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2013

Luyt, B. (2013). The long road to local library and information education in Singapore. Libri, 63(4), 339-344.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/107086>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/libri-2013-0026>

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The Long Road to Local Library and Information Education in Singapore

Abstract: The problem of education for librarians in Singapore came into being in the late 1950s and early 1960s as the country prepared for independence from the British Empire. Initial plans for a library school could not garner the political support necessary for their realization so that library education was instead provided through the Library Association (U.K.) and its facility for taking exams by correspondence. When the Association decided to discontinue this facility, alternatives were sought. At first a part-time course of studies was developed by the Library Association of Singapore (LAS) and certified by the Public Service Commission, but criticism of this programme led to renewed calls for a library school in Singapore. The rapid proliferation of digital information technology gave the library community the leverage it needed to finally realize this dream in 1993.

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Introduction

Although Singapore's community of librarians and information professionals lobbied since the 1960s for the creation of a library school located in the country, it was only in 1993 that such a school was founded. This article traces the history behind this founding, a history that dates back to the end of the British colonial period in the island city-state.

The problem of education for librarians in Singapore came into being in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Before that time there was little concern about public libraries in the country, let alone the need for professionally trained librarians. Dominated by a foreign merchant elite whose priority was to maintain the colony's status as a free port and to keep taxes low, government expenditure was kept to a minimum (Trocki 2006). What changed this state of affairs was the rapid preparation of Singapore for exist-

ence outside the confines of the British Empire during the 1950s. As a result, there was seen a need for a wide array of services for the local population, services which had not appeared necessary even a few decades before (Luyt 2009).

A public library was one of these new services. The influential U.K. librarian, Leonard Harrod (author of *Harrod's Librarians' Glossary*, a reference work that was in its fifth edition by the time of his death in 1984), was asked by the colonial government to restructure the colony's old Raffles Library along more modern, public library lines. The Raffles Library had been run as a subscription library for an elite group of Singaporeans, mostly expatriates (Luyt 2009). Harrod's job was to change that mission; to cater more for the masses, a project which required an expansion of qualified staff, although he apparently never really addressed the question of local library education (Rajaratnam to Goh Keng Swee 1959).

The Beginning

Initially library staff received qualifications through the Library Association (U.K.). Those interested in librarianship as a career could either study in the U.K. directly or study on their own in Singapore and take the Library Association (LA) exams via correspondence (Selvarani 1993). It was this latter option that prompted the newly founded Library Association of Singapore (LAS) to establish the first informal courses in Singapore – courses that would help prepare those aiming to sit for the LA exams (Wee 1980).

The first real effort to lobby for a library school in Singapore dates back to 1962. In his final report to the Government of Singapore in that year, John Cole, former librarian at the New Zealand National Library, Colombo Plan advisor for libraries in Singapore, and Director of the National Library of Singapore, wrote of the need for library education within the country (Cole 1962). He argued for a library school attached initially to the National Library, but later to move to a university setting. For Cole and fellow Colombo Plan advisor, Priscilla Taylor, Singapore needed its own

library school in order that the particular problems of developing Southeast Asian countries could be thoroughly addressed in the curriculum. As it was, Cole and Taylor believed that much of the LA curriculum was not suitable for use in the Singapore context, arguing that better models for library education could be found in the United States and New Zealand. For Cole, the basic problem was that the frontier of librarianship, the cutting edge of the field was no longer located in Great Britain, but rather in the United States. Singapore was overlooking this development. He believed that

The state of Singapore appears to have been largely bypassed by the very great contributions to all fields of librarianship which emerged in the United States of America in the 1930s and which have since developed to such a peak that American librarianship and American library training have led the world ever since in virtually every field. (Cole 1962, 5)

Furthermore, the United States model of library service was seen by Cole as particularly well suited to Singapore as “American ideals and practice ... were closely geared to the needs of rapidly developing countries emerging from the constrictions of a colonial heritage” (Cole 1962, 5). In the report, Cole proceeds to recount the experience of his own country:

