Chapter 15
The Maldives National University Library:
Emergence, Challenges, and Successes

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ABSTRACT

The Maldives National University Library is the main academic library and the one and only university library in the small island developing state of the Maldives. The library is made up of seven branch libraries and caters to the university community located in Malé and three smaller campuses in the outer regions of the country. This chapter attempts to demonstrate the swift developmental milestones taken by the library. It also outlines the challenges in managing the library at an acceptable level to the academic community needs, given the shortage of human resources, financial resources, and lack of local information sources. Presenting this information to the international community, as shared experience for other similar developing countries, is one of the motivating factors in writing this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The first part of the chapter will introduce the concept of academic libraries and its management in the face of limited resources; especially in a small island developing state like the Maldives.

The second part of the chapter will outline the background to the Maldives with specific reference to its information resources and services. It will also briefly explore the nation's existing research culture, provision of information services and the level of information literacy of the library clientele.

The third part of the chapter will outline the emergence of the University Library, from its roots in the early tertiary institutes in the 1970s, to the institutes being later amalgamated under the Maldives College of Higher Education in 1998, this later leading to the centralization of the individual library branches in 2005, and the College subsequently becoming the first University of the country.

Following on from the discussions on the challenges and success of the past, the next section will outline the challenges that lie ahead in becoming a world standard academic library that could meet the information needs of the University community at a satisfactory level.

The chapter will conclude by summarizing key areas reviewed and discussed in the preceding sections. It will also present recommendations in light of these conclusions.

ACADEMIC LIBRARY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The IFLA/FAIFE libraries and intellectual freedom (cited in Nicholson, 2002) states that:

The right to access to information and ideas is vital for any society. If citizens are to participate and make informed choices, they must have access to political, social, scientific and economic information and cultural expressions. They need access to the widest range of ideas, information and images. Freedom, prosperity and the development of society depend on education, as well as on unrestricted access to knowledge, thought, culture and information (p. 259).

The right to information can only be facilitated by the right to have access to information (Koren, 2000). Libraries play an important role in facilitating the right to information as well as to freedom of expression as outlined above. Koren further states "one can hardly form an opinion, discuss matters, write an article or make a news programme without sources of information" (p. 275).

This right to access information can only be fulfilled with free and open access to information, whether it is print, digital, or networked access. This applies to any community, be it the wider public, school children, or students in academic institutions. Providing this free access to information appears to be more important in underdeveloped countries with limited access to information. The Alexandria Manifesto on Libraries, the Information Society in Action (2006) states that:

Libraries and information services contribute to the sound operation of the inclusive Information Society… regardless of frontiers… The unique role of libraries and information services is that they respond to the particular questions and needs of individuals… Libraries are essential for a well informed citizenry and transparent governance… They also build capacity by promoting information

literacy and providing support and training for effective use of information resources, including ICTs (p. 66).

Raseroka (2003) states, that "the library is a point of convergence for many communities, systems and disciplines that influence access to information" (p. 110). For instance, it facilitates the sustenance of lifelong learning; acts as a meeting place for people with their information needs; is an institution where knowledge content can be organised, preserved, safeguarded and made accessible; provides ICT infrastructure to facilitate public access to information which strategically helps in the enhancement of the information culture of the population (Raseroka, 2003).

As has been demonstrated, libraries are an important element in enhancing the information culture of a community as it promotes the free flow of information, spread of knowledge and promote reading and writing (Tucker, 2003). In a study of information seeking behaviour, Johnson (2007) reported that in developing countries, even where libraries do exist, libraries most often tend to operate as study spaces or as a source of textbook, instead of catering for the information needs of the community. This reflects poorly on provision of access to information to the wider public. However, it positively demonstrates the existence of libraries to cater for academic institutions even in the developing countries.

Academic libraries are an essential component of any educational institution, be it a college, or a university; it is indispensable to the functioning of colleges/universities and the achievement of their academic missions. "The academic library exists to assist the academic, researcher or student in the process of their self-discovery, adoption of high ideals in life, and the improvement of scholastic efficiency through self-study and the upliftment of the capacity for critical thinking" (Chowdhury, 2006, p. 1).

The services of an academic library ranges from the provision of reference services, academic

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