

## Improving Bhutan's Academic Libraries, Recommendations from a Situational Analysis

SYLVIA RANSOM, sylvia.ransom@gmail.com  
University of New England and Royal University of Bhutan

### ABSTRACT

The author spent six months in Bhutan in 2010 at the request of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB). The brief was to advise how to improve the standard of the libraries of the ten constituent RUB colleges, particularly relating to library services for users. The original study investigated the current state of RUB academic libraries. Once this state was identified and evaluated, it was necessary to decide what should, and realistically could, be done to improve the constituent libraries and align them more closely to western academic libraries. Very little has been written or published about academic libraries in Bhutan. The main method utilised therefore was situational analysis, involving the design of a rubric for identifying common factors of libraries, then time spent working in each library to gather information. In most libraries, this consisted of at least a week spent working with staff and assessing the library. Observation was used with a photographic record kept. As well, library staff were interviewed informally, as was staff in the Office of the Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan. At the conclusion of each library visit a brief report making specific recommendations pertaining to that library was presented to the library staff member in charge, both to provide feedback prior to the final report, and to give library staff documentation to pass on to the campus Director and Dean of Academic Affairs who facilitated the visit. In addition to the brief memoranda provided to each library, a final report was presented to the Office of the Vice Chancellor (OVC) in a workshop setting with opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions. A more detailed report with supporting appendices was also provided to the OVC. Seven main recommendations were contained in the report, the seventh having several sub sections relating to a number of staffing issues. This paper introduces readers to an area of academic librarianship about which little has been written or known outside Bhutan. The descriptive analysis of Bhutanese academic libraries in 2010 will provide comparative data for other developing countries.

**Keywords:** Information literacy; Academic libraries; Service standards; Developing countries; Bhutan

### INTRODUCTION

In April 2010 the author commenced a six month contract with the Royal University of Bhutan. Prior to arrival, a document outlining terms of reference for that contract was received. One of the three (subsequently amended to four) itemised goals of the contract was the following:

“Development of RUB library service standards: A task force, led by the Chief Librarian of Samtse College of Education has been working on overall service standards for all RUB libraries. Sylvia Ransom will provide critical inputs, in consultation with the Chief Librarian of SCE, into refining the document. Amongst others, the document should have service standards that are

- a) achievable and pragmatic for all colleges of RUB
- b) comprehensive enough to cover services of a typical university library system.”

(Yangka, 2010).

With forty years' experience in all types of libraries, but primarily in academic libraries, and with most of that experience in the areas of reference and user education, the author was excited about the differences that the experience could offer to the Royal University of Bhutan.

The author's experience of Bhutan was limited, consisting of a trekking holiday in 2007, as well having worked with teachers and university students from Bhutan when enrolled and attending the University of New England (UNE), where the author was working. The University of New England is a regional university in Australia with a history of its School of Education being involved in AusAID and Unesco projects that assisted teacher education in Bhutan. A number of UNE academics had worked in Bhutan and provided advice and information. The Bhutanese students and teachers who attended UNE were engaging and intelligent. It was through working with lecturers in the School of Education, and through personal contacts with the Bhutanese students that the contract with the Royal University of Bhutan was arranged.

Bhutan, for readers unfamiliar with the country, is a landlocked country of nearly 39,000 square kilometres, about the size of Switzerland. It is bordered on the north by Tibet and on the south by India. It has a population of less than 700,000 whose median age is 23. It is a

constitutional monarchy and the majority of its population are Buddhist. To many it is best known because its fourth king stated that Gross National Happiness is more important than gross national product. The country is 70% covered by forest and the majority of its population are subsistence farmers. Both its geography and previous government policies limited development. A road connection into neighbouring India was only completed in the 1960s, and television introduced at the very end of the twentieth century. Dzongkha is its official language, but English is also an official language of instruction in schools (Bhutan. National Statistics Bureau, 2009; Wangchuk, 2010)

