to information and technology through libraries is transforming the lives of librarians and academic outputs. This change happened quickly; from very old print journals to updated online journals in less than two years!

'The eLibrary Myanmar project is a milestone for librarians in Myanmar'

Quotes

'eLibrary Myanmar Project is the turning point for our university: from ordinary library to electronic library. Faculty members, students and researchers can read and download high quality research papers, new edition of e-books, and electronic articles in their departments. One of the advantages is by using eLibrary, many students can read particular book simultaneously. They use e-resources round-the-clock service.'

Dr Kyaw Naing, Pro Rector, University of Yangon (Now Pro Rector, University of Distance Education)

'No one can deny that e-resources are beneficial for legal education. So I am sure that e-resources are beneficial for law department, for legal scholars to find out legal resource collection. It is essential for us.'

Dr Khin Mar Yee, Professor, Law Department, University of Yangon

'The open access repository will enable our university and researchers to establish new international and national research partnerships.'

Rector Dr Thida Win, Mandalay University

'What we learned today, from the e-resources' training, is like finding a treasure of knowledge which is uncovered for all the teaching staff; new technology, new strategy, new skills were introduced to three pillars: Faculty, Students and Librarians for Myanmar Academic Network.'

U Zaw Aung Htut, Lecturer, University of Yangon

I would like to highlight significant moments in the history and development of the academic communities as they come into the networked world; credits to the academic librarians who are the key players of the project – they were delighted at the chance to be in Bournemouth attending the UKSG Conference, 2016 (pictured). It was a great pleasure and honour to be at the UKSG conference and share the challenges and success of eLibrary Myanmar project implemented by EIFL. Thank you.



Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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Myat Sann Nyein

Local Co-ordinator, Yangon
EIFL eLibrary Myanmar Project, MM
E-mail: myatsann.nyein@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7001-7348>

To cite this article:

Nyein, M S, Transforming Libraries in Myanmar: the eLibrary Myanmar Project, *Insights*, 2016, 29(3), 266–272;
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/uksg.319>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 04 November 2016