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YOUTH TO YOUTH: PARAPROFESSIONALS IN NTU LIBRARIES (SINGAPORE)

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to look at the paraprofessionals in NTU Libraries and the various responsibilities that the paraprofessionals take on. They bring with them various technical skills to support the professional librarians. These paraprofessionals – where some of them belong to the younger generation - also take on roles to engage the majority of the users – the students.

Besides the roles in their respective divisions, the paraprofessionals are involved in engaging users in other ways such as using social web applications, graphic design, coordinating submissions to the institutional repository, etc.

The paraprofessionals in NTU Libraries - mainly young people – also strive to engage the users by promoting the library and providing the service. This paper will look into how these young and young-at-heart paraprofessionals work together with the librarians to ensure that consistent service is provided and assist the professional librarians in the development of new projects.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Nanyang Technological University

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) is one of the four autonomous universities in Singapore. Since its establishment as Nanyang Technological Institute in 1981, it aims to provide a broad-based education, covering science and technology, business and the arts. The colleges in NTU are:

- College of Business (Nanyang Business School)
- College of Engineering
- College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences
- College of Science

Besides these subjects, the university also prepares its students for the global working world by providing entrepreneurial and leadership skills. The university has a total staff and faculty population of 5,761, with support staff forming 30% of the population. The student population is over 33,000, 11,000 of these being graduate students.

1.2. NTU Libraries

NTU Library has seven subject libraries to provide a range of library materials to cater to the learning and research needs of the university, in the various subject areas. The libraries are:

- Lee Wee Nam Library (Engineering and Science)
- Business Library
- Humanities & Social Sciences Library
- Chinese Library
- Art, Design & Media Library
- Asian Communication Resource Centre
- Wang Gungwu Library (a specialist research library focussed on overseas Chinese research)

The libraries have over three quarters of a million books and about 40,000 volumes are added every year. As for electronic resources, the library has more than 260,000 e-books and subscribes to over 210 databases and 48,000 unique e-journal titles.

The library, besides the subject libraries also consists of groups which are further divided into divisions. These divisions work together to provide the necessary support to the users and the subject libraries. The divisions are (1) Acquisitions Divisions, (2) Serials & E-Resources Division, (3) Bibliographic Services Division, (4) Instructional Services Division, (5) Library Technology & Systems Division, (6) Project Development Division, (7) Scholarly Communications Division, (8) Access Services Division and (9) Library Promotion Division.

The library has total staff strength of about 103, with 43 professional staff and about 50 support staff. The clerical staff – those with no library qualifications – and paraprofessionals make up the support staff group in NTU Libraries.
2. LIBRARY PARAPROFESSIONALS IN SINGAPORE

2.1. Titles associated with paraprofessionals

The paraprofessionals have been given different titles, for instance, library assistant, library associate and titles related to their specialization. The common title is Singapore is library paraprofessionals or library officers. A paraprofessional works alongside professionals under the guidance and supervision of a professional (Davidson-Arnott, 1998). The term ‘paraprofessional’ is used to include the three categories of (1) paraprofessional, (2) library technician and (3) library technical assistant (Tin, 2002).

2.2. Local training for library paraprofessionals

Local studies for library paraprofessionals were first introduced in 1983 by the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS), where successful candidates were awarded the Certificate for Library Assistants.

In 1994, a two-year part-time course, Certificate in Library and Information Studies was implemented. This training programme was proposed following a local study on library technicians. This programme replaced the former course by NBCDS (Ng, 1996).

In 1996, a new diploma course, Diploma in Information Studies, was implemented in Temasek Polytechnic. The course trained full-time students who have completed their General Cambridge Examinations (Ordinary Level), who could be employed in information-related organizations. The course aimed to “train paraprofessionals to be competent in the identification, acquisition, storage, organisation, retrieval and use of information so that they can contribute to the effective and efficient handling of information and information resources in various organisations.” (Choy, 1996a).

3. LIBRARY PARAPROFESSIONALS IN NTU LIBRARIES

3.1. Introduction

NTU Library currently has eight paraprofessionals, who provide support to the professional librarians in terms of library operations, library promotion, technical services and technology.

3.2. Educational Background

Some of these paraprofessionals have undertaken the Diploma in Information Studies as mentioned earlier. One of the paraprofessionals took the part-time course, introduced in July 1996 to allow those who are currently employed to upgrade their skills and qualifications (Choy, 1996b).

Those with a diploma, not related to information studies also form the group of paraprofessionals as their expertise is required in certain areas such as technology and library promotion. This will be further explained under “Roles & responsibilities”.

3.3. Roles & responsibilities

Some paraprofessionals are involved in a supervisory role, overseeing the clerical staff in handling some of the straightforward and routine aspects (Tin, 2002). For instance, the paraprofessionals ensure that staff stationed at the Service Desk adhere to the library policies and procedures in providing the services to the users and handling any problems that may be escalated to them.
The paraprofessionals take on different roles and responsibilities, not limited to library operational roles. We will look into the various roles that the paraprofessionals take on and their responsibilities.

