

A comparative study of information literacy provision at university libraries in South Africa and the United Arab Emirates

A literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to establish and compare the provision of information literacy (IL) skills to university students both at undergraduate and graduate levels in South Africa (SA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This could in turn inform the development of appropriate/suitable IL programmes to support teaching and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of available scholarly papers is performed for information collection.

Findings – The findings can identify variations in IL provision within and across disciplines, deficiencies in local current and ongoing research.

Research limitations/implications – It must be noted that this is a review and conclusions from it are expected to reveal areas that require more in-depth study.

Practical implications – The study's contribution to the field of IL lies in its revelation of what is understood by IL provision and how the ACRL standards are used to guide practice in the two different regions of the world.

Originality/value – The study is the first of its kind which compares IL practices at university libraries in SA and the UAE. It will assist policymakers and librarians in the development of appropriate IL programmes in support of teaching and learning.

Keywords Libraries, Librarianship, Library services, South Africa, Information services, Information literacy

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

The term “literacy” is generally used in reference to the ability to read and write. When it is information literacy (IL), there is a more focused meaning, in that this refers to the realisation that information is required, the ability to find it and to use it ethically. Academic libraries rely on the [ALA Standards for Higher Education \(2000, p. 2\)](#) for a more universal definition:



Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to:

[...] recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Information literacy also is increasingly important in the contemporary environment of rapid technological change and proliferating information resources.

Despite the fact that the ALA has tasked an ACRL Taskforce to update the Standards, the definition varies only insofar, as it incorporates resources that are currently evolving and altered user habits due to a fast-changing information environment. As a result, the Standards should reflect:

[...] the creation and dissemination of knowledge, the changing global higher education and learning environment, the shift from information literacy to information fluency, and the expanding definition of information literacy to include multiple literacies, e.g. trans literacy, media literacy, digital literacy (DL), etc. (ACRL Taskforce, 2015).

The result is that a *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015) was filed by the ACRL in February 2015 for librarians to experiment with. These changes will inevitably impact upon IL provision in both South Africa (SA) and the UAE as in all other places that use the Standards as guidelines. With that statement on what IL is and a mention of its changing nature, it is equally important to have the guidelines in mind, as the academic librarian responsibilities change. Mention of digital literacy warrants a brief discussion about what it is about, as that is included in the *Framework* document.

Digital and information literacy

Librarians the world over are persistently making efforts to support their user communities by enhancing IL skills. It is sometimes unclear where the difference between IL and DL lies. The ability to find, evaluate, utilise, share and create content using information technologies and the Internet is included. According to the [Open University \(2015\)](#) of the UK:

Digital literacy includes the ability to find and use information (otherwise known as information literacy) but goes beyond this to encompass communication, collaboration and teamwork, social awareness in the digital environment, understanding of e-safety and creation of new information. Both digital and information literacy are underpinned by critical thinking and evaluation.

DL is often used as a synonym for digital competence. The difference between literacy and competency almost becomes one of polemics, but in actual fact, the latter includes the former. It will take more research to have a definite theory-based determination on what to name the concepts. [Punie and Cabrera \(2006\)](#), under the auspices of the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies of the European Union, say that DL:

[...] consists of not only learning to use information and communications technology (ICT) but also really mastering them. This implies, for instance, understanding how ICT applications and services function. It does not necessarily mean technical know-how but rather understanding what it means to use digital technologies in everyday life.

Thus, IL skills are an essential component of DL. One of the reasons that it has become important to give it special focus is the multiplicity of devices used, most of which are smart. The game has become more than getting information out, but rather actual

effective use of the devices to access relevant information resources. This is the point made by Skiba (2010), in mentioning the fact that the wisdom of people's decisions and judgements depends on how they use, filter and eventually apply these information resources. Jewels and Albon (2011, p. 28) point out that regular exposure to the Internet contributes to DL to an extent, but while:

[...] within the UAE widespread e-government services are available, there has been no systematic or widespread education of the general population on the use and benefits of internet usage in the country.