We in New Zealand, emerging from our chrysalis of English colonialism, threw off what we felt to be the shackles of restricted English practice and turned to the United States of America ... Commencing in the early 1930s, almost without exception, our senior librarians were sent to the United States of America, usually with Carnegie Corporation assistance, to study American libraries and to train or observe in American Library Schools. At a time when our own libraries were stagnating in outmoded practices, influential librarians were in this way exposed for the first time to modern thought in librarianship and progressive reforms began to take place almost immediately. (Cole 1962, 5)

Cole’s plan was for twenty students to participate in courses of ten months’ duration, followed by a one-month practicum. Each year, twenty students were to be drawn from Singapore and a further five to ten from countries in the region. Tuition would be free with a living allowance given to Singaporeans willing to sign a three-year bond. Cole and Taylor were adamant that a university degree would be a prerequisite for entry to the programme, arguing that one problem with the British system was that it did not require such a degree and as a result librarianship there was “a depressed sub-profession” (Cole 1962, 5).

The First Attempts at Establishing a Library School in Singapore

Cole went back to New Zealand shortly after presenting his report, but Taylor was promoted to the position of Director of the National Library and she remained committed to the establishment of a library school. She had the support of the newly formed National Library Board (NLB), a body created to oversee public library services in the country (Loke Wan Tho to Minister of Culture 1962), but winning the support of the government was a tougher job. The library in those days came under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, and it was concerned that there might not be enough positions for the library school graduates despite Taylor’s estimate that three hundred qualified librarians would be needed for the public service alone (Development of Library Service 1962). Perhaps of more concern was the belief that the Ministry of Finance was unlikely to prioritize such a project, preferring instead to fund book purchases. In the end, the Ministry of Culture gave lukewarm support for the establishment of a library school, suggesting that only if foreign aid could be found would it be worthwhile to proceed (Rajaratnam to Goh Keng Swee 1962).

Subsequent to the failure of this initiative, the Library Association of Singapore attempted to interest the University of Singapore in offering a programme, and later, in conjunction with its Malaysian counterpart (Persatuan Perpustakaan Persekutuan Tanah Malaya), the University of Malaya. Both initiatives produced no results (NLB Minutes 8 May 1964; 1 November 1965) so that by the mid-1960s library education for Singaporeans remained confined to self-study for the external LA exams or enrolment at overseas degree-granting institutions, principally in the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Selvarani 1993). What made the situation a little better and what probably dampened enthusiasm for trying to establish a local school were the increased availability of government scholarships and the provision of more-or-less informal programmes sponsored by local libraries to help those studying for the LA exams.

But this situation was not to last. In 1972, the LA officially announced that it would gradually withdraw its provisions for overseas exams. The NLB noted with alarm that “the long term implications ... are extremely serious in that unqualified Library Officers will now have no means of qualifying as professional librarians unless they proceed overseas for study ...” (NLB Minutes 5 October 1972, 3). The issue was not merely that library staff would be overseas for a protracted period of time, but that it would

be necessary for the number of scholarships to be raised to support them while overseas; a prospect that seemed unattainable “in anything like the proportion required” (NLB Minutes 5 October 1972, 3).

In order to find a solution to the problem, the Public Service Commission was approached in August of 1973. Three alternatives were presented: establish a relationship with a British library school that would allow Singaporean candidates to be considered external students; support the University of Malaya’s initiative to create a library school; or reopen the issue of a library school in Singapore (NLB Minutes 5 October 1972, Enclosure 12). The following month found the Public Service Commission and the Ministry of Culture in agreement that the first two alternatives should be followed up. Objection was raised to this by the NLB who argued that these options would not really address the long-term need for staff training (NLB Minutes 12 October 1973).

In the end, none of these options proved viable. The Library Association was unwilling to allow the staff of Singapore’s libraries to enrol in British library schools in order to take their exams (NLB Minutes 21 January 1974) while the Library Association of Singapore announced in September 1974 that the “time was not ripe to set up a full-time library in school in Singapore,” requesting more scholarships for overseas education instead (NLB Minutes 27 September 1974). And support of the University of Malaya’s library school seems to have dampened by the prospect of that institution’s switch to Malay language instruction in its classrooms from 1983 onwards (NLB Minutes 12 October 1973).

