

# A STUDY OF AN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: DISSANET

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The researcher was fortunate to be a member of an international development programme for library and information science (LIS) in South Africa (DISSAnet), and has benefited from the experience to the extent that research and development in the LIS field is on-going. In order to promote this kind of initiative and to share the experience with those not fortunate to be part of the programme, it was decided to undertake this study to establish the views of each member of DISSAnet. These views will illustrate the outcomes of the programme and serve as an evaluation of how the members' individual professional development has been influenced. The results of the study indicate the success of the project, and are aimed at promoting the success of the DISSAnet programme among local researchers and to make sure that the knowledge and insights gained from this experience do not remain within the small circle of privileged LIS professionals but, rather, are shared with other researchers.

## 1. Introduction

It is noticed from various literature reviews on the development of library and information science (LIS) professionals in South Africa and on continuing professional development, that most initiatives are usually aimed at the development of information technology (IT) skills, with very little attention being diverted towards human resources development and research. Wormell et al. [4] demonstrated this adequately by noting that during the democratisation and development process in South Africa, considerable assistance was provided to information services and LIS schools in the form of computers and other materials. The assistance went further to provide support and some training in the use of these IT tools. However, this support was limited, and any attempt to utilise these tools at an advanced level was limited due to the lack of competence and knowledge in the management of these resources among information professionals. Lack of resources and knowledge can also be suggested as a reason for the very limited amount of postgraduate research in the LIS field. Several higher education institutions decided that there was a need to create a platform for addressing this issue, and to encourage the development of LIS professionals on a more advanced level, which would assist them to cope with the demands of the new South Africa and to be internationally comparable [2]. The researcher was fortunate to be a member of the international development programme for LIS in South Africa (DISSAnet) and has benefited from the experience to the extent that on-going research and development in the LIS field is being pursued. In order to promote this kind of initiative and share the experience with those not fortunate to be part of the programme, it was decided to undertake a study to establish the views of each member of DISSAnet. These views will illustrate the outcomes of the programme and serve as an evaluation of how the members' individual professional development has been influenced. An attempt will also be made to establish the responses of the participants of a similar development programme that was conducted in the Nordic countries. It will be interesting to see if the Nordic counterparts have similar experiences and benefits of the development programme as the South African participants.

## 2. Background to the development programmes

DISSAnet is the acronym for the Development of Information Science in Southern Africa Network, and was the name chosen by the participants to describe the intention and willingness of the group to contribute to the development of LIS in the country. This international development project was initiated and developed by Professors Irene Wormell and Peter Ingwersen, Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, in collaboration with representatives of Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) and Professor Theo Bothma, University of Pretoria. The project was planned for six weeks over a three-year period starting in 1998 and ending in 2000. The participants consisted of 20 Doctoral or Master's students coming from different institutions [2]. During this time, students underwent a series of lectures on and training in LIS-related topics. Each year the participants had to prepare an essay on a given topic related to their area of research. The project ended in 2000 and the results of the programme indicated that it had indeed been very successful in achieving its aims. Walker [1, p. 234] described the outcome of the presentations and research conducted by the DISSAnet members as follows: "The quality of presentations compared very favourably with presentations from new presenters in other South African contexts."

The DISSAnet programme was planned with the following important aims and intentions:

- To provide support for those LIS departments that wish to offer high-level education and research programmes for staff, Master's and doctoral students, but whose local resources at present do not equip them

to launch this kind of programme themselves

- To train and educate participants to be able to meet the demands faced by the profession in the new South Africa
- To focus on promoting interest among LIS professionals, skills development and
- excellent scientific research
- To stimulate LIS professional cooperation in South Africa at the most appropriate time when the LIS sector was experiencing extreme difficulties. Government departments were restructuring and these changes affected the functioning and organisation of the LIS sector; budget constraints were experienced and other services such as housing and electricity were regarded as more essential than LIS
- To prepare LIS researchers to communicate and function as an international team of professionals.