However, this also applies to most countries of the world, and responsible use of Internet programmes gradually filters into academic institutions.

DL is especially important in academic environments because the layout of many library databases, for example, appears different from desktop to iPad to smart phone, and librarians have to ensure that the end-users have access regardless of which one is in use and that their requirements are met. Then again, library databases do not have a monopoly over research information provision, resulting in a cultural dilemma. According to Jewels and Albon (2011, p. 28):

[...] though the operational benefits of using the internet are generally understood by citizens, there are many families who are still concerned enough about the medium's more sinister ramifications to effectively curtail its use in the home.

This concern is not unique to UAE families as many international media reports have demonstrated some of the dubious and questionable effects of the dark side of the Internet, thus justifying UAE family concerns.

Information literacy versus academic literacy

IL is largely regarded as a common denominator of all literacies, academic literacy included. However, there is confusion among students and even some academics about the difference between the two which makes it necessary to differentiate the concepts in this article. Academic literacy refers to the literacy which is meant to prepare students in the literacies that a tertiary institution requires of them (McCabe, 2011). It is usually meant for students who are at risk academically because they are tripped up by language (Weideman, 2006, p. 7). In SA, there has been a shift from elitist (bottleneck) education to mass university education, resulting in an increasingly diverse student population. According to Holder *et al.* (1999), the changing student profile, coupled with demands from both the government sector and employers, has brought the importance of literacy and other generic academic attributes and skills more sharply into focus. This statement adds depth to the current study focusing on IL as one of the required competencies for graduating students.

Academic literacy focuses mostly on the four branches of language, namely, speaking, listening, reading and writing competencies. Similar to the UAE, most university students in South Africa, particularly those in rural and remote environments, find it very difficult to relate properly in the English language and yet most sources of academic information come in English. Instruction also takes place mostly in English (Lenta, 2012, p. 171; Sommer and Dumont, 2011, p. 386; Stephen *et al.*, 2004, p. 42). Furthermore, Stephen *et al.* (2004, p. 44) argue that the critical impact of English proficiency cannot be underestimated, as most English as a Second Language (ESL) students have problems pertaining to reading and writing ability. It is therefore

important to offer them academic development support that covers all the branches of language and IL skills to allow them to realise their full potential. Academic problems – and any other problem for that matter – are better solved if one is able to seek out relevant information to the task at hand and have the capacity to use it. In this regard, academic literacy has to be complemented by IL skills to help solve day-to-day problems. If students lack academic and IL, their educational achievement is no doubt retarded, hence the importance of both.

Purpose of the study

This article sought to establish and compare the provision of IL skills to university students both at undergraduate and graduate levels in SA and the UAE through a review of relevant literature in both print and online.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- find out IL interventions that were available to university students in SA and the UAE;
- compare the practice of IL provision at universities in SA and the UAE;
- standards – ACRL and need for home-grown standards; and
- identify constraints which impact negatively on the provision of IL in both countries.

In December 2014, a South African delegation visited Dubai, UAE, on a mission to promote the Brand South Africa networking initiative. A press release available online[1] states that the intention is for both countries to share best practice for improving their competitiveness rankings with a view to become attractive and globally competitive destinations for inward flows of investment. It is in view of the fact that libraries are at the core of development and global competitiveness that this paper focused on comparing practices in SA and the UAE. Prior to the South African delegation visit to Dubai, the two authors had met in Croatia at a European Conference on Information Literacy in October 2014, where interest in formally comparing notes on IL practices in SA and the UAE was expressed, following an informal discussion on how IL was handled in the two countries especially at the university level. The meeting of the two countries later in December 2014 therefore strengthened the authors' resolve to write this paper.

