



Leadership Skills and Advocacy for Libraries : Best Practices in Library Association Management, the Singapore Experience

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Meeting: 83. Management of Library Associations, Continuing Professional
Development and Workplace learning with ALP
Simultaneous Interpretation: English-French and French-English only

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract

The Library Association of Singapore (LAS) was set up in 1955 by a group of 36 passionate librarians to promote professionalism, and to facilitate networking and learning from each other. Today, LAS is a 400-strong library association that serves a variety of libraries, both in the public and private sector.

This paper describes the work that LAS does to promote librarianship, build capacity and capability for the library industry in Singapore, and nurture the profession.

Background

The Library Association of Singapore (LAS) had its roots with the Malayan Library Group which was formed in 1955. When Singapore became independent in 1965 and was separated from Malaya, the LAS separated from the Malayan Library Association and became an independent association. It now serves a membership of some 400 members.

Like most library associations, the LAS organises regular professional development programmes and social programmes. These aim at bringing the profession together to network, exchange ideas, share and learn from each other, and leverage on each others' skills and strengths. It also participates in various advocacy opportunities such as participating in career fairs, and jointly organizing a national library week with the National Library Board of Singapore. In addition, it takes on a leading role in longer term projects such as designing and implementing a Professional Development Scheme and working with a national agency on developing competencies to build capacity and capabilities for the profession.

Professional Development and Social Programmes

Training and development programmes are bread-and-butter programmes organized by the LAS to enhance the capability of the profession. These include courses that focus on trends and the latest developments such as the use of new media in library services, or traditional library skills that are still important in today's world, for eg. public speaking skills.

LAS also organises social events to facilitate networking and building of bridges between librarians across libraries. These include courses such as on baking, and a sharing session by one library that uses new media to enable collaboration on reference enquiry work using a web-based wiki-like platform.

In 2007, LAS made an agreement with the National Library Board (NLB)'s training arm called the NLB Academy to open NLBA's professional and para-professional courses to the LAS. These include courses on writing book reviews, writing for professional journals, metatagging in Dublin Core, reference enquiry work and storytelling skills.

Will also organize other updating and networking opportunities for our members such as conferences, workshops and talks by prominent visiting librarians.

Singapore Library Week

For the first time in history, the LAS and the NLB organised a nation-wide Singapore Library Week in Nov 2007. Together, the two agencies garnered enough support to run a 6-page supplement on libraries and librarians in the national newspaper called the Straits Times, and a 4-page supplement in another newspaper called The New Paper. The initiative brought together over 40 libraries to organize events for the public to help them understand better what librarians do, and to showcase what goes behind the scene in libraries.

Apart from bringing librarians from all over Singapore to work together on the project, strengthening ties between libraries and librarians, these are excellent opportunities for the profession to develop leadership qualities and skills in those who took part in the organisation and running of the programmes.

The media publicity that came about due to the programmes helped raise the visibility of librarians and promote the profession. It reminded the general public and clientele of these libraries of the impact that libraries make in their work and lives.

President's Reception for Librarians and Information Professionals

A reception will be held at the Istana (the President's official residence) in May 2008 for the President of Singapore to honour and recognise librarians for their continuing useful and impactful role in society, especially in this interconnected knowledge age. Hosted by the President, the coverage by local media will help make visible the contributions by librarians in the development of Singapore. We hope this celebration will be an annual event.

LAS Innovation Conference and Exhibition

As part of the strategy to develop the profession, and to give greater recognition to librarians for the work done in their innovations, the LAS is organising a conference in May 2008 to celebrate and to showcase the efforts taking place in libraries here. Some 250 librarians have signed up for this event.

The Conference and Exhibition aims at bringing the state-of-the-art innovations in library products and services to one place for all Singapore librarians to share and to learn from each other. Both libraries and library vendors will participate in this. It provides an excellent opportunity for libraries to network with each other, apart from learning and sharing.

Speaking at conferences such as this is a wonderful professional development activity, and we feel that it is good for local librarians to have a regular platform to share their learning experiences, and to learn from it. These activities contribute to leadership training as well, both for the organisers, and for those who play an active role to help it succeed.