The project was based on a similar development programme that was undertaken in the Nordic countries, known as NORDISnet (Nordic Development of Information Science Network). It was found that the LIS institutions in the Nordic countries that offered MA and Ph.D. programmes were small and did not have sufficient qualified staff. As a result it was difficult to provide proper high-level education programmes and up-to-date courses for Ph.D. students. Thus, in order to further research generation in the Nordic region and to promote cooperation between institutions in order to deliver Ph.D. courses, the Nordic Academy for Advanced Studies (NorFA) launched the NORDISnet programme. This programme comprised of 20 Ph.D. students from the Nordic countries [4]. Similar to the South African situation, these students came from different socio-cultural backgrounds, language groups and different levels of skills and competencies especially with regard to technology. The ability to handle intercultural issues is a reality in most professions and the LIS is no exception. The programme aims to assist the LIS professionals and researchers to cope with these complex issues.

### **3. Methodology**

Although there have been papers reporting on the launching and results of the DISSAnet programme, this will be the first one from the participants' point of view. The researcher, also a participant of the DISSAnet programme, sent out questionnaires (see Appendix 1) to the participants of the project. The questionnaire was developed with the aims and intentions of the project (as mentioned in 2 above) in mind. The aim of the study was to establish whether the project had been able to achieve its goals, and to establish the views and experiences of the participants and the usefulness of the programme to the participants. Questions 1–7 (see Appendix 1) were directly related to the five aims and intentions of the DISSAnet programme, while questions 8–10 related to the participants views and experiences of the success of the programme and recommendations to be considered in future projects of a similar nature. The questions were open ended in order to obtain as much information as possible from the participants. A pilot study of the questionnaire was conducted with 5 members of DISSAnet to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness of data. The questionnaire was chosen as the most feasible and cost effective means of collecting the data since the participants came from all over South Africa. The questionnaire was e-mailed to the respondents and the responses were either e-mailed back or posted. Responses were received from 10 participants, which was regarded as satisfactory to obtain the desired outcome. The same questionnaire was sent to the NORDISnet participants to try and obtain and share their views of the programme and to establish any similarities or differences with the DISSAnet programme. Once again the questionnaire was e-mailed. However, due to the time constraints, very few responses were received from the Nordic counterparts, nevertheless these responses did provide some indication of their experiences. The results of the study are aimed at promoting the success of the DISSAnet programme among local researchers and to make sure that the knowledge and insights gained from this experience do not remain within the small circle of privileged LIS professionals, but rather is shared with other researchers in an attempt to foster research excellence in LIS to the benefit of all in South Africa [4].

#### 4. Results of the study

Of the 20 participants who initially started the project, only 18 completed the programme. The following results were obtained, and are indicative of the impact, experiences and benefits that the project had on the participants. Indication has been made to quotes from the responses received for the questions.

(1) The project was able to provide opportunities for the sharing of resources among participants whose departments did not have such resources, “even if it only meant knowing someone in a different university or department whom one could contact or ask questions” (quote from a respondent). Some participants carried out research that was very specialised and technical, e.g. information retrieval and information systems, “and there was nobody in South Africa to help as much as the international lecturers did through this programme”. The programme also helped participants to write and present papers, and some students were able to complete their Master’s and Doctoral studies “partly as a result of the project”. Students also had access to reputable LIS journals and books provided by the project, which assisted them in carrying out quality research. Although most participants were not sure whether LIS departments as such had benefited from the project, they were “certain that the individuals did”. A participant felt that “their own institutions knew what they were doing and that the international supervisors just confused the issue and contradicted the local supervisors”. As a result this participant felt that the project did not achieve its first aim (see question 1 in Appendix 1).

(2) The participants indicated that the project was able to educate and train them to meet the demands faced by the profession in South Africa. “It is expected of professionals in South Africa to do research, and the programme was successful for it stimulated such research among the participants”. They also indicated that apart from becoming more aware of and confident in conducting research, they “were able to get a better understanding of various LIS issues, such as the need for more quality research, statistics, data-mining, data-warehousing, etc.” The choice of lecturers from the industry and the academic environment provided the participants with knowledge demanded by the profession. Participants also indicated the benefits from having been exposed to new topics of importance to the LIS sector, e.g. comparative theoretical studies in information systems. Learning about the theory of information systems and, specifically, information retrieval, has equipped participants (who do not have higher qualifications in information systems) to be more confident in teaching students the background against which to interpret current information science research. However, it must also be mentioned that participants felt that while most training was relevant and beneficial to their professional environment, “some training was too advanced and could not be applied immediately in certain environments, e.g. information retrieval”.

