

Collaboration across Europe: Experience from Practice

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This paper explores the experiences of working on a joint European project to develop an online Gateway of website resources in addictions by members of ELISAD, the European Association of Libraries and Information Services on Alcohol and other Drugs. A brief overview is given of the work of ELISAD, and of its sister organisation SALIS. The project is described along with an exploration of the benefits and barriers in working collaboratively. The paper draws on

these experiences to highlight the lessons learnt through the Gateway and other activities. Issues considered include: genesis of the project; funding; project management; working styles; language; benefits and barriers; and key observations regarding how to make partnerships work. Although the paper is based upon a joint European project, it includes some reflections upon ELISAD's international links. The paper is written from the personal experiences of the authors.

Introduction

In the information and library world it is common for groups of organisations with the same subject interests to form networks for mutual benefit. Networks exist at local, regional, national and international level. But when the subject area is very specialised and the libraries are quite small such opportunities for networking can be limited.

In most European countries, those of us working for addiction studies libraries have to look beyond our own geographic boundaries for organisations that provide networking. In the addictions field there are two key organisations, ELISAD (European Association of Libraries and Information Services on Alcohol and other Drugs) and SALIS (Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists), an international organisation based in North America.

Both organisations have existed for over 15 years and were established to enable those working in substance misuse, such as alcohol, drugs and tobacco libraries, to exchange ideas and experiences and, through networking and interaction with each other, to develop their professional knowledge, skills and work.

The first meetings were aimed at sharing knowledge and building the network. Common issues were explored such as grey literature, indexing terms for substance misuse and addictions, and resource sharing. In addition a journal was started, which features members' libraries, promotes new resources, and encourages networking. With the advent of the Internet, a website and email list was also set up.

In 1999 at the annual ELISAD meeting at the EMCDDA (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction) in Lisbon, two presentations

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focused on the growth of information about alcohol and other drugs (AOD) on the World Wide Web and raised concerns about the quality and accuracy of such resources and their origin. The presenters also found that their searches were producing thousands of results because AOD encompasses various research disciplines, including health, social sciences, medicine, law, politics, psychology, neurosciences, toxicology, and so on. In addition to this, AOD information could be found in different subject categories such as recreation or health. These presentations and subsequent discussions led to a proposal to set up an evaluated, indexed, subject gateway to quality AOD information and resources on the Internet.

This article focuses on the lessons learnt from collaborative work through the gateway project and other activities.

The Gateway Project

The Gateway Project Team, which now comprises 18 partners from across Europe, has developed a pan-European database of resources in the field of addictions and substance abuse. This on-line Gateway provides descriptions of and links to evaluated European websites and other Internet resources on the use and misuse of drugs covering 32 countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe. Subject experts and information professionals select, evaluate, classify, index and catalogue Internet resources, in order to provide a quality controlled collection of resources for gateway users via a distributed database system with online updating. The gateway steering group has responsibility for managing the work of the team, developing processes and systems to ensure consistency and quality in evaluation and data control and determining the project strategy and development. ARCHIDO, the Archives for Drug Literature at the University of Bremen, Germany, coordinates the day-to-day work and technical aspects of the project with support from The European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addictions and oversight from the Board of ELISAD

Environment and drivers

The impetus for the project was born out of a combination of frustration about the amount of misinformation on the World Wide Web and the

desire to change that situation. Commitment to get the project going was strong coupled with the fact that the partners all knew one another so a basis of mutual trust and respect was already established. This, alongside a history of partnership working within the parent organisations, made the co-operation smoother. This enabled potential partners to gain support not only from the Board of ELISAD but also from their employers.

The main reason that the application for funding to the European Union Public Health Programme was successful was a favourable political and social climate. The timing was fortunate because activities concerning the use of the Internet related to Public Health, particularly on addiction issues, were high on the EU agenda. Additionally, the European Community also values networking, which given the number of partners we had, also contributed to our success in obtaining a funding again this year.

Collaborative working: critical success factors

Clearly, a project of this complexity would be a challenging programme of work for ELISAD and the participating libraries to manage. From the beginning, it was important to invest time in building the team and agreeing on how to work together. Many of the participants already knew one another through their membership of ELISAD so had a good understanding of the skills and knowledge that each was bringing to the project. They also shared a high level of motivation and commitment and had a common vision of what they wished to achieve. However, the project team were aware that there was a risk that they might take on more work than could realistically be managed. Recognising this, and the fact that no project can happen overnight, the team managed it by

- taking a planned and phased approach;
- investing time in building the team;
- running training days and team meetings;
- defining and allocating tasks and roles;
- developing and publishing working guidelines;
- developing participants' database and information technology skills;
- developing clear communication processes;

- recording minutes of meetings and action points;
- gaining the support of our respective organisations in allowing staff time for the work and assisting with routine administrative matters;
- accepting that conflict will arise.

A phased approach to planning was important as it enabled us to create a framework for the project activities. The work programme was divided into stages with achievable goals for each stage: for example, between June 2001 to February 2002 each participant was responsible for identifying websites for evaluation. This facilitated a coordinated performance and ensured that participants were not overloaded. Regular project group meetings were held not only to help build the team but also to develop working protocols and share information about any difficulties or concerns.

Communication is a crucial element to the success of any project and probably even more so when working across geographical, cultural and language barriers. Whilst the Internet served as the reason for the project, it has made communication easier for the project. An email list for the Gateway partners keeps us in touch about the work, and has been used for seeking help and advice from one another, but it does not replace face-to-face communication. A special newsletter was also set up which informed us of one another's progress in evaluating websites and proved to be a key motivator and reminder to do the work!

Another factor for good performance was the documentation of all meetings and joint decisions as well as the agreed work steps. All minutes and papers were circulated within all participants and also published online ensuring a good information level. An important outcome of the meetings was guidelines for methods in resources selection and evaluation, and rules for cataloguing. These standardised procedures secured consistent results and outputs.

A critical success factor for the management of the project came from the need to meet the criteria set out in the funding agreements. In order to do this it was necessary to have a lead partner with clear responsibilities. This was taken on by ARCHIDO at the University of Bremen who:

- focused on delivery of product;
- evaluated and reviewed progress regularly;
- established financial procedures;

- documented and recorded the whole process;
- kept funders informed through written reports and personal contact;
- provided technical support.

Barriers to collaborative working

Describing the success of this work without mentioning the barriers and difficulties would be disingenuous. The three major barriers identified were language, cultural and professional differences. Conflicts are inherent in the controversial subject of addiction and the related differences of cultural and political backgrounds across borders. Also different professional backgrounds of participants imposed the need for discussions and compromises.

There is a language barrier within Europe that has to be acknowledged. Europe is a small continent, rich in history and culture, and according to the database Ethnologue, there are 239 languages in Europe. Not all are spoken by large groups of people: 20–30 are major languages. Eighteen of these are represented in the gateway and probably more in ELISAD as a whole.

As in so many contexts in Europe and around the world, the working language of ELISAD is English. Fluent English is a great advantage and almost a must for active participation in the organisation. All Board members are fluent in English. English is the communication language on the mailing list, in the journal and in the discussions in the annual meetings. Exceptions are annual meetings in countries where there is simultaneous translation. This was the case in 2004 when the annual meeting was held in Florence, Italy. In Florence there were many more Italian participants than at other annual meetings outside Italy. There are two reasons for this, the language being one and the cheaper travel expenses the other. Members less fluent in English are naturally