Next Steps

It has not proved possible to piece together adequately the flow of events that transpired between 1974 and 1979. In 1974 we see the profession struggling to find a solution to their training requirements with no one approach gaining the upper hand. And then in 1979 we suddenly learn that the Director of the National Library had approached the Library Association of Singapore in order to examine the possibility of offering a part-time course of studies that would be certified by the Public Service Commission. The LAS turned the work over to its Standing Committee on Library Education (SCLE), asking it to prepare a plan for “a local in-service part-time course leading to a certificate or diploma” (LAS SCLE 1980, i). The committee submitted its report to the LAS and National Library in July 1979. Approval of the Public Service Commission was forthcoming in June 1981 and the Ministry of Finance came on board

a couple of months later. The first batch of students was enrolled in 1982. The programme was structured into a two year course of study with each year divided into two semesters of five months duration. Three courses would be taken in the first semester and two in the second. All courses would have examinations, but these would be scheduled at the end of the second semester. If the student passed all these exams they would be awarded with a Diploma in Librarianship of the LAS. The content of the programme consisted of five core subjects and five optional ones in order to cater to special interests. The core courses consisted of Library in the Community, Library Organization and Management, Organization of Library Materials, Reference Work, and Acquisition of Library Materials. Among the optional courses students could take: Bibliographical Control and Services, National and Public Libraries, Academic Libraries, Special Libraries, Library Materials and Services for Children, Library Materials and Services for Young People, Library Automation, Advanced Cataloguing and Classification, Media Resources, and Research Methodology.

Students were required to be LAS members in good standing (that is, they had to have paid their membership dues), work as library trainees in recognized Singaporean libraries, and be graduates of recognized universities. But provision was made for those employed in library positions before 1980. Conditions were to be relaxed in order to allow them to enrol. Classes were to be held at the National Library and course fees were set at an estimated SGD 1,100 per student. A maximum of twenty students would be enrolled each year (Thuraisingham 1984). Given that one of the purposes for training librarians in Singapore was to provide a local perspective to the curriculum, it is interesting to see to what extent this was accommodated. Of the core courses only two contained much local content in terms of the topics to be covered and the reading list provided. A course entitled Libraries and the Communities included a section on the history of libraries and librarianship “... with particular reference to Singapore and other ASEAN countries” while the reading list included works dealing with Singaporean or southeast Asian library work: *Books in Singapore* by Cecil K. Byrd (1970), *Libraries in West Malaysia and Singapore* by Huck Tee Lim (1970), and *The Barefoot Librarian* by D. E. K. Wijasuriya, Huck Tee Lim, and Radha Nadarajah (1975). The annual reports of the National Library of Singapore were also listed.

The other course that highlighted local conditions was called Library Organisation and Management. Here the topics included Singaporean library legislation – the National Library Act, various bylaws and regulations, as well as censorship and copyright laws.

Turning to the optional courses, we find six of the courses having local content explicitly described in the course descriptions. Bibliographical Control and Service discussed “national bibliographies with special emphasis on ASEAN national bibliography” while the course on National and Public Libraries included sections on the development of these libraries in the ASEAN region, services to multiracial, multilingual communities and problems in the development of national and public libraries in the developing world. The reading list for this course was also fairly extensive. It included the previously mentioned works by Byrd and Wijasuriya, but also Hedwig Anuar’s *Blueprint for Public Library Development in Malaysia* (1968), *Library Development in Eight Asian Countries* by David Kaser, Clarence Walter Stone, and Cecil K. Byrd (1968), and “The National Diet Library, the National Library of the Philippines, and the Singapore National Library” by Lucile Hatch (*The Journal of Library History* Vol. 7, No. 4, (Oct., 1972), pp. 329-359).