(3) The ability of the project to promote interest and awareness among LIS professionals obtained positive results. “LIS professionals have been made aware of the need for developing similar projects to enable local professionals and upcoming LIS workers to benefit from them”. Respondents indicated that the overwhelming attendance of the first ProLISSA (Progress in Library and Information Science in Southern Africa) conference by LIS professionals was indicative of the need for such programmes. This is a biannual DISSAnet conference that resulted at the end of the programme. Respondents referred to a brainstorming session that was attended by LIS professionals from several institutions to discuss the future of DISSAnet, and indicated that “great interest in, and the need for continuity of the project was expressed”. Participants further established that “even though the number of participants was very small, the project was able to provide Master’s and doctoral students with insight into current interesting research projects they were unaware of before”. “Teamwork was excellent, and has encouraged interaction and communication with others from different environments, research fields and interests. It has also made LIS professionals more aware of the need for establishing a networking group within the LIS sector in South Africa”.

(4) Participants indicated that they benefited from the project in that it had contributed to the development of certain skills that they were lacking. Many participants gained more confidence in, and understanding of, the benefits to be derived from collaborative work on projects and how it could add to one’s own experience and knowledge. Before the course, some participants indicated that they knew nothing about subject areas such as statistics, bibliometrics, digital libraries and knowledge management, to name just a few, but the project has enhanced their understanding and reinforced existing knowledge. Participants indicated that they were able to grow in the process in that it impacted their personal understanding and professional attitude. They were more understanding of other participants and the organisations they came from, and had a more positive view of information, research and the willingness to share with others.

(5) The possibility of the project being able to promote excellent scientific research from the participants was investigated and it was found that the project had created opportunities for participants to meet and interact with other specialists in their fields, thus providing the motivation and support for conducting research and writing journal articles. Several participants stated that they have conducted research and written research papers of a very high quality, which were published in a number of reputable journals (Scientometrics, IP&M, Libri, Electronic Library) and presented at several conferences, both nationally and internationally (e.g. ProLISSA conference 2000; LIASA conference – Library and Information Association of South Africa; ISIC 2000, third International conference on Information Needs, Seeking and Use

in different Context and the ACM Conference on Digital Libraries in the USA, 2000). Others have written and conducted research together with international professionals in the field. One respondent had the following to say in this regard: “I have learnt a great deal about research and scientific writing, and the fact that my research paper was accepted in one of the major IS journals are proof of the quality thereof. But I have to add that I had an excellent supervisor who had a very strong interest in my research, and this made the difference”. The fact that some participants even completed their studies while on the programme is indicative of the quality research that resulted from the programme. Excellent research was conducted, e.g. specifically with an African focus on indigenous cultures and the impact on LIS in the provision of information and research based on sophisticated First World systems in information retrieval. Through the project, participants learned how to conduct better scientific research, and the guidelines provided showed how research could be improved. Many participants were busy conducting research and publishing articles in journals when they started the programme, and they indicated that they are more motivated to do so now after participating in the project. Participants felt that it is important to mention that “those participants who were willing to give it their all had good results, while those who did not put in the same effort did not achieve quality outputs”.

(6) Although participants were not certain whether the project was able to stimulate professional cooperation in LIS in the country, it certainly was stimulated among smaller groups in organisations. The network is often used by individuals to assist them in certain situations or to locate relevant information. Respondents referred to the “fact that there is the second ProLISSA conference taking place, and the fact that many papers have been received from LIS organisations throughout the country, is indicative of the level of cooperation and interest” among LIS professionals. Furthermore, an invisible network has been built up for the sharing of information and knowledge. Many participants, although from different institutions and industries, stated that they are still in contact with each other to share information and knowledge and to keep abreast of developments in the LIS sector.

(7) Personal benefits of the project to the participants were identified as “the opportunity to become part of an international community; meeting and interacting with knowledgeable people; belonging to a wider circle of information professionals; stimulation to do further research; confidence in presenting papers; networking with other professionals, both nationally and internationally; the opportunity to travel and meet new people; better understanding of other cultures; being aware of trends in the field and of research being done in LIS; gaining a broader perspective; refreshing certain areas that have been forgotten about; the realisation that the quality of research in the country needs to be improved; gaining subject knowledge that would have not been obtainable elsewhere in the country; acquiring research skills; discovering and becoming involved in new research areas; international cooperation; and exposure as an academic”. Prior to this project, participants did not know many other LIS professionals or students, and had worked in isolation. However, the project helped to bridge this gap and enabled them to meet other people with similar interests and knowledge.

