

# **COLLABORATION AND SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE: THE ROLE OF CONSORTIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper argues that library consortia can play a role in collaboration and in sharing information as well as in sharing knowledge. It provides an overview of the development of library consortia; it refers to the characteristics of library consortia and focuses on collaboration and sharing information as well as other resources and knowledge in library consortia. It focuses on academic library consortia, but it is important to note that most principals apply to library consortia in other sectors as well.

Librarians and libraries have a long and successful history of collaboration. A natural development resulting from this is the development of library consortia.

Reference is made to the shared approach of consortia to solve challenges and to enhance service delivery in member institutions.

The paper illustrates that staff of member libraries gain considerable experience and knowledge through their regular interaction with staff of other member libraries. Examples of opportunities for colleagues to share knowledge at meetings, training sessions, site visits, and information sessions, etc. are provided.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Imagine a country where all schools, universities, technikons and libraries are electronically interconnected and where information is distributed electronically to these institutions and their users. Furthermore, imagine a country with state-of-the-art shared telecommunications systems that makes these interconnections possible and where all citizens have access to these systems.

There is still a very long way to go towards such an ideal world of collaboration and sharing of information. There is even more to achieve when one considers the challenges of sharing knowledge.

This paper argues that library consortia can play a role in achieving such an ideal situation. It provides an overview of the development of library consortia, refers to the characteristics of library consortia and focuses on collaboration and sharing information as well as other resources and knowledge in library consortia. It focuses on academic

library consortia, but it is important to note that most principals apply to library consortia in other sectors as well.

Most examples in this paper refer to the Gauteng and Environ Library Consortium (GAELIC). GAELIC is the largest academic library consortium in South Africa and currently has 16 academic library members.

Academic libraries and their services are an integral part of teaching and learning. They form a partnership with faculty, researchers, publishers, students and funding agencies. Librarians and libraries are known for their willingness to share resources and knowledge. They have a long and successful history of collaboration. This is mainly a result of the nature of the service provision as well as the severe budget constraints in which the libraries operate. The use of technology also enhances and facilitates collaboration.

Libraries are facing increasing demands for resources and services and at the same time declining levels of human and financial resources. Libraries can therefore not provide these services successfully on their own. A natural development resulting from this situation is the development of library consortia.

## **2. DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARY CONSORTIA**

### **2.1 Early developments**

The USA is often seen as the home of library consortia or “networks” as they were formerly known. Regional networks developed as early as the 1930s as a means of distributing state funds for libraries. These were developed further in the 70s and 80s. A primary reason was the promotion of reciprocal borrowing or collection sharing facilitated by the advent of union catalogues and serials listings. Another reason was the sharing of library systems.

### **2.2 1990s**

In the 1990s many of these catalysts remain in place, but a new and powerful major motivation to form groups has been the pooling of purchasing and negotiation power for electronic database licences and services.

### **2.3 Consortia of consortia**

Over the past ten years many new groups – large and small, formal and informal - have developed specifically to deal with electronic database licensing. These groups, together with existing regional networks, have formed consortia of consortia or mega-consortia such as the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC). ICOLC is an information consortium with over 60 member consortium organisations in the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, South Africa and Europe.

eIFL.net is also an example of an international consortium of library consortia operating in 40 countries worldwide. eIFL.net leads, negotiates, supports and advocates for the wide availability of information by library users in member countries. It also facilitates the sharing of knowledge across countries by encouraging members to share documents developed in library consortia on their web site.

## **2.4 Recent developments**

Later the emphasis on electronic database licences has expanded further to include the cooperative provision of database services from servers owned by the consortium. New consortia, such as OhioLink, were also formed to provide a common database system with the benefit of state funding. Another model for providing databases from a shared server is where the server is housed at one member institution within the consortium. Software can be licensed to that institution, and the package includes the staff to manage and operate the system.

