

## A report on the Second Biennial DISSAnet Conference – Prolissa: Pretoria 2002

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### Introduction

The democratisation of South Africa culminated in changes and growth in the library and information science (LIS) profession. The formation of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) came as a result of such transformation. Unfortunately, most changes were more focused on strengthening the resource base in terms of material and information technologies. Arguably, the skill of utilising these technologies at an advanced level was inappropriate (Wormell 2002). Sewdass (2002) discloses further that very little attention was paid to human resource development, especially in terms of research capabilities. It is believed that through research the LIS profession can make a significant contribution to library and information theory and practice in South Africa and far beyond her borders. Menou and Bishop, Menou, Mchombu and Miti as well as Mlaki in Mchombu (2002) all concur that LIS research should expand its horizons to go beyond the information dissemination and use paradigm. They feel that LIS profession should be an active element of the civil society, democratisation and global community. Fortunately, the challenge can be achieved by conducting research on policy issues at national and international level, whilst on the other hand developing multi-faceted knowledge relevant mostly to the African context. It is thus, crucial that the LIS profession grows and strengthens its resolve to avoid marginalisation as one of those professions that are no longer viable in this new political dispensation. Ultimately, the international development program for LIS research in South Africa DISSAnet was formed by Professors Irene Wormell, Peter Ingwersen of the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen and Theo Bothma of the University of Pretoria in collaboration with the representatives of the Danish International Development (DANIDA) to promote LIS research in South Africa. DISSAnet is the acronym for the Development of Information Science in Southern Africa Network. The project was planned for six weeks over a period of three years, from 1998 to 2000. A total number of 20 registered Masters and Doctoral students were selected from different institutions of higher learning. The main focus of project was to provide and enhance skill's development specifically in scientific research, as well as to provide a platform for networking among LIS practitioners in South Africa. This was achieved through a series of lectures on diverse subject areas and the candidates' active participation in conducting research and presenting and publishing the output in local and international conferences and publications consecutively.

### Conference location

The second biennial conference known as Progress in Library and Information Science in Southern Africa (ProLISSA) was successfully held in the Farm Inn in Pretoria from the 24-25 October 2002. The Farm Inn is about 12km from Pretoria and is a multi-purpose centre, providing accommodation for a number of national and international activities as well as hotel suites. This centre is one of the tourist destinations in South Africa which prides itself on wildlife and an exhilarating natural environment that is free from congestion and pollution of urban life. The environment and the setting in the centre are breathtaking, as it has created a balance between the indigenous and modern architectural monuments and features and names. The centre clearly reflects the multi-cultural dynamics of the South African people and the richness that can be obtained from merging these diverse cultures. The Farm Inn was the most appropriate venue for the LIS conference, as the profession has in past few years formed one professional association for information practitioners LIASA.

### Programme and events

This conference attracted over one hundred and sixty delegates largely from South Africa that included; lectures/professors, students, practitioners in academic, public, special libraries and other information agencies. There were also delegates from Botswana, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Kenya, Namibia, Sweden, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Two keynote speakers delivered informative and challenging papers: Prof. Kingo Mchombu's (University of Namibia) paper on "Which way information sciences research in Africa?" highlighted that the LIS sector in Africa needs to leapfrog

the research process and be more focused on development issues. Researchable areas as indigenous knowledge, HIV/AIDS, civil society and democratisation amongst others were identified. Dr. Kgomotso Moahi's (University of Botswana) paper on "Information science research in southern Africa: are we making the mark?" extended Kingo's paper by challenging LIS practitioners to conduct research in an African context that will contribute to national and regional development and at the same time appeal to the global market.

Twenty-six interesting and unique papers were presented in two days plenary sessions on the following themes:

## **1 Information seeking and use**

- 1.1 An observational study of the information-seeking and communication behavior of entrepreneurs in the informal sector in Uganda, J. Robert Ikoja-Odongo, Makerere University, Uganda.
- 1.1 A comparison of the use of electronic journals for the dissemination of scholarly information by the university of Natal and the University of Zululand, Margaret N. Mgobozi & Dennis N. Ocholla, University of Zululand.
- 1.1 A review of web information-seeking/searching studies (2000-2002) : implications for research in the South African context, Ina Fourie, University of Pretoria.
- 1.1 Internet use, trends and attitudes among academic librarians: a comparative study between the University of Zimbabwe and the University of Zululand, Tinashe Mugwisi & Dennis N. Ocholla, University of Zululand.
- 1.1 E-sources and parliamentary libraries: an insight into their utilization by parliamentarians in South Africa, B. Janneke Mostert, and University of Zululand.

