

Experiences from a programme of professional development in Wales

A time well spent



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Introduction

This article recounts the experiences of an Indian library professional who has undertaken a programme of professional development with Cardiff University libraries and other higher education and national libraries across Wales for professional development purposes. The visit took place over a period of approximately three weeks in the summer of 2018, and was organised in collaboration with staff at Cardiff University and with WHELFL (the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum).

Higher education in India

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world and has expanded at a fast rate by more than eight million students in the past decade. There has been a gradual paradigm shift from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning, as it is recognised that students need to acquire skills for lifelong learning (Oinam, 2017).

Higher education libraries in India stand at the crossroads. Integration of IT is paramount to ensure their future development as India progresses towards becoming a knowledge-based economy, and libraries also need to respond effectively to the shift towards student-centred learning approaches.

The current situation of higher education libraries in India is best understood against the backdrop of India's IT revolution since the early 1990s, which marked a watershed moment in India's socio-economic development. The growth of Indian IT companies not only heralded the arrival of India into the realm of IT entrepreneurship, but also marked the inception of the information age characterised by what Castells (1996) calls the 'informational mode of development'. Castells perceives this 'informational mode of development' as a new stage of capitalism, where information is the new capital that drives the economic process. The fundamental 'restructuring' of capitalism has two aspects: technological and organisational: *technological* is evidenced by increased profit margin, greater emphasis of the role of the state in reinforcing the technological infrastructure than on redistribution of profits and the increasing internationalisation of the economy; while *organisational* is evidenced by an increasing reliance on human capital, downgrading of blue-collar labour, the rise of networked organisations and the pronounced shift from strictly centralised organisations to decentralised networks. However, the IT revolution within public services did not happen until the early 2000s. Academic libraries in higher education have, until recently, largely ignored IT developments, and consequently Indian library staff and users are unable to capitalise on the fast-changing information landscape.

There have been significant recent developments around open access and the use of open source solutions in India. Researchers and professionals released the Delhi Declaration on Open Access on 14 February (Open Access India, 2018) to further the cause of openness in scholarly communications. This has resulted in the slow growth of open access publishing in India, with over two hundred active open access journals now available, according to the Directory of Open Access Journals.

The release of the Indian government's *Policy on open standards for e-governance* (Hariharan, 2010) was welcomed, as it provided government services to the populace in a cost-effective, transparent and efficient manner. However, not all open initiatives have been successful, particularly the Delhi Declaration on Open Access, which has yet to make an impact within the scholarly communications realm. Furthermore, the current legal framework coupled with the current pace of innovation has resulted in a lack of standards, a dearth of proper legislation on issues relating to privacy and a virtual absence of data anonymisation frameworks.

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The limited development of information literacy as an academic practice has led to poor information and digital literacy skills for both staff and students. Concepts such as user experience design are also virtually unheard of in the Indian higher education environment and the student voice has minimal impact on curriculum and service design.

Very few academic libraries have special collections, and among these, there has been very limited activity around digitisation. Finally, there is not a strong culture of collaboration across Indian higher education libraries.

A professional visit

Given this context, I decided to visit a UK higher education library to learn more about how library services are being developed and delivered in the UK. I approached Cardiff University library as it has a strong reputation for information literacy development and innovation, which was a long-standing area of professional interest. Cardiff kindly agreed to host a month-long professional visit so that I could understand more about how their services are designed and delivered. I also had the opportunity to spend time in other higher education and research institutions in Wales, including Swansea University Library, Aberystwyth University Library, the iSchool at Aberystwyth University, the National Library of Wales, NHS libraries in Wales, University of South Wales, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and Cardiff Metropolitan University. Many thanks to WHELF for arranging these visits. I also spent some time at the international EAHIL (European Association for Health Information and Libraries) conference, which was taking place in Cardiff at the time of my visit.