But it was the courses for children’s and young people’s materials and services that contained the most local content. Library materials and services for children included sections on the publishing of children’s books in Asia, the role of UNESCO, children’s book development in Singapore, sources of information on Asian children’s literature as well as the study of individual titles of works set in Asia. The reading list presented “Public Library Services to Children in Singapore,” by Emerald Klauss and Vilasini Perumbulavil (*Singapore Book World*, Vol. 10 (1979), pp. 3-8), Elsie Lim’s “Preschool programme: a Singapore response” (*Singapore Libraries*, Vol. 3 (1973), pp. 43-46), and “Children’s books and reading in a plural society” by Vilasini Perumbulavil (*Singapore Libraries*, Vol. 6 (1976), pp. 1-5). For youth, the course claimed to cover the “relevant literature published in Asia, the Commonwealth, USA and translated works” while the reading list included “Young Adult Service in Singapore” by Hedwig Anuar (in *Library Service to Young Adults*, Emma Cohn and Brita Olsson, eds. Copenhagen, 1968) “Secondary School Libraries in Singapore” by Douglas Koh (Singapore, 1972; FLA thesis - Library Association of Great Britain), and various materials produced by the National Library.

The final optional course to include local content was Research Methodology, which promised to provide “the state of the art of library research with special reference to librarianship in Singapore and other ASEAN countries.”

Overall, it appears that while many courses did include the element of the local that was one of the reasons for establishing a school for librarianship in Singapore, such content was not present universally. A good number of the courses, at least from the description, seem to

have had no local content or very small amounts, consisting rather of topics and readings considered of universal value to library workers.

This was to be Singapore’s first experience with a locally designed, formalized system of education for librarianship. And although it was considered a success in terms of the quality of the graduates it produced over the eight years of its existence, a number of difficult problems confronted the organizers. To begin with, it was a hard task for the co-ordinators to attract lecturers given the meagre pay (SGD 40.00/teaching hour) allotted to them. One sweetener seems to have been to have multiple lecturers per course, thereby reducing the overall effort any one individual had to put into designing course materials. The product of this approach, however, was a series of classes that frequently did not mesh together or which duplicated subject matter. Students also complained about the uneven quality of the lecturers, and that the pressure of work frequently interfered with their studies. It was also considered problematic that the content of the courses was more aligned to traditional library studies rather than dealing with topics such as information technology that were seen as increasingly important to the library world (Thuraisingham 1984).

Programme for Information Management (PRIM)

Information technology appears to have finally tipped the balance in favour of a library school in Singapore. The magic allure of the technology seems to have been appreciated by the library community starting around the mid-1980s as it became clear that the government was still not supportive of a local library school. In 1984, Ajita Thuraisingham, for example, recognized the need for a new approach to lobbying the government, given the signal lack of success up to that point in attracting funding. She wrote in general terms that much more “lobbying, convincing, and public relations will need to be resorted to before the authorities will appreciate the importance of adequate training to Singapore” (Thuraisingham 1984, 63).

But the LAS was also aware that the government would be unlikely to support a library or information school without some guarantee that there would be a demand for its graduates. Hence it commissioned two studies to examine the issue. The first, led by Patricia Layzell Ward (Head, Department of Library and Information Studies, Western Australian Institute of Technology), was given the task of reporting on the demand for what was classified as tra-

ditional library positions. Surveying the major employers of librarians in the country she determined that over the next ten years 67.4 posts would need to be filled each year (Ward 1984) (this was later revised to 40 per year by Lim Pui Huen, who factored in lower than expected attrition rates among existing staff and slower projected overall growth of new positions (LAS 1988)). At the same time as Layzell Ward was examining the market for traditional library jobs, Nick Moore, a consultant and later Professor of Information Science in the United Kingdom, was asked to report on the demand for information professionals in non-traditional areas of employment. Based on his survey, he projected a demand for 87 positions per year until 1990 and an even greater number after that (LAS 1988).

Armed with the Ward and Moore reports, and further justified in its need for a full-time educational institution by the claim that the part-time training programme it ran in conjunction with the National Library was running out of resources, the LAS developed a new rationale for a library school. The argument was to be based not just on the cost-effectiveness of local training or its ability to be tailored to local conditions, but that it fitted precisely into the government's plans for the country; namely, "to promote a cultured and well-informed society with "information as a future strategic resource for competitive advantage" (LAS 1988).