The Royal University of Bhutan came into being in 2003. Two of its colleges have been in existence since the 1960s, Sherubtse College located in the east in Kanglung, which offered Bachelor level degrees in the arts and sciences and in business, and the National Institute of Education, which subsequently became the Samtse Teachers College and whose name describes the training it provides. In 2005 the nine campuses were joined by the Jigme Namgyel Polytechnic located in Deothang in the southeast which provides undergraduate and certificate level engineering qualifications. The other campuses, which are spread across the breadth of the country include the College of Science and Technology (CST) which offers a range of engineering qualifications and is located in Rinchening near the Indian border; the Gaeddu College of Business Studies which has taken over the business programmes of Sherubtse College; the Royal Institute of Health Sciences, located adjacent to the National Hospital in the capital, Thimphu, and offering degrees in nursing, medical technology and, commencing in 2010, a bachelor level qualification in public health; the tiny National Institute of Traditional Medicine (NITM) also located in Thimphu; the Institute of Language and Culture Studies, currently located in Semtokha, but moving to Trongsa in 2011, which offers bachelor and certificate level courses in the areas described by its title; the College of Natural Resources (CNR) located in Lobeyssa which offers programmes in agriculture, animal science and forestry; and the Paro College of Education which is the second teacher training college in the country.

Through the wise use of international aid money and a long term development plan that includes expanding both the courses offered at the various campuses and the levels of those courses, the RUB plans to offer PhDs within the next five years. The RUB document entitled the Wheel of Academic Law (2008) outlines the rationale and procedure for introducing new courses and programmes at the RUB. All the campuses of the RUB are currently undergoing impressive expansion. New buildings, particularly student accommodation, are under construction. The Bhutan Ministry of Education released its Tertiary Education Policy in July 2010 and libraries and library standards are specifically mentioned in the policy document.

In the area of library provision, two college libraries have moved into new premises, and five more are planned in the next two years. Funding for new buildings has come from international aid, with Helvetas of Switzerland a major provider. Stock in libraries is limited, sometimes to multiple copies of text books, and access to electronic resources is limited by a range of factors. Strategic initiatives are needed to bring the disparate college libraries together.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Upon arrival in Bhutan, the author was provided with a schedule of work indicating that at least a week would be spent at each of the ten campuses of the Royal University. This would permit a situational analysis of libraries at every campus. Background material was provided in a report, prepared in 2008, which included data on the RUB libraries and also included a number of library related recommendations (Maxwell et al, 2008). A rubric for data collection while at each campus was initially designed using this data. The base for more than half the time while in Bhutan was Samtse College of Education. Samtse College is the home of the Centre for University Learning and Teaching (CULT), a body providing support for the teaching staff throughout the RUB through workshops and a specialised collection of library materials.

### ***Data Collected***

The ten libraries of the RUB do not currently have any formal structure for collaboration. Previously, the Library Task Force (LTF), consisting of staff in charge of each library existed, but the CULT report recommended disbanding it in favour of appointing a Network Services

Manager. This position has not been filled, except partially by a non-librarian in the Office of the Vice Chancellor. The final report of the LTF was presented to the RUB Academic Board in January 2009, but it did not appear that any action had been taken on its recommendations, nor had any further activity of the LTF taken place.

### **Staffing**

Library staff across the RUB almost doubled in 2010, but there are only 8 qualified librarians in all of Bhutan and three of the RUB campus libraries are run by unqualified staff. The qualified librarians have graduated from UK, Australian or Canadian universities and the majority have less than five years experience. The newer library assistants have passed the Bhutan Royal Civil Service Commission's (RCSC) exam, have a Class 12 certificate, and had been selected at an interview process. Longer serving library assistants may have only a Class 10 certificate and their experience has primarily been obtained on the job. Some have attended three month long library training courses at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Documentation Centre in New Delhi. New library assistants had no library experience whatever, other than using the library at their high school. They did not know library procedures, did not know what the Dewey Decimal System or cataloging was, and had limited knowledge of clerical procedures. Most had some computer skills. The RCSC job description of a Library Assistant III, which is where these new assistants were classified, puts the position as an entry level one, with on the job training to be provided. While the additional staff was needed, they presented massive training issues at many RUB campuses.