Provision of information literacy skills to university students both at undergraduate and graduate levels in the UAE

The UAE hosts more than 70 universities, three of which are federal institutions and the rest are either UAE-based or branch campuses of external universities, e.g. New York University, University of Wollongong, Middlesex University and Paris Sorbonne. The federal ones are Zayed University (ZU), Higher Colleges of Technology and United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). In terms of IL provision, there is a tendency to be guided by the ACRL Standards. They are familiar to the majority of academic librarians who are expatriates, most of whom have received their training from the places that rely on those Standards, i.e. USA, UK, SA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and UK. The practical approach, however, is to tailor the suggestions in the standards to suit the

needs of each institution. Thus, the way that IL skills teaching is done at UAEU is not necessarily identical to how it is done at ZU even if they are both federal institutions. The disciplines taught, the curriculum in place and administrative priorities are all factors that impact upon the way IL is provided.

Reporting on the relevance and value of InfoOasis[2], a web-based IL tutorial developed and tailored to the Arab student population of the UAE (Martin *et al.*, 2010), librarians from ZU discuss reasons for its poor usage outside the classroom. They point out that one of the cultural reasons may be the students' preference for auditory and visual perceptual styles of instruction. This is despite the fact that most students reported that they found both of them relevant, usable and useful to their studies. In terms of student need for IL instruction, Martin (2006) points to the lack of understanding of what the research process involves, minimum enthusiasm by Emirati students to read extensively and inadequate independent learning skills that need to be enhanced. Closely connected to this scenario is the impact of technology on library use. Many studies suggest that the modern student is computer literate, can use the Internet and is comfortable with the use of several Internet-connected devices. However, that does not necessarily coincide with their ability to find and use information ethically, especially when it is in an educational environment.

Information literacy in UAE institutions of higher learning

Libraries provide IL instruction in various ways, ranging from self-paced tutorials to actual in-class sessions. The way that in-class sessions are organised also varies from institution to institution, from one academic department to another. In a UAE study about online IL in an Arabian context, Martin (2006) concludes that students from an Emirati Arab culture are more comfortable in a controlled task-oriented environment at the time they move from high school to university. However, this does not mean that librarians should ignore strategies that increase critical thinking skills. Indeed, the UAE government expects all educators in universities to use methods that bring out those skills in students to enable them to solve problems and make informed decisions. This is the essence of a UAE nationalisation programme known as Emiratisation, where nationals are being trained and re-trained with a view to have them occupy key positions so that they can determine their own destiny rather than depend on expatriate professionals.

Historical perspectives of information literacy in the UAE

Martin (2013) mentions that the circumstances of the UAE, while unique in many ways, are reflective of many countries where there has not been a strong history of library services nor indeed a culture of reading and where there is a paucity of understanding of the value of libraries and library professionals. That makes it important to integrate IL seamlessly with the rest of the learning process. Successful classes are therefore a result of collaborative effort to develop an IL project that results in the integration or embedding of IL in student education.

Current perspectives on information literacy in UAE institutions of higher learning

IL instruction in the UAE is a work in progress. This is mainly because of the fact that the librarians, who are mostly expatriate, bring experience and models that they have used before, but to tailor that for local requirements takes time and cannot be a rushed

effort. Shaping a local librarian programme is taking many attempts that have met with various challenges. This is confirmed by [Boumarafi \(2002\)](#) who pointed out that libraries and information centres in the UAE required local librarians, suggesting the need for training and professional programmes.

Among other IL training approaches are the systematic introduction to online public access catalogues (OPACs), electronic databases and bibliographic referencing. The degree to which IL is integrated into the mainstream academic curriculum varies from institution to institution, depending on institutional focus.

Information literacy standards in the UAE context

In the UAE, IL is a need in terms of enhancing the culture of reading. The [National Qualifications Authority \(NQF\) of the UAE \(2015\)](#) suggests that a high-quality national qualifications system reinforces the links between learning outcomes and the labour market needs. It is thus necessary for individual academic institutions to include IL as a learning outcome, e.g. at Zayed University, it is clearly stipulated as one of the university's basic learning outcomes.