Librarians were positioned as "part of the infrastructure of information skills required to support an information society" so that a school was needed in Singapore to address the "gap in ... manpower training that had opened up as a result (LAS 1988, 6). Since the country was "rapidly moving into a very different level of information use, it is evident that the skills of the librarian will be useful outside library employment" (LAS 1988, 7).

The curriculum suggested by LAS was, not surprisingly, heavily IT-related although it was stressed that a local school would "cater to the particular needs of the Singapore environment as well as incorporate the international trends and developments in information industries" (LAS 1988, 8).

Among the core courses, one was designed to provide an IT foundation for the students. Optional courses involving IT topics included: Information Systems Analysis in Library and Information Centres, Current IT Applications in Library and Information Centres, Database Design, Data Communications in Library and Information Centres, Microcomputers in Library and Information Centres, Intelligent Knowledge-based Systems, and Online Retrieval Service and Online Search Skills. All in all, IT-related courses comprised six out of thirteen of the electives, almost half of the offerings.

Emphasizing information technology appeared to produce results. The Singapore government was very much concerned from the mid-1980s with harnessing information technology to move the country's economy even further away from its origins as an exporter of raw materials and low-wage cost haven for multi-national corporations. To do so it launched, from the 1980s onwards, a series of plans (National Computerization Plan: 1980 to 1985, National IT Plan: 1986 to 1991 and IT2000: 1992 to 1999) designed to enhance the role of information technology in the country's society and economy.

Hence in 1989, the Ministry of Community Development asked the National Computer Board (NCB) to report on the feasibility of a library/information management school for Singapore. The resulting committee, composed of representatives from the NCB, NLB, and LAS was named Programme for Information Management (PRIM). Following the lead of the earlier LAS position paper, PRIM was careful to expand the definition of information worker well beyond the confines of the library and to situate demand for their services in light of the belief that "Singapore is shifting into an information/service economy." (PRIM 1990). The research of the committee suggested that 155 full-time and 75 part-time information services professionals would be needed over just the next five years and hence there was indeed justification for the establishment of a local training programme at a tertiary institution. Furthermore, the committee recommended that the education be at the post-graduate level with a part-time programme established at first, joined in two years by a full-time programme of studies. In line with consultations with the National University of Singapore and the then Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI, now Nanyang Technological University [NTU]), the intake was to be fifty students per year. Both tertiary institutions also informed the committee that they would need one or two years to establish the programme (PRIM 1990).

In terms of curriculum, it was much the same as the earlier plan, but with a much reduced emphasis on IT as it was thought that topics such as databases and data communications" could be left to the IT professionals with whom the information services professional would work to design systems" (PRIM 1990, F-2). What remained of the elective IT courses were the following: Information Systems Analysis Design and Implementation in Library and Information Centres, and Online Retrieval Services and Online Search Skills.

Conclusion

It would appear that no serious obstacles presented themselves between the submission of the PRIM report to the government and the opening of the new school. Ultimately it was decided that NTI would host the programme and that would be based in the School of Applied Science, later School of Computer Engineering. The curriculum had changed from the initial PRIM plan so that five faculty members were in charge of offering six core courses and two electives, with students also required to write a dissertation. The core courses remained much the same, with one addition: Services to Users. But the electives were very different, perhaps reflecting the interests of the individual faculty at the time. New courses included: Organization of Information in Automated Environments, Conservation Management, Electronic Database Evaluation, Management of Information Systems, Records Management, School Librarianship, Literature for Children and Young Adults, Information Needs, Sources and Services in Business and Economics, Information Needs, Sources and Services in Arts and Humanities, Information Needs, Sources and Services in Science and Technology, Management of Academic Library Services, Development of Services and Products for the Internet, and Special Topics. The programme was structured to allow part-time students to complete it over two years (Khoo 2005; Foo 2006). With the first intake of students in 1993, the decades-old dream of many information professionals in Singapore was finally realized. The country had at last an institution of its own for the training of new generations in information work under local conditions.

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- Editorial history
received 12 March 2013
revised version received 11 June 2013
accepted 1 July 2013

Archival Material

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