### **Library Collections and Resources**

Monograph collections of the libraries vary from 1,000 volumes (NITM) to 35,000 volumes (Sherubtse College). The National Institute of Traditional Medicine library serves 57 students and six staff (as well as the staff of its clinic and laboratories bringing the total user base to approximately 250); and Sherubtse College library serves 1,200 students and 100 lecturers. Library collections in a number of campuses consisted almost exclusively of multiple copies of textbooks. Most libraries had very few serial subscriptions, with only Sherubtse College subscribing to more than 100 titles. Sherubtse College also had access to the full suite of JStor titles. The Royal Institute of Health Sciences (RIHS) has access to medical and scientific journals via the WHO Hinari scheme for developing countries.

Two libraries (NITM and RIHS) use the National Library of Medicine classification scheme. All other libraries use Dewey Decimal Classification. Of the ten libraries, four only had an online catalogue. One library (Sherubtse College) uses a library management system called Autolib, and two others (RIHS and CST) use a free open source system called Koha. Another library (NITM) had used Koha, but the system was not working at the time of the consultancy. A fifth library (CNR) uses Procite as a quasi-online catalogue. Most libraries, however, maintained records of holdings on Excel spreadsheets that could have been made available as a sort of catalogue. Libraries without catalogues relied on signage of various sorts to explain how the books were arranged on the shelves.

Concurrent with the author's time in Bhutan, the RUB was investigating a partnership arrangement with the Royal Danish Library to introduce a library management system (LMS) called Aleph across the ten campus libraries, as well as providing a union catalogue and enabling resource sharing via interlibrary loans. Aleph is the LMS used at the National Library and Archives of Bhutan and its holdings coupled with that of the RUB, comprise the beginning of a national union catalogue. A workshop on capacity building presented by staff from the Royal Danish Library and attended by staff from all the RUB libraries took place in May, 2010, and a proposal for funding from Danida, a Danish aid organization, was to be written just after the presentation of the author's final report with its recommendations. Early in 2011 it was learned that the funding for this project had not been forthcoming and while some RUB libraries continue to send data to the Royal Danish Library, no useful online cataloguing system can be made available to the RUB as a whole.

Loans systems were manual in all but two libraries. Issues in libraries were proportionate to the size of the libraries and their user base, and lending periods varied from overnight

through to a semester's duration. What types of material available for loan also varied from campus to campus.

Most libraries maintained that they provided orientation to new students, and provided general reader assistance in locating books. Only one campus provided a program of more detailed library instruction, an elective unit for trainee teachers at Samtse College, presented by the librarian in charge. A library presence on the College website was evident at only four of the campuses. It varied from outdated information poorly presented; access to the online catalogue (CST) only; through to another library (Sherubtse College) where a website existed on the College intranet that provided access to a range of web resources, including JStor.

Generally, the potential of the college website as a promotional, educational and access tool for the library had not been appreciated. Neither was the role of the library in teaching students and staff to evaluate free internet resources, nor had the potential of working with lecturers to teach students skills for lifelong learning been investigated, in part because of the limited role of libraries perceived by college administration and the library staff themselves. One project of the author at each campus visited was to provide, in consultation with library staff, a draft library web page outlining library policies, and providing links to appropriate free internet resources. For example, at Samtse and Paro Colleges, which both provide teacher training education, the web pages provided links to ERIC, to the education journals in DOAJ, to free national thesis portals, to Google books, and to a website that provides instruction on the use of Google's varied resources for academic purposes. Similar discipline linked pages were drafted for each campus, and the IT staff at each campus were brought into discussions on how to load these pages and keep them updated.

Staff in charge of libraries are personally financially responsible for stock losses from their libraries. Other than in exceptional circumstances, each library is expected to perform an annual stocktake. Only one library (Sherubtse College) has a book security system, but several others place a library staff member at the entrance to the library to check library users entering and leaving. Book theft is said to be a serious issue although figures from stocktakes reveal them to be within an acceptable level by library science textbook standards. Disposal of materials weeded from library collections is ultimately controlled by the Department of National Properties and what should be removed from a collection interpreted variously across campuses. Together, these factors contribute to library staff viewing themselves more as custodians than as people who promote, educate and exploit the collection for its users.