Challenges of information literacy in UAE institutions of higher learning

Following a New York University study, [Dragovic \(2015\)](#) suggests revisiting the Hofstede cultural dimensions before setting expectations that may not necessarily be suitable for the cultural context. It appears that the few studies that have been conducted in IL in the UAE have focused on information searching skills without taking into consideration cultural factors to develop effective IL curricula when helping students with information/research-related queries. In an environment of more expatriate librarians than local ones, it is easy to become unconsciously incompetent ([Bradley, 1997](#)) in the sense that they genuinely try to offer services according to what they have been trained, but are unaware of their lack of knowledge or expertise on how to appropriately communicate in the host culture. Educators have sometimes been found to be unaware of culturally competent pedagogical strategies concerning responses in culturally sensitive ways, and thus they lack the ability to successfully communicate and work with learners from other cultures ([Gopal, 2011; Paige and Goode, 2009](#)).

The current responsibility of libraries in IL programmes in the UAE is less to encourage students to read, but more to use the web effectively as this is a part of digital empowerment. In fact, DL has become an essential skill. That is because of the proliferation of Internet devices and ready access in the UAE. This approach is in line with the concerns of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015). A survey by the [Telecommunication Regulatory Authority \(2013\)](#) of the UAE revealed that:

100 per cent of businesses had a fixed telephone line, 100 per cent of businesses had a personal computer, 95 per cent of businesses had an internet connection, 49 per cent of employees were using the internet at work, 65 per cent of businesses provided their employees with a paid mobile phone, 75 per cent of businesses had website presence, 95 per cent of businesses had some type of advanced network services.

This means that if there is no IL education, people may equate the ability to use their sophisticated Internet access platforms with IL. In that sense, the digital dimension which has empowered all with connectivity cannot be ignored.

Information literacy in South African institutions of higher learning

Several research articles on IL in SA institutions of higher learning have been published in the past decade (Hart and Davids, 2010; Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010). The manner in which IL has been implemented differs from one institution to the other. Some IL programmes are offered as stand-alone while others are integrated or embedded with individual course modules. Stand-alone IL courses are mostly offered by library schools, while libraries offer embedded IL (Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010). It must however be acknowledged from the outset that most institutions still conduct IL sessions on an *ad hoc* basis, where academics and librarians arrange for such sessions during the lecture periods of the lecturers concerned. The IL programmes are usually not on the institutional timetables (Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010), hence the need for librarians to negotiate for session times with academics.

Historical perspectives of information literacy in South Africa

South African students come to the world of education with severe disadvantages that might not be as evident in the developed world (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003). The two authors contend that IL interventions and assessment should be specifically designed for the requirements of South African students. Major strides in IL in SA began in the late 1990s when the Cape Library Cooperative (CALICO) launched a large IL needs assessment study which revealed serious discrepancies between students from historically disadvantaged and historically white universities (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003). However, Moll (2009, p. 40) notes that:

The first document on the position of information skills in the curriculum appeared in 1994 as the core teaching programme of IL skills. Outcomes of the information skills expected learners to demonstrate, among other things, the ability to:

- define the goal of an information task;
- find sources of information;
- select appropriate resources;
- interpret the sources; and
- use the information to communicate the results (Moll, 2009, p. 41).

These abilities were later summed up in the critical cross-field outcomes by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) as the ability to “collect, analyze, organize and critically evaluate information” (SAQA, 2005).

The CALICO assessment study further revealed the need for IL programmes in SA that were highly dependent on context, emphasising the need to develop IL interventions that would address the specific requirements of the South African student body. In 1995, INFOLIT (information literacy) Project, a major IL undertaking with financial support from the Reader’s Digest South Africa, was launched. The project identified the following key objectives:

- promoting the concept, value and importance of IL in the context of globalisation and redress to key players in the region;
- launching a series of pilot projects which explore and establish various means of spreading IL education in the region; and

- investigating IL models, programmes and initiatives in other countries that could be adapted to local conditions (de Jager *et al.*, 2007, p. 110).

Following these objectives, workshops on IL were conducted around the region among key stakeholders that included librarians and academics. The workshops later spread to the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), the official library and information workers professional association. This resulted in the spread of IL to the rest of SA (de Jager *et al.*, 2007). Since then, there has been a measure of success, although there is still a wide gap between already-developed standards from the Western countries such as ACRL and what could suit the local student population, paying special attention to historical imbalances.