## **2 Education and research capacity**

- 2.1 Mapping and audit of information and communication technologies in library and information science education in Africa: a review of the literature, Mabel K. Minishi Manjanja, University of Zululand.
- 2.2 Teaching practical skills in information organisation for a digital environment by means of project work, Martin S. van der Walt, University of Stellenbosch.
- 2.3 Information technology: an aid or barrier for an undergraduate student to be information literate? Gavin R. Davis, University of the Western Cape.
- 2.4 A study of an international development project in library and information science in South Africa: DISSAnet, Nisha Sewdass, University of Pretoria.

## **3 Informetrics**

- 3.1 South African research in selected scientific areas: status 1981-2000, Peter Ingwersen, Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, Denmark & Daisy Jacobs, University of Pretoria.
- 3.2 Scientometrics of genetic research and development in South Africa, 1990-2001, Daisy Jacobs, University of Pretoria.
- 3.3 An informetric analysis of the corruption literature based on Africa between 1990 and 2001, Omwoyo B. Onyancha & Dennis Ocholla, University of Zululand.
- 3.4 Informetrics and the use of bibliographic data in a strategic combination, Irene Wormell, Swedish School of Library and Information Science, Boras, Sweden.

## **4 Information and knowledge management**

- 4.1 The theme of tacit knowledge in information and knowledge management theory, Christiaan H. Maasdorp, University of Stellenbosch.
- 4.2 The interdependency between strategic management and strategic knowledge management, Retha Snyman, University of Pretoria & Neels Kruger, Department of Defense.
- 4.3 The assessment of corporate knowledge management practices: the role of a reference model, Daan F. Botha & Ben Fouche, University of Stellenbosch.

## **5 Web technologies**

- 5.1 User requirements for storing and retrieving information contained in a large document collection that conforms to human-computer interaction specifications, Paul Bothma, University of Pretoria.
- 5.2 Adaptive online guitar tablature system, Nelis Franken & Etienne J. de Villiers, University of Pretoria.

## **6 Information for development**

- 6.1 Two models and six types of telecentres: a typological experiment, Szilard Molnar & Laszlo Z. Karvalics, Technical University, Budapest, Hungary.
- 6.2 Getting information to disadvantaged rural communities: the centre approach Marithe Snyman, University of Pretoria.
- 6.3 Use of wireless technology and other forms of ICTs in bridging the digital divide in the communication of agricultural information in Sub-Saharan Africa, Joseph Kiplang'at, University of Zululand.

## 7 Cross-language information retrieval

- 7.1 Cross-language information retrieval: using multiple language pairs, Turid Hedlund, Ari Pirkola, Heikki Keskustalo, Eija Airo & Kalervo Jarvelin, University of Tampere, Finland.
- 7.2 Cross-language information retrieval systems: a proposed model for the utilisation of Latin as a pivot language for simultaneous retrieval in multiple Romance languages, John Z. Theophanous & Erica Cosijn, University of Pretoria.
- 7.3 Metadata and cross language information retrieval as complementary technologies to provide access to knowledge databases in indigenous languages, , Erica Cosijn, Theo Bothma, Kalervo Jarvelin, Ari Pirkola & J.G. Nel, University of Pretoria and Tampere, Finland.

One volume of the conference proceedings resulted from the conference. Bothma (2002) indicated that proceedings will also be published electronically on the DISSAnet web site, <http://www.dissanet.com>. and may be downloaded in PDF format free of charge.

### Significance of conference

The conference is significant in several ways: This is the first research project in the LIS sector in the country that local participants together with their international counterparts have achieved a sustainable outcome with concrete results. The initial project was funded by an international funding agency, but local LIS practitioners have also played a prominent role alongside their international counterparts, bringing balance between African and international involvement and commitment. Secondly, it brings together LIS practitioners from different countries, libraries and other related agencies together and is emerging to be one of the greatest regional research conferences. The testimony of its magnitude can be seen from the growing number of participants, the quality of papers in diverse subject areas, the nature and calibre of delegates that included distinguished scholars and prominent professionals from diverse areas. Thirdly, the conference is a clear manifestation that the initial purpose of the project that of developing and enhancing research skills in the country, while on the other hand providing a platform for LIS workers to share ideas and experiences has been successfully achieved. Finally, a new breed of researchers will emerge through this practical initiative and this may have a snowball effect that can ultimately motivate and regenerate other LIS workers to get involved in research. Furthermore, through ProLISSA the African paradigm of LIS research will improve and extend to those areas that are crucial to the development of the continent and at the same time have global relevance.