Other incentives for collaboration have been facilitated by developments in technology, for example virtual union catalogues and Web-based, client-initiated interlibrary loans. Another impetus for co-operation is the focus on best practice. Several groups have been formed for the purpose of negotiating supply arrangements for books and serials with regional consortia entering into agreements with vendors. Virtual reference collection and virtual reference services are also motivations for collaborative action.

Library consortia and the combinations and services offered are developing and expanding rapidly. The underlying motivation remains the same, namely the sharing of increasingly expensive library collections in the most cost-effective manner for mutual benefit and general cost-savings.

All these factors have also played a role in the development of consortia in South Africa.

Relevant to the theme of this conference, it is important to note that a major incentive for collaboration has evolved and this is the sharing of knowledge to enhance service delivery and ultimately to benefit the users of the member libraries of consortia.

## **3. CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBRARY CONSORTIA**

Modern library consortia have a wide variation in funding, governance and operations. They also vary in terms of the types of institutions represented in their membership and the extent to which its operations are centralised or distributed. In most cases library consortia deal with representatives of member institutions and not directly with students and faculties. On a more strategic level consortia deal with national or international collaboration. An important factor determining the operations of library consortia is the level of centralisation. Some library consortia receive most of their funding from a central agency; others are funded by the contributions of members. Some assume central responsibility for managing services and others outsource this to service providers.

### **3.1 Consortia models**

Library consortia around the world are organised in various models. These range from informal gatherings of library directors for the purpose of sharing information and promoting a united front to formal operations either sponsored by a single member institution or owned by all member institutions through a separate incorporated entity. Consortia also develop through various phases, depending on the changes needed to remain relevant to their members.

#### **Provision of services**

The need and requirements of the members will determine the model and the activities of the consortium.

Activities usually include reciprocal borrowing, interlibrary loan arrangements, negotiating database licences and human resources development. They can also include union catalogue linking. These activities do not require a formal legal structure and the members operate independently. However, the provision of joint services requires that the consortium provide service to end-users on behalf of the consortium members. These include electronic database systems (not only negotiating licences), union catalogues, shared library systems, shared interlibrary loan systems, digital facilities and physical co-operative storage facilities. Joint services can be utilised by all members or alternately members can participate in different services over time.

In addition to the borrowing agreements made possible by shared online catalogues, library consortia offer online collections for students and faculty members of institutions.

Virtual library consortia focus on acquiring digital information with online access and authentication to students and faculties. This service now also includes millions of journal articles available from some consortia. There is no doubt that unit cost of electronic information can be reduced significantly through consortia licenses.

Technology enhances the sharing of individual collections through electronic document delivery and online catalogues. This has resulted in a need to train the users to find the information and to promote information literacy. This provides an opportunity for colleagues to share experience and knowledge and is further described in item 4.2.3.

Library consortia can also provide many other services to improve customer services, for example a delivery system for interlibrary lending, common solutions for collecting fees for printing and photocopying, or developing a consortia curriculum for an effective information literacy programme.

These are merely some examples of the services performed by consortia and only a brief overview of these services.

### **3.3 Funding**

Consortia have different models of funding. Some operate without funding and others receive some form of grant funding. In South Africa the academic consortia receive grant funding and some also contribute annual subscription fees.

Annual membership fees are generally on a sliding scale according to the size of budget of the members, number of transactions, number of clients, size of collections, etc.

Some include a base fee that allows for some equalisation of costs between small and large institutions on the premise that basic consortium activities benefit all members similarly.

The annual fee usually covers staffing and the costs for the basic functions performed by the consortium and used by all members. For projects involving subsets of members or major additional cost requirements, there is usually a fee for service or a sharing of the costs on some basis agreement by the participants.

### **3.4 Staffing**

Informal consortia have no designated staffing and it is completely a voluntary effort to run the projects. However, if some members wish to advance the cause of co-operation more than others, they must carry the burden. Appointing designated staff is seen as more business-like and more clearly identifies the costs of co-operation than the purely voluntary approach. When the consortium projects move beyond collaborative efforts to the joint provision of services, the need for co-ordination and some level of joint responsibility becomes apparent. With the joint provision of services comes the need for operational resources, for clear and frequent communication with the member libraries and for the co-ordination of the members' activities with the service provider. This requires the appointment of staff who are independent of any member library.