Current perspectives on information literacy in South African institutions of higher learning

Past studies on IL instruction notably by de Jager and Nassimbeni (2002), de Jager *et al.* (2007) and Jiyane and Onyancha (2010), among others, reveal that a lot of interventions have taken place. However, it was also noted that librarians were still finding it difficult to make inroads into the academic curriculum (de Jager *et al.*, 2007). As a result, supportive programmes ranging from the general and traditional library orientation to introduce students to the library and its holdings were still on offer. On request, interventions for students and academics which covered, among others, training on the OPAC, electronic databases and bibliographic referencing were also conducted (de Jager *et al.*, 2007, p. 113). However, there was some meaningful measure of success with regards to imparting IL skills to students in higher education in SA.

Some institutions, such as the University of Pretoria and Cape Peninsula University of Technology, managed to integrate IL into the mainstream academic curriculum (Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010; Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010). The majority of courses were still generic and stand-alone, while some were credit bearing (de Jager *et al.*, 2007, p. 113; Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010, p. 20). Some institutions of higher learning in SA had IL as part of the libraries' mission and had components of self-taught IL programmes available on their websites. These included Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Central University of Technology, Durban University of Technology, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Cape Town, University of Free State, University of Fort Hare and University of the Western Cape. However, the extent to which aspects of IL are covered on university websites differs from one institution to the other.

Information literacy standards in the South African context

According to de Jager and Nassimbeni (2003, p. 108):

[...] during the 1990s, and partly in response to rapid developments in the field of information technology, the information and library profession began to note the increasing importance of IL and recognised the need for standards and benchmarks with which to measure competencies.

Widely recognised standards such as those by the ACRL, SCOUNL and those by the Council of Australian University Librarians were adopted in most institutions despite the uniqueness of SA. Due to the continued realisation that SA is different from other countries, the Council for Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA) has developed some guidelines for the conduct of IL in SA.

Esterhuizen and Kuhn (2010, p. 84) say:

[...] there has been little cooperation, coordination or consensus amongst universities and their libraries about what, when and how IL should be taught [...] adding that at some universities, IL has been institutionalized and courses are offered by academic departments but generic and add-on IL training remains largely the domain of libraries and is often credit bearing.

In SA, IL is a need in terms of addressing past imbalances (de Jager *et al.*, 2007; Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010). The new South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) embraces some aspects of IL (collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information) and thus provides librarians with a policy framework within which to push for IL training (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2005; Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010; SAQA, 1997). It is further noted that further impetus to formalise IL training has come from new requirements of the NQF of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which include generic literacy outcomes known as critical cross field outcomes (Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010; Hart and Davids, 2010; Lockhart, 2011; SAQA, 1997). The CHELSA guidelines are modelled along the ACRL (2000) standards and the module content covers six units as follows:

- (1) Become familiar with the library and information services to empower users to recognise their need for information and to make independent use of services, departments and sources to find information for academic purpose.
- (2) Locate information in the library using the library homepage and in-house catalogues to retrieve and find information sources necessary for the assignment at hand.
- (3) Select and use various information resources whether printed, electronic and/or in multimedia format to ensure optimisation of information necessary for specific academic purposes.
- (4) Access, retrieve, evaluate and apply Internet and other electronic information for academic use.
- (5) Identify and use various electronic databases from the electronic resources portal retrieving scholarly information for academic and research purpose.
- (6) Comprehend the ethical issues of copyright and plagiarism and apply the Harvard referencing method that complies with International Standards for academic purpose to support research (Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010).

The guidelines recognise a number of exit level and learning outcomes. The content, however, does not cover computer skills, which are very critical for students to be able to access information in a world where it is available mostly in electronic formats. Students also need computer literacy skills for them to be able to navigate the electronic library catalogues (OPACs) to locate resources in libraries. The draft guidelines only serve as a guide and are therefore not prescriptive.