3.3.1. Subject libraries

A paraprofessional has been deployed in each of these subject libraries: (1) Asian Communication Resource Centre, (2) Art, Design & Media Library, and (3) Humanities & Social Sciences Library.

They work alongside with the professional librarians, and clerical staff. Along with the clerical staff, the paraprofessionals oversee the daily operations of the library. The daily operations include:

- Supervising the maintenance of library, audio-visual equipment and facilities, by liaising with the relevant departments or vendors
- Ensuring library policies are adhered to and providing consistent services to the users
- Hiring, training and managing student assistants
- Assisting the professional librarians to set up for instructional classes and preparing handouts. At the end of each class, they assist to collate feedback from attendees

Besides overseeing the daily operations of the library, they are also involved in promoting their respective subject library’s resources and events. They assist the professional librarians to set up visual and book displays, exhibitions and promote the resources on their respective subject library blogs.

3.3.2. Social web applications

From the mid-2000s, NTU Library has been actively engaged in a number of social web application developments, such as (1) Library Subject Blogs, (2) Library Facebook, (3) Library Database Page (Information Page), (4) Library FAQs (Share this function & Permalinks), (5) Library Toolbar, (6) RSS Feeds and (7) Library Statistical and Analytical System (Nurhazman Abdul Aziz.; Chia, 2010).

The paraprofessionals play a huge role in maintaining most of these applications to ensure that they are readily available to the users and report to the professionals on any downtime and issues. For instance, the paraprofessional of Library Technology & Systems Division helps to maintain the NTU Library toolbar, which was created for users to have better access to library resources. She also ensures that the toolbar is readily available to users for downloading and attends to any issues that arise.

Figure 1: NTU Library Toolbar

The paraprofessionals are involved in the social media efforts embarked by the library. Interesting resources, announcements and developments in the library are shared on the NTU Library Facebook page. The paraprofessionals, as well as professional librarians collaborate and contribute on different ideas to engage with the users with this popular social media platform.
3.3.3. Library promotion

NTU Library is one of the first academic libraries in Singapore, to have established the Library Promotion Division. The division aims to encourage NTU community's use of the resources and services among users, to support their learning, teaching and research needs.

The paraprofessional working in Library Promotion Division usually has experience or qualifications in graphic design work or specifically, visual communication. The paraprofessional impart their expertise and work alongside with student assistants, also with graphic design background, to create eye-catching visuals, wall papers, web banners, collaterals or even videos to promote the library. Besides that, he/she assists the librarians to coordinate annual library promotional events such as library orientation and electronic resources fairs.

The paraprofessionals stationed at the mentioned subject libraries also play a key role in promoting the resources as mentioned in 3.3.1.

3.3.4. Equipment and software

Users nowadays are attracted by the latest technology and gadgets, and they require them for their learning and research needs. Libraries take effort to ensure that the facilities are equipped with the latest equipment. NTU Library is no exception. Some of NTU Libraries’ paraprofessionals assist the librarians to source for equipment by contacting vendors, requesting for quotations and recommending them to the professional librarians. Once approved, they coordinate with the vendors to supervise in the set up of such equipment in the library.

They also coordinate with the different vendors to keep themselves updated on the latest equipments available in the market.

Besides computers, the other equipment includes Blu-ray disc players, 3D LED televisions and projectors. One such project that involved equipping of various equipment was the setting up of the Lee Wee Nam Library Learning Commons. The Learning Commons was set up in 2010 to support users’ collaborative and self-directed learning by providing special configured spaces for collaborative work, with enhanced technology support and high-end equipment, software and tools.

The Learning Commons has six learning pods with smart boards and large screens, several two and three screen workstations, touch screen computers, a recording room and a viewing area with a video wall and sound domes. The paraprofessionals were heavily involved in equipping this space with the mentioned equipment and the required software. Another learning commons has since been set up in the Business Library with paraprofessionals also involved.

![Figure 2: A learning pod(left) and a three-screen workstation in Lee Wee Nam Library Learning Commons](image)

3.3.5. Institutional Repositories

In 2007, NTU Libraries set up the university’s institutional repositories called the DR-NTU (Digital Repositories – NTU). Institutional repositories are digital collections that capture and preserve the
intellectual output of university communities (Crow, 2002) with the intention of preserving this scholarly information for future research use.

Presently, NTU Libraries built two versions namely the DR-NTU (Open Access) and DR-NTU (Restricted Access). DR-NTU (Open access) is designed to collect conference papers and journal articles written by NTU faculty for which publishers allow self archiving in the public domain. DR-NTU (Restricted access) comprises student works such as theses, student research reports and final year project reports that require users to login to view the full text. NTU staff and students need to authenticate using their NTU network account.