### Challenges

Essentially there is need to refine and re-configure LIS research agenda. Practitioners need to focus on applied research that is more development oriented to address problems that are mostly pertinent to information services in the African continent. The conference has to be marketed more aggressively and widely so as to inform and attract a wider audience. Though, the second biennial DISSAnet conference was a success, the challenge of improvement by making sure that the third one, which will be held in 2004, will reach even greater heights is crucial. Most papers presented were by delegates from academic institutions. There is a need to widen and diversify the scope of future contributions to include participants from other LIS sectors so as to enrich the quality of the conference. Strong collaboration with similar initiatives and other stakeholders not only in the LIS sector but other subject areas should be considered to make the project to be multi-disciplinary as information is embedded in other social issues.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt now that through initiatives that promote collaboration similar to this conference quality LIS research output can be strengthened and it will contribute significantly to development of a strong knowledge base that is generated locally. Such forum can alter the problem of having few researchers in the LIS field, as more and more researchers emerge from this undertaking. The sharing of resources and expertise will also enhance capacity building in research skills. The added advantage to South Africa is that there are government institutions that support financially research projects. This shows that the South African government is committed to supporting progressive research in the country in a variety of fields. It is upon the Library and information professionals to identify relevant research themes that can bring development and progress to the entire country.

### References

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- Wormell, Irene. 2000. Background of the DISSAnet: development of an information science research network in the Republic of South Africa. ProLISSA: In: Irene Wormell (ed.), Progress in Library and Information Science in Southern Africa. Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Biannual DISSAnet Conference, 25-27 October, Pretoria: Centre for Information Development and the University of Pretoria.

## Book review

*Human resources for library and information services (East, Central and Southern Africa)*, Julita Nawe.

Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press; xvi, 208p. ISBN 9976 60 341 X. Price not known

The book focuses on a broad spectrum of issues regarding of human resources and related issues in library and information services (LIS) in the East, Central and Southern African regions. There is also a strong focus on the problems facing the library and information workforce in these regions, as well as suggested solutions, such as the establishment of links between information professionals with those in other professions and the users; the quality and practical aspects of the training programmes; the need for LIS professionals to recognise, embrace and manage change; and the necessity for consensus in solutions to unique problems in the profession.

With regard to the management of library and information services in the Central, Eastern and Southern African regions, it is argued that the perennial complaint about the low status of information professionals should be confronted and that harmonisation among all parties be promoted. One of the ways of dealing with this problem is by the LIS education institutions offering continuing education courses to bridge the changes in knowledge and competencies in the field.

On LIS employer perspectives and problems related to human resources, several factors are highlighted. For example, often there is a lack of autonomy to be able run professional and management issues which in turn frustrates the initiative in those attempting to undertake this; there is a lack of research on management problems so that accurate information for successful decision-making can be generated; there is unsatisfactory remuneration, terms and conditions of service in the field, which can result in a “brain drain” to greener pastures; and there is a lack of effort to identify causes of problems and find solutions.

With regard to the education and training of information professionals, several issues of concern are identified. These are the need to evaluate current education programmes so that they are able to incorporate changes in the field, and the consolidation of career mobility in view of the challenges from information and communication technology (ICT) and alternative sources of information. It is important that the education institutions’ curricula take into account the latest information with regard to user needs, processing, control and accessing of information materials, interpersonal skills and service evaluation techniques.

Finally, the book stresses proposals for a positive future in LIS human resource management. These include cultivation of cooperation between employers and practitioners; identification of root causes of problems in LIS human resources and possible solutions; and learning from past mistakes in order to produce knowledgeable and committed information professionals.

In summary, the book is an illustration of well-researched, well-written and illustrated work, making it a suitable text for human resource managers, policymakers, administrators, educators, practitioners and other stakeholders in the library and information fields in all developing countries. LIS students studying human resource management at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels will benefit from the book.

The author, Professor Nawe, is currently the Director of the University of Dar es Salaam’s Library Services, a distinguished scholar and LIS educationist – the founder and teacher of the MA Library and Information Studies course at University of Dar es Salaam. She is also an experienced information professional and LIS consultant who has successfully managed several consultancies in Tanzania. These attributes coupled with wide research in education, extensive travel and practical experience in UK, USA and Africa, make her one of the most qualified persons to author a book on human resources in the library and information fields.

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