### **3.5 Legal structure**

Library consortia become more formal if they wish to own assets in common or need to take on contractual obligations in their own right. In library consortia these assets are likely to be hardware, software licenses, a union database or even a building. At this point a consortium usually initiates the process of becoming a legal entity.

As indicated earlier, consortia often develop from a stage where they are not incorporated but operate services that depend on jointly owned infrastructure. Ownership will impact on the way annual costs are met. Some are state funded, while others are funded by members. Where institutions pay the majority of the costs, the issue of equal ownership and transparency becomes significant.

Once incorporated, there are small ongoing administration costs even if the consortium provides no services and does not own assets. While this is not a major burden, the filing

of organisation returns, auditing accounts and holding required meetings all constitute an overhead. An active consortium requires a responsible officer, accommodation and staffing to support services that incur costs.

There are also problems in informal arrangements, with formal institution-to-institution agreements. The most important is the question of liability. The consortium would need to ascertain whether each member of the executive is personally liable not just for his/her own actions but also for the actions of others. Success in informal arrangements may depend on the key individuals involved. Unless institution-to-institution agreements are very carefully drafted, they can be exceedingly burdensome to administer. Depending on the decision-making procedures at member institutions, decisions could be delayed. Difficulties may arise because those participants not running any joint system or service may develop unfair and unreasonable expectations of their colleagues at other institutions.

Even when legalised, the consortium could still choose to outsource some of its services and systems. The benefit of this is that the company would be experienced in providing services on a business basis, the process would be transparent, each consortium member would be on an equal footing with the supplier and the contractual arrangements could be more easily enforced. The disadvantage could be that the commercial service is likely to be more expensive than a not-for-profit consortium that operates as a legal entity.

### **3.6 Organisational structures**

Most consortia of any model and sizes have substantial committee structures in place. This facilitates participation at many levels among members. It also ensures a sense of commitment by the staff of member institutions and maximises the relevance and usefulness of services offered. Consortia usually use technology (email, video conferencing, telephone and telephone conferencing) to complement meetings and in some instances to reduce face-to-face contact. This could be helpful when there are huge distances between members, but it would be wise to start off with face-to-face interactions when developing a new consortium.

GAELIC reviews its structures every three years to ensure that they remain relevant in the changing environment. The Governing Board provides leadership to GAELIC, its teams, work groups, projects and finances and all member libraries are represented on the Board. The Strategic Management Team (SMT) manages GAELIC and the leaders of the teams are members of the SMT. The Information Resources Team, Human Resources Team and Information and Communication Technology Team and various work groups facilitate the implementation of the strategies identified for GAELIC.

These structures provide the opportunities for staff of member libraries to share knowledge with others. In addition to the meetings, workshops and training sessions focused on the areas of responsibility are arranged. Examples are discussed in item 4.

### **3.7 Management structure**

Some informal consortia recognise the value of having designated staff to focus on the needs of the group. Some appoint an Executive Director very early in their development. The responsibilities of Executive Directors in consortia vary. They usually play a leadership role and work closely with the Executive Management Team. The description of responsibilities will depend on the nature and needs of the consortium

GAELIC has operated with volunteer staff for several years and has progressed well because of the organisational structures and the commitment of members. However, it became evident that due to time constraints of staff and the vision to expand the membership of GAELIC, it was necessary to appoint a full-time Director.

## **4. COLLABORATION AND SHARING**

### **4.1 Inequalities**

A few large libraries have the most information resources and many libraries have small collections. This inequity becomes more evident as more information is available electronically. There is clearly a divide between the “information haves” and the “information have nots”. This situation also applies when considering human resources and knowledge in institutions.

Library consortia play an important role in eliminating the inequitable distribution of information and knowledge by facilitating collaboration and the sharing of resources and knowledge. Library consortia have become known for their shared approach to solve challenges and to enhance service delivery in member institutions. Staff of member libraries gain considerable experience and knowledge through their regular interaction with staff from member libraries. Some of the sharing of knowledge happens informally, but it is mostly planned and structured in a formal way within the structures of consortia.

#### **Facilitating collaboration and sharing within a consortium**

As indicated earlier, library consortia have developed beyond the sharing of information resources and systems as a main focus. Experience has revealed that library consortia create suitable opportunities for members to share their knowledge and experience as well. They provide excellent opportunities for networking, training and capacity building. By sharing knowledge and assisting one another, successful co-operative efforts contribute to a positive image and a better professional identity. Library consortia therefore create opportunities to build capacity and to broaden the knowledge base of the members in a consortium.

#### **4.2.1 System implementation and management**

Libraries need much support and assistance for the implementation of a new system and for the ongoing maintenance and updates of the system. Consortia can play an important role by establishing an implementation team and system work group to assist members with this. Colleagues can share their knowledge and assist others by site visits and telephone assistance. The additional benefits of utilising colleagues from the member institutions to participate in the implementation team are to build capacity in the consortium and to save on costs. It is also recommended that a Project Manager be appointed for system implementation. Although this will usually be at an additional cost, the members can share the cost and will benefit from the expertise of a full-time professional and they will save on time. The successful implementation and maintenance of the system on each member site is crucial for the success of the consortium.

The Information and Technology Communication Team of GAELIC facilitates the optimal use of information and communication technology in and among GAELIC libraries. The team share information technology expertise and knowledge and solve problems through site visits and training workshops. A specialised work group manages and co-ordinates all issues relating to the development, co-ordination and maintenance of the library system. Colleagues assist one another with system upgrades and implementation of additional modules. Informal and formal opportunities are created to share knowledge and to train colleagues.

#### **4.2.2 Negotiations for access to information, systems and products**

Libraries always had to negotiate for affordable information resources. This was almost always done individually. Library consortia now provide member libraries opportunities of expanding their service offerings at a lower cost with site licenses for the purchase of electronic resources. These developments have effected a new dimension in negotiations in the library industry and pose some distinctive challenges to the members and the consortia.

To ensure optimal use of funds and optimal access to information, consortia develop collection development strategies and evaluation criteria for information products. Within this context, library consortia provide another opportunity to share knowledge and experience.

Workshops and training sessions on these topics provide an opportunity for staff of member libraries to share their knowledge and experiences in negotiations, collection development, etc. with others. These workshops and training sessions also encourage networking and promote collaboration in this area to the benefit of all members.

Library consortia can also negotiate affordable prices for systems, services and products and all members can benefit from the joint purchasing of these. Staff with experience and knowledge in negotiating affordable licensing agreements, discounts for systems and products, etc. can share their knowledge and experience with others in the consortium.

#### **4.2.3 User education**

User education has always been an important service in the library and information industry to ensure that users fully optimise the information resources available to them in various formats. With the development of virtual consortia as described earlier, the need to train users to find information in the digital libraries has increased.

Library consortia provide the opportunity for staff of member libraries to share their knowledge and experience relating to user education with staff of other libraries. GAELIC (Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium) has established a work group on user education to facilitate the optimum utilisation, access to and sharing of information resources to the benefit of members by enhancing information literacy and lifelong learning. The work group host workshops for user education librarians of member libraries. Staff can share their experience and knowledge on practical aspects of developing effective user education programmes for students and faculty.

### **Changed needs of users**

The rapid growth of library consortia presents libraries with more partners than ever before to help work through the challenges of changed customer services needs. Many library staff members have difficulty dealing with the pace of change in the information industry and the changed needs of users. These staff members were not always trained to meet these demands and such lack of training could result in poor service delivery. Ongoing training is very important and within consortia, workshops and training sessions can focus on this need. Colleagues with experience can share their knowledge with others and assist with the training.

### **Customer services and assistance at all hours**

Libraries are increasingly expected to provide customer services and assistance 24 hours per day, seven days per week. This can be done by telephone, email or inter-active chat assistance, but such services are expensive especially if there are few callers. However, a consortium can achieve economy of scale by providing the service to all users of member institutions. This can be combined with a knowledge database and some questions can be referred for further action. This provides an opportunity for experts to share their knowledge with users of member libraries in the consortia. The management and maintenance of the service also facilitate collaboration on service provision

#### **4.2.6 Evaluation of services**

Library consortia can also help member libraries improve their operating processes. Consortia are in a position to provide objective assessment about current library processes and operations in cataloguing, acquisitions, circulation, technology and services. Sharing experiences and analysing these, as well as recommendations on how to make operations more productive can be shared.

#### **4.2.7 Training and workshops**

The Human Resources Team of GAELIC co-ordinate and provide a regional support, training and development infrastructure for GAELIC members. The team assesses the training needs of members annually and plans training workshops and sessions accordingly.

Training on various aspects can be arranged, for example training for libraries interested in developing digital library programmes and services, financial management, cataloguing, information services, system maintenance, collection development, negotiating skills, etc.

Colleagues with knowledge and experience in the various areas can provide the training and promote collaboration and sharing among members.

#### **4.2.8 Marketing and communication**

Marketing and communication in consortia are very important to ensure that members are informed of the progress. It is also important to create an awareness of the benefits of collaboration and to encourage participation in projects, which in turn benefit all members. A consortium also needs to ensure that it creates and maintains a positive image with all stakeholders. Stakeholders include possible donors, government, the broader library community, etc.

The Marketing Work Group of GAELIC co-ordinates an annual “GAELIC and Friends Marketing Fair” This is an opportunity for libraries to showcase their marketing expertise and to share their knowledge with others.

The GAELIC web site and newsletter provide opportunities for sharing of information and knowledge.

#### **4.2.9 Member profile and database of knowledge**

To facilitate collaboration and the sharing of knowledge consortia can create and continuously update a database of member profiles. Apart from detailed knowledge, the database information on IP address ranges, user population sizes, subject interests and expertise, current e-resources offered and institutions’ contact information would enhance collaboration and the sharing of knowledge.

Library consortia can also develop and maintain an ongoing programme of sharing ideas, expertise and best practices across a broad spectrum of issues. The Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) established a task force to determine these needs and to identify appropriate information.

GAELIC has established a Management Information Work Group to obtain and maintain

up to date statistics and management information on GAELIC. This information is shared within the consortium to create an awareness of the information and knowledge available and to promote collaboration.

#### **4.2.10 National Plan for Higher Education of South Africa**

Academic libraries need to develop their services and resources in order to support their institutions comply with challenges in Higher Education.

GAELIC's objectives are aligned with the goals and required outcomes of the National Plan for Higher Education. GAELIC supports member libraries with their planning and provides opportunities for colleagues to share their experiences and knowledge to the benefit of others.

In general participation in GAELIC has paved the way for libraries to plan integrated library services within the proposed mergers. This is not only because of the use of a shared library system, but also because of the existing collaboration on resources and services and the sharing of experiences and knowledge with colleagues.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

These are by no means exhaustive examples to demonstrate that library consortia can play a vital role in collaboration and sharing of knowledge but only a brief overview.

It is however clear that sharing knowledge and skills and preventing duplication saves time, resource and ultimately money for members of the consortium.

The financial benefits of collaboration are always more evident than less tangible benefits. These benefits are also emphasised in times of severe budget constraints. However, the less tangible benefits of collaboration and sharing of knowledge proved to be very important in the long term.

It is therefore important to note that opportunities for colleagues to share knowledge at meetings, training sessions, site visits, and information sessions, etc. benefit all members of the consortium. Furthermore these opportunities lead to opportunities for networking and in turn this lead to enhanced collaboration and cost savings.

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