The paraprofessionals assisting in this area play an active role in administrating all submissions collected in both repositories. In the DR-NTU (Restricted access), documents submitted will be check by the paraprofessional and routed to NTU Libraries’ Bibliographic Services Division (BSD) for metadata quality checks. At this level, if the submitter does not render adequate information in the submission, the document can be rejected from the workflow. BSD will validate the metadata visibility and quality standards before publishing the record. Once the document has been published, the record will be assigned with a handle URL or a persistent link. Records with handle URLs can be use for wider and rapid dissemination. Hence, this will increase citation counts and making the paper written by the faculty more visible.

In the DR-NTU (Open access), the paraprofessional involves will perform basic copyright checks for the documents submitted by NTU faculty using Sherpa Romeo. Further supervisory content recruitment process of the DR-NTU (Open access) will be carried out by NTU Libraries’ Scholarly Communications Group (SCG).

3.3.6.  Hiring and managing student assistants

NTU Library hires about 220 student assistants to assist the staff on the routine tasks. These paraprofessionals play a huge role in managing the student assistants by:

- Screening the applicants and hiring the suitable candidates by matching their experience and skills against the requirements
- Providing training for the student assistants
- Delegation of relevant tasks in the respective subject libraries or divisions
- Handling remuneration for the student assistants by overseeing submission and approval of claims

Besides the subject libraries, the student assistants are hired in the library divisions, as well. The student assistants apply their expertise and contribute to the running of both subject libraries and the library divisions. They supplement the staff in performing some tasks such as processing and shelving library materials, helping out at the Service Desk when the staff is encountering many requests, designing posters and other visual displays, setting up equipments for users, checking the submissions submitted via the institutional repository, etc.

The student assistants play a vital role in the library as they release the library staff of routine tasks, so that the library staff can focus on providing other value-added services. Student assistants bring to their library jobs a wide range of talents and skills, which if properly identified and matched with jobs, can provide meaningful employment for the students, valuable contributions to the operation of the library, and lifelong friendships among students and staff (Mathews, 2009).
4. YOUTH TO YOUTH

4.1. Why youth?

Most of the paraprofessionals hired in NTU Libraries belong to Generation Y which comprises of the 72 million children of the baby boomers, born between 1977 and 1994 (Kotler, 2005).

As the paraprofessionals in NTU Libraries are dynamically involved in the social marketing, they are also the bridge or voices that have shaped library within the daily life of the students.

The paraprofessionals in NTU Libraries can easily connect with the majority of the library users as they share the same demographics as the largest group of library users, which are the undergraduates. Most of these paraprofessionals currently are or have been undergraduates before. This group of paraprofessionals can relate their own needs as undergraduate students, to the needs of the undergraduate students in NTU. They are able to give their views from these students’ perspectives, therefore providing essential feedback to the professional librarians.

For instance, as part of their curriculum, the students are required to view restricted videos, titles which have been classified by Media Development Authority. Previously, users can only travel to a specific subject library to view these titles, even though a nearby subject library has copies, as their names are required to be checked against class lists. This proved to be inconvenient to some users. A paraprofessional took up this matter, discussed with colleagues in other subject libraries and proposed to the library management on sharing these class lists among the libraries. This was approved and it greatly benefitted the students as they could conveniently approach the nearest library which has the copies, without the hassle of travelling to the one specific subject library.

Paraprofessionals are the ‘connectors’ individuals who have many ties in different social realms and who act as conduits of information (Mathews, 2009).

4.2. Challenges faced

Even though paraprofessionals may have the same demographics as the student, the behaviour towards the library services offered differs. Some may be more competent to use while others may find it difficult. Learning curve differs among the large pool of users.

Paraprofessionals may encounter users with different learning approaches or learning curves that paraprofessionals might be able to relate or adapt to, due to conventional methods and various learning curves among users.
5. CONCLUSION

Although the paraprofessionals in NTU Libraries form a small part of the total library staff strength, we believe that our contributions, from managing the daily operations of the library to creating promotional visuals of the library, are significant to the library. They continue to relieve the professional librarians of some of the routine tasks so that the professionals could focus on providing higher value-added services demanded by users in this knowledge economy. With their close Gen Y connection with users, together with the Student Assistants they can provide an important perspective on services and user behaviour.

The paraprofessionals will need to continually upgrade themselves with more training and practice. As users’ demands may change over time, they may need to move up to supplement some roles performed by professional librarians in future, such as providing basic reference services. This will allow the librarians to focus on new services that may be required in the future. Paraprofessionals should cultivate a positive learning attitude and flexibility to changes in their roles. As predicted: Much of what librarians have done will be done by library technicians in the future, while librarians will move on to a role that demand greater efficiency in the merging knowledge of information and human understanding (Marshal, 1987).

As the profession advances, the future will be challenging for library paraprofessionals as we will assume a greater and more integral part of the information service (Ng, 1996).
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