Challenges of information literacy in South African institutions of higher learning

IL provision in South African institutions of higher learning is confronted with a multitude of problems ranging from minor to very complex and from economic to legal impediments (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003; Hart and Davids, 2010; Jiyane

and Onyancha, 2010; Moll, 2009; Selematsele and du Toit, 2007). The challenges, highlighted below, probably explain why the topic has been an issue of concern to many authors.

Inasmuch as IL has been accepted by most librarians, the same cannot be said about their academic counterparts in most institutions of higher learning in SA. The lack of support and collaboration among librarians and academics has not helped either in terms of IL policy formulation. Most university missions and goals still cast a shadow on IL, thereby making it difficult for librarians to move forward. It is largely believed that information skills are best learned and practiced as students undertake their real work, hence the need for collaboration between the library and the faculty (Hart and Davids, 2010). The major challenge posed to IL emanates from the unpreparedness of some students for university education. Most students come from poor backgrounds where the standard of education is still very low, with little or no access at all to libraries and technology (Hart and Davids, 2010; Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010; Woods and Marsh, 2007). Such students are reluctant to partake in IL programmes because they are largely computer illiterate. The lack of computer literacy results in a low number of attendees at IL sessions (Stoffberg and Blignaut, 2008). In the researchers' view, IL skills training should be preceded by training in computer skills as a way of empowering students in proper information retrieval.

Jiyane and Onyancha (2010, p. 19) identify challenges related to the delivery of IL. They also raise concerns about the lack of basic information handling skills, including basic computer skills by students who attend university for the first time. The two further observed the problem faced in attracting students to attend IL sessions which were not mandatory. The net effect of this is very minimal development of students' IL competencies and skills. Yet another challenge related to IL delivery in SA is the lack of appropriate facilities and resources such as computers and skilled instructors. This is as a result of shrinking university library budgets, (Jiyane and Onyancha, 2010), which in turn results in less focus on the acquisition of state-of-the-art and development of librarians as teachers (LaGuardia, cited in Selematsele and du Toit, 2007, p. 120).

The lack of adequate budgets breeds other serious challenges such as keeping up to date with the dynamic ICT environment and infrastructural development of spaces such as knowledge and learning commons. Language and culture present other challenges that instruction librarians have to contend with especially in a country like SA, also known as the Rainbow Nation because of its race, ethnic and linguistic diversities. Selematsele and du Toit (2007, p. 120) urge instruction librarians to use language flexibly to accommodate students, especially those whose first language is not English. With regards to culture, Selematsele and du Toit assert that cultural knowledge and cultural values are at the basis of reasoning, inferring and interpreting meanings; hence, librarians must acknowledge and respond to the cultures of students to maximise participation in IL instruction.

Another challenge for IL provision is a lack of home grown standards. It is only as recently as 2010 that the CHELSA developed draft guidelines for use in SA (Esterhuizen and Kuhn, 2010). Other than these, most academic libraries used standards developed in the Western developed countries which may not properly fit in the local context, comprising an unbalanced past.

Findings on issues surrounding university IL provision in the UAE and SA

A large number of students in South African universities come from poor backgrounds, where the standard of education is still very poor with little or no access at all to libraries and technology. There is therefore a need to introduce them to technology before IL. The similarity with the UAE is in the sense that, while most students have Internet access and some experience with Internet technology, proficiency does not necessarily translate into being information literate. IL skills therefore still need to be taught. It is even more complicated to do so where students may be convinced that familiarity with technology equals being information literate. Additionally, in the institutions in both countries, academic literacy is a work in progress.

In SA, there are budgetary challenges that militate against increasing the resources for IL skills acquisition. On the other hand, in the UAE, the challenge is in getting what is suitable for national culture and linguistically easy to interpret. It is highly likely that if there were unending financial resources in SA, the concerns expressed in the UAE would be similar too. What this leads to is national academic librarians putting more effort into creating suitable resources, lesson plans and home-grown standards. This suggestion is complicated in the UAE, where the majority of the academic librarians are transient expatriates and very few nationals are holding those positions. It is sheer professionalism that may drive them to do what is practical.