(8) The future role that DISSAnet can play in the LIS sector has been identified as the development of knowledge and skills, especially with regard to disadvantaged universities; training more professionals in new areas so that the impact of the project can be felt by all; encouraging and supporting South African LIS researchers; and creating a network to do this. DISSAnet should link up with LIASA (the Library and Information Association of South Africa) and identify and rectify gaps that exist within LIASA. It can also be the forum for creating an up-to-date database of LIS professionals and specialists, which can be made available both locally and internationally. The exchange of lecturers (also for continuing education) on the basis of expertise can be considered, although cost may be a prohibitive factor here. “There should be a virtual network for sharing information or knowledge in the LIS sector, in the form of a website, with searchable databases containing contact details, research papers, research fields and interest”. Some DISSAnet participants are “already involved in workshops and projects, or are cooperating with international research projects, and this can be enhanced and extended to include other researchers in the LIS sector”. Participants felt that “working with other researchers in the LIS field ensures that research does not remain focused on local issues alone, but also includes more generalisable issues to encompass the entire LIS profession”.

(9) We have learned from this experience that if such projects were to be carried out again in future, there needs to be more cooperation and interaction between participants of DISSAnet and NORDISnet, as we can learn more from each other’s experiences and can create a more effective network with researchers in LIS. Participants indicated the need for more timely feedback on progress of their assignments and projects, so that there is no stagnation in the research process. There needs to be “more encouragement and emphasis on the sharing of projects and information between similar projects, e.g. DISSAnet and researchers from different institutions and regions in southern Africa”. Participants felt that the project would have been more advantageous if we had more participants from other major universities in the country, as this would have fostered research and cooperation outside the confines of one’s own institution. “Participants need to be chosen on the basis of their willingness to do their best, preferably students who have already made some progress in their studies and who are desirous to complete their studies successfully”. It was recommended that membership should be opened to others and there needs to be more marketing of the project, the research

conducted and the capabilities and skills of the researchers, so that many other LIS professionals can benefit from this.

(10) In general, participants enjoyed the opportunity and privilege to be part of such a project and found the team-building experience very useful in their present situation. It was an enjoyable experience, although it required hard work and was stressful at times.

## **5. NORDISnet participant responses**

This research was initially intended to be a comparative study between the two projects – DISSAnet and NORDISnet. However, due to the time constraints and poor response rate from the Nordic counterparts, it was decided to concentrate mainly on the South African development project. It is interesting to note though, that from the few responses received from the NORDISnet participants, it is evident that they had similar views on the project. These participants indicated that they arrange courses, and almost every active doctoral student in the Nordic countries within the LIS field has at some point taken part in these courses or has received support in other ways. Also, senior lecturers are invited as speakers, and students are offered the opportunity to meet them. NORDISnet was able to bring together all the active researchers and this helped to stimulate scientific research and cooperation. The participants felt that working together gives one a stronger sense of belonging and makes it easier to work together afterwards. However, as the LIS field in the Nordic countries is much smaller than that of South Africa, this cooperation was achieved very easily. Nevertheless, this is something that DISSAnet and the rest of the LIS sector in South Africa can be encouraged to do.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is evident from the above results that on the whole, the DISSAnet project was very successful and certainly achieved the goals it had set out, especially with regard to the development of LIS professionals in South Africa. Participants expressed the benefits, both personal and professional, gained from their experience of participating in such a project. It is heartening to note that most participants are willing to share these experiences and knowledge with those less fortunate in the LIS sector and those who require support and assistance. Wormell [3, p. 142] indicated that the modern LIS professional is seen as a “professional [who] constantly interacts with other professionals in the working environment and [has] a strong involvement in electronic information resources and networks”. The project was able to promote this kind of environment for LIS professionals in South Africa. The experiences of the NORDISnet counterparts revealed results similar to those of the DISSAnet participants, and they also felt that it was a very successful project in helping to develop LIS professionals in the country.

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