LAS in Careers Fairs

In Feb 2008, the LAS took part in a 2-day Career Fair organised for the fresh graduates from the National University of Singapore. Over 500 fresh graduates visited the LAS booth to learn more about the profession, and all 500 brochures on job openings in libraries were taken. Within two weeks of the career fair, five libraries received applications for jobs from these graduates. Promoting the profession through these channels help us to spread our influence and reach a wider audience. We aim to do this once annually to spread the word about librarianship to the younger generation of job seekers.

The following section describes projects that we hope will benefit librarians in Singapore over a longer term period.

Professional Development Scheme

Two years ago, the LAS and the NLB set up a joint Committee to look into the development of competencies of professional librarians. This resulted in a proposal for a Professional Development Scheme (PDS) that recognizes the effort put in by librarians to develop themselves professionally and personally. The scheme comprises a point system where librarians who have attended courses relevant to their professional work, written papers for professional journals, spoken at conferences or did a certain number of hours of professional reading would be eligible for points attached to each development activity. On attaining a minimum number of points over two years, the librarian will be awarded a Practising Professional status. The librarian can use this status to seek opportunities that could make use of his or her expanded capabilities.

The PDS scheme is currently being fine-tuned for implementation. The target date for this to happen is expected to be later part of 2008.

Workforce Development Agency Partnership Programme

In mid-2007, the Singapore national agency called Workforce Development Agency (WDA) approached the LAS to explore the need for a longer term development programme to expand the capacity and capability of the library profession.

WDA has been tasked to help Singapore professionals in different fields upgrade themselves continually to keep up with the changing social demands, and the technologies.

In Dec 2008, LAS decided that it would undertake this national competency development programme with WDA to identify competencies needed by the profession, develop competency maps and standards for each of the competencies, and develop courses to upgrade and to build capacity and capability for librarians in Singapore. This is a multi-year project that will be funded by the WDA, supported by the government. Course fees will also be subsidised by the WDA when courses begin.

The working team had completed the competency map, and will be working on the competency standards and courses. It is expected that the whole planning process will take 18 months before actual results can be seen.

Challenges

Like most smaller library associations, LAS members do the work for the association at their own time and pace. There is no paid staff to do most of the work, except for some part-time help, when they are required and available. This means that progress is usually painfully slow, and short term project work is usually more feasible than long term projects, as most members are not able to commit time for projects that last too long.

In Singapore, it is also not easy to find enough members who are willing to make time for their profession, as they are usually very tied up with their own professional work at their respective libraries, and do not have much time to spare for this work.

Getting younger librarians interested in LAS work is another challenge. Though we had an idea to start a new section in the association for young librarians, it was not easy for us to find a critical mass to make this happen!

Results

Though the LAS has been going strong for more than 50 years, and though it has played a continuing professional role in the development of librarians and para-professionals, my own sense is that there is room to do more.

In terms of regular training programmes and development courses, we have done what we could, given the constraints. In terms of visibility, during the past year, we were able to create more of this in the last 12 months. Like most library association we are also challenged to find solutions to boost our image and promote our importance in the knowledge economy.

Have we developed enough leadership to help more to succeed? I would say that we have given many more members the opportunities to discover their own potential and to practice and nurture their leadership skills, outside their individual working spaces. This would add to the strength of the profession, certainly.

What we did not do enough is to leverage on the collective knowledge and experience of members to help more members to shorten their learning curve. A LAS-wide mentoring programme where newer librarians, or librarians moving into new areas can look for mentors who have experience in these areas to help shorten the learning curve. These are programmes we can consider doing in future.

Conclusion

Any library association depends on the contribution and commitment of its members to make it work. I am fortunate to have a team of very dedicated Council Members who are willing to put in time and make the extra effort to help the association grow.

There is still a lot to do in terms of advocacy, and in terms of leadership development. When the PDS and the programme with the WDA are in place, I will be more confident that we can make concrete progress in the years to come.

References

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Biodata

Ngian, currently President of the LAS, is also the Director of the National Library, and Deputy Chief Executive of the National Library Board of Singapore. She has served in various capacities in the LAS and was voted in for a 2-year term in Mar 2007. Her term as President ends in Mar 2009.

Ngian enjoys her work at the National Library and is grateful to have a chance to serve the LAS as President, especially at this time when libraries play a critical role in Singapore and as Singapore focuses on using knowledge as its critical resource. World.Singapore is the latest initiative by the Singapore government to reach the world and for the world to be brought to Singapore. Libraries are seen as a critical component of this national effort.