SA has a longer history of the development of standards than the UAE. Part of this is the existence of a library association and other library professional groups that examine the standards with a view to tailoring what is in use to the SA context. This is not yet so in the UAE because the formation of a library association is a work in progress. While in both countries, academic librarians use the [ACRL \(2000\)](#) to guide them in practice, there is little unanimity among librarians especially in terms of pedagogical styles. As a result, it is easy for their parent institutions to quietly give them a role that is not central to curriculum development. In fact, once their role is not featured as essential during the creation of the curriculum, it is difficult to get them embedded in teaching classes because faculty is left to decide whether to include them or not. It therefore could be effective to start from the administrative level so that actual practice is possible for the rest of the librarians. Leaving it to individual faculty as they see fit leaves IL provision sporadic.

While the MLS is the terminal degree for academic librarians in the UAE, in some instances it leaves them suffering from professional image challenges and exposed to being regarded by academic faculty as general service individuals who should fill the role of research assistants, consequently definitely not academic faculty enough. It therefore may sometimes be advisable to embark on post-masters qualifications to get over this recognition hurdle, in addition to continuous professional development (PD) efforts. However, this is only practical if the librarians are faculty, in which case they are expected to enhance their qualifications and be engaged in PD. Where they are not, there is little incentive to work like academic staff when they do not have the privileges of that category. But then, if librarians are involved academically, it can be easier to make progress in collaborating with fellow academics and their classes. This situation is perhaps less prominent in SA because of the availability of a range of library science training opportunities, though the reality of overstretched budgets militates against desired and useful continuous PD for academic librarians.

The suggestion to have library directors/deans penetrate university curriculum design stages works only if the policy makers have accepted the idea that the library is the nerve centre of the university. That implies advocacy work. There is a lot of pressure on the library to be involved in campus life much more than traditionally. That is for the purpose of getting buy-in from all the user groups. Advocacy work is intended to facilitate IL provision. Thus, collaboration with all student-centred departments is essential, besides policymaker buy-in. These include being involved with activities in Student Life and Career Services, creating workshops that answer the queries that are most commonly asked at the reference desk.

The use of English as a second language is a common denominator in universities in SA and the UAE. This calls for a deep pedagogical awareness to understand the way that IL messages are conveyed to culturally or linguistically varied student groups. This is because interpretation is a part of the communication process whereby people assign meaning to a particular thing. The way that learning happens among students, regardless of which academic level they are at, is a feature educators need to understand, especially in the current environment of sometimes confusing technological advances and the proliferation of information sources that time to time require evaluation.

Conclusions and suggestions

The LIASA needs to champion the cause for the status of academic librarians so that they are assured of their position within academe. In the UAE, librarians have academic status in some universities, but not in all. However, not all academic librarians have the inclination to be accorded academic status, as that carries with it the requirement to be academically active. It should be possible to have a track for those who continue to be academically productive, and another for those who prefer solely the practical side, e.g. those in technical services who would be producing less scholarly work because their role is to enable the actual functioning of the library.

It is the creation of a library association that requires attention in the UAE. It needs to be a national association as in SA, but because there are still very few nationals with library science training, it will take some time before one is established. The librarian groups that exist, such as the Information Literacy Network (ILN) in the Gulf, is a platform to share experiences and enhance PD, but it does not have a mandate to determine the course of the profession in a manner that is equivalent to LIASA. There is therefore a lot of responsibility on existing associations to be effective at whatever their mandate is so that when younger nations such as the UAE learn, they can take advantage of the lessons already learnt by the experienced.

In the universities of both countries, use of English as a second language creates a need by all educators, librarians included, to tailor lessons to suit the environment of their students. It does not matter how much of an expert a librarian is; if IL is not provided in a communicative manner, that becomes a challenge to students. On the other hand, librarians also need to be up-to-date with ICT and various discipline developments because that helps in the way IL teaching can be perfected. Thus, PD for librarians is essential, whether they have academic status or not, and regardless of whether the parent institutions are financially stable or not.

Notes

1. www.brandsouthafrica.com/images/december2014/Deputy_Minister_DoC_Dubai_December_2104.pdf
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