### ***Perceived Differences between RUB Administration and Libraries***

Working in and observing the practices of the libraries of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) network, revealed a disconnect between what was said at the Office of the Vice Chancellor (OVC), compared with what was actually happening, or not happening, at the college libraries. Policy compared with day to day practice often seemed contradictory. To some extent this is to be expected, as the OVC has an oversight and planning role. The disparity, however was so great between the reality and the desirable that it was worth comment. The problems were perceived to be the result of a number of factors;

- 0 rapid growth in the Higher Education sector in Bhutan;
- 1 insufficient funding to adequately support development across all areas;
  - 1.1 lack of resources, and efficient centralised utilisation of resources, for the constituent libraries; and
- 2 a failure to grasp what is possible and necessary to build a library of academic standard. This latter is due in part to a lack of training on the part of library staff.

### ***Library Standards in Bhutan***

The standard of the RUB libraries falls far short of that in developed countries. In July 2010 the Tertiary Education Policy (Bhutan. Ministry of Education) document was released. Its contents relating to libraries are quoted:

library standards

It is appropriate that the libraries of Institutions of tertiary education should provide services to all students and staff to specific standards, such as:

- a) There must be provision for borrowing books: Tertiary education should expect students to have their own copies of the main text-books and for the library to provide a wide range of supplementary texts and journals. The main purpose of the university library is not to hold stocks of the main text-books.
- b) An on-line Catalogue is needed: An Open Access Catalogue (OPAC) of books should be available to all staff and students in an on-line format. A catalogue is a listing following internationally agreed formats of bibliographic description for all the books available in the library. It describes the books in a way that facilitates their retrieval by author, book title, subject entry and/or classification entry. This provision is not universally available throughout T E Libraries. This means that staff and students are left to wander along the stacks of books to find a book they need. Additionally, not all cataloguing is accurate.
- c) There should be access to journals relevant to the programmes taught: Access to electronic journals, should be provided on a country-wide basis, and made available to staff and to students. Librarians should keep up-to-date bibliographies of electronic journals in their relevant subjects.
- d) An automated circulation and security system is needed to aid record keeping and to prevent books from being stolen. Librarians are particularly concerned about this, as they are held personally accountable for any loss from the library. And they are, therefore, turned into book guardians as opposed to disseminators of information.
- e) Networked computers need to be situated within the library premises, with some access to the internet. As a guide, there should be one networked PC per 8 enrolled students, beyond that necessary for staff.
- f) There should be provision for inter-library loan system. Formal arrangements are needed for the national tertiary education libraries to establish formal links with international and regional bodies and informal links with all Bhutan Libraries.
- g) There should be provision for the training of library staff at all levels.” (Ibid. pp. 93-4)

One omission in these standards is a clear statement of policy regarding user education, although reference to it is made in the section immediately preceding entitled ‘Learning Resources and the Library’ (Ibid, p. 92). User education was a large part of the author’s brief. It is affected by library staff attitudes and training, by the importance college and institute directors place on libraries in their respective institutions, and also by the expectations of the library by students and teaching staff. Every recommendation in the author’s report contained implications for user education.

Prior to the release of the Tertiary Education Policy document a slightly different list of standards was provided to the author:

- “...access to open access catalogue of books
- borrowing books from that institute and from other institutes
- access to the WWW
- access to electronic journals
- guidance from library staff on information sources
- and access to library at all times” (Yangka, 2010)

It was decided that reference to more ambitious overseas standards emanating from countries with a longer history of higher education library provision was inappropriate until the libraries of the RUB have at least achieved the standards of the Tertiary Education Policy document quoted above.

The ambitious building expansion programme under way at most of the RUB constituent campuses, with new libraries either planned, under construction, or recently provided on all sites, has not always provided resources for facilities within the buildings. Staff work at computers without ergonomic desks or chairs; inadequate study space is provided for library users; and shelving to permit expansion of the collection is lacking.

Technology is also under provided at most college libraries. Library computers are often the cast offs from other parts of the campus. If an interlibrary loan/document delivery system is to be implemented, each library needs a scanner and easy access to fax facilities.

Staff often use their own mobile phones as some libraries lack landline connections.

Many library staff share computers. When a library management system is implemented, additional computers with internet connections will be necessary at Loans counters in every library except Sherubtse College and CST.

While photocopying is outsourced on many campuses to avoid too much library time being taken up with copying, printing facilities for students adjacent to the library would be useful.

No target dates were attached to the recommendations which follow. This was deliberate for the following reasons:

- Most recommendations are contingent on funding, and this was outside the control of the report's author.
- Some recommendations require others to be implemented before a target date can be devised.
- Recommendations may require different degrees or stages of implementation at the constituent libraries. Where appropriate, the individual colleges/institutes should develop their own target dates with assistance from the Office of the Vice Chancellor.
- Previous reports by Reid and Cano (2005) and Maxwell et al. (2008) provided target dates for implementation that have fallen behind schedule. Of the 23 recommendations relating to libraries in the CULT Report (Ibid.), only four have been even partially achieved (a further three have a 2012 deadline) and many of the recommendations of the report by Reid and Cano (2005) have not been achieved. The recommendations need implementation, but the Office of the Vice Chancellor is best placed to provide realistic target dates, and the impact of the recommendations are not lessened because a specific date has been passed.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations in the report to the RUB Office of the Vice Chancellor were presented in priority order, with the exception of those relating to staffing which are grouped together at the end of the list.

1. That the Aleph library management system be implemented across the ten constituent colleges and institutes of the RUB. For the RUB to be considered a federated body, the libraries need a shared library management system. A shared catalogue, as well as an automated loans system, with later added modules to manage acquisitions, journal subscriptions, electronic resources and produce management reports is the top priority for library improvement.

2. That formal IT support for library activities be mandated for RUB colleges and institutes. Some support needs to be maintained at OVC level, but support at each college is also necessary for library staff and resources to operate adequately. (IT support should include adequate computers in libraries, server space with regular back up for library applications and staff designated to support library software, hardware, and web pages.)

3. Some resources for libraries would benefit from being funded centrally at the OVC level, before allocation of budget funds for materials to individual colleges. These resources include the library management system, a library security system, and electronic resources such as JStor, Hinari, Agora and ProQuest.

3.1 That the Office of the Vice Chancellor provide clear guidance as to budget allocation for the budget dispersed to constituent colleges, to ensure that funds are equitably assigned to libraries.

4. All libraries in the RUB network develop a structured information literacy programme appropriate to the institution/college and targeting both lecturing staff and students of all levels. (This would include updating library web pages, providing expanded information literacy programmes, as well as adequate signage, handouts and publicity relating to the library across campus.)

5. A series of policies should be mandated by the OVC to cover weeding, stock take procedures and acceptable loss policies across all colleges.

6. That a centrally funded library security system be implemented across all colleges to assist in loss prevention and better staff task allocation.

7. Staffing:

7.1 At least five more qualified librarians are required from the Bhutanese population to fill positions at constituent colleges, allow for attrition and resignations, and adequately support library needs.

7.2 The Diploma of Library Management must be implemented by its planned date of 2012 to address the problems in staff training of library assistants.

7.3 Some form of regular communication between librarians-in-charge and library assistants-in-charge of college libraries, akin to the disbanded Library Task Force (LTF), is necessary to facilitate sharing of ideas, regular communication and work on policies like that needed for interlibrary loans. A face to face meeting at least once a year is recommended, facilitated at OVC level.

7.4 The job descriptions for library positions provided by the Royal Civil Service Commission need simplification and clearer requirements to progress from one level to another. (In 2011 the RUB will achieve autonomy from the RCSC, and in preparation had developed a working paper including job descriptions for academic support staff that was presented to the Academic Board in October 2010.)

7.5 Library assistants-in-charge of libraries should be recognised for the extra responsibilities they have, both by financial reward and an upgrade in classification.

7.6 Librarians-in-charge and library assistants-in-charge of libraries of the RUB should be provided with a short course in staff supervision and management to address serious issues in task allocation, training, rostering and performance management.

## CONCLUSION

The report was well received by the office of the vice chancellor and the author invited to return to bhutan in 2012 when it is planned that the diploma of library management will be implemented. By then, most of the new libraries currently being built or planned should also be completed. Almost every recommendation is contingent on funding; adequate staffing to put recommendations into practice; and the administration (office of the vice chancellor) of the royal university endorsing the recommendations as policy. Given that the report deliberately provided no deadline dates, implementation of recommendations may take place as it becomes possible. It is imperative, however, that if the ambitions of the royal university of bhutan are to be achieved both in the expansion of programs it plans and also for it to take its place among world class institutions of higher education, its libraries will need to improve.

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