Observations from the visit

The professional visit focused on many areas of library service delivery and development, but my particular areas of interest were information literacy, research data management, open access, e-learning and customer services. Information literacy is a poorly understood concept in India. The general understanding of librarians is that it is limited to visiting journal and statistical databases to gather information. My interactions with library staff in Wales radically changed my views on information literacy to include a much more holistic approach, including the critical evaluation and use of information. I noted a real focus on understanding the current levels of digital and information literacy of students who attend such sessions, the academic expectations in their discipline and the framing of the information literacy curriculum to meet their needs. A walk-through of the Information Literacy Resource Bank of the Cardiff University's website and the online learning tutorials gave me a solid understanding, particularly about the broader concept of *learning literacies*. The visit underscored that any literacy activity is all about the willingness to unlearn and learn.

I had an opportunity to attend the Cardiff University education summer conference, where I was able to interact with various experts and faculty members to explore innovative approaches to learning and teaching under development in the UK. I discovered the importance of increasing the level and depth of student engagement with the curriculum.

Many Indian higher education libraries are using open access resources. However, research data management is at a very early stage of understanding in India. I was therefore fascinated to learn how UK higher education librarians have developed active support for their institutions in both of these areas. In relation to open access, I discovered that library staff navigate a raft of complex regulations from different funding bodies, the requirements for the Research Excellence Framework, and the requirements of publishers to

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support academic and research staff. Furthermore, I was impressed by the close liaison with the research staff, and the need to constantly keep on top of a rapidly changing research information landscape, something that is not seen to such an extent in India.

I also noted the strong focus on excellent customer services across the institutions. Staff training emerged as a key aspect in ensuring excellent customer service at all levels in the organisation. There is no formal customer service excellence standard in India, and excellent customer service is not consistently prioritised across the sector.

Lessons learnt from the visit

Given my experiences in Wales, I firmly believe that there are many opportunities in the Indian context:

- Higher education libraries, including my own, should develop a vision document that lays out a future roadmap that staff can aspire to achieve within a set number of years, including a section on the digital strategy.
- Library professionals should pursue active engagement with policymakers to create awareness of how latest trends, such as research data management, should be actively promoted to reinforce Indian research as per global standards.
- The library and information science courses in India need to be fully overhauled and refreshed to include aspects particularly, but not limited to, user experience (UX) design, information science philosophy, information literacy and metaliteracy, community informatics, social informatics, data librarianship, the relationship between libraries, information and society, and research design in information sciences.
- Library staff need to liaise regularly with the research community in their respective institutions to bolster the research performance of individuals and the institution.
- There should be an active collaboration between Welsh and Indian libraries, as well as other international libraries to upskill Indian library professionals and help inform policy development.

As the information environment is changing rapidly, library professionals in India need to seize the moment for the benefit of their institutions and wider society and learn from others.

Value and learning for Cardiff

Cardiff University library is committed to international engagement through the University's Way Forward strategy (Cardiff University, 2018). One of the targets of the strategy relates to the development of international strategic partnerships. The library service has contributed specifically to this target through its involvement in the Phoenix project (Cardiff University, 2018), which is working in close partnership with the University of Namibia on a number of initiatives, with the broad aim of cross-transfer of skills and learning to reduce poverty, promote health and ensure sustainable change. As part of this initiative, the library has hosted a number of library staff from Namibia, and has also undertaken visits to Namibia to provide training to staff and undertake service reviews. The library is keen to work with and develop other international partnerships in order to share and transfer learning and exchange experiences. There is huge benefit for Cardiff's staff development in learning from other institutions and sharing experiences, and through these opportunities Cardiff's staff have also had their horizons broadened.

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Tips for undertaking a visit

- Have an innate desire to learn and delve deeply into the various facets of librarianship.
- Be a patient listener.
- Always be emboldened to ask questions – it evidences how well one comprehends a topic and allows clarification.

Tips for hosting a visit

- Have a friendly and approachable manner.
- Make periodic enquiries to ensure that the visitor is not encountering any difficulties.
- At every stage of the visit, do seek the visiting professional's suggestions on areas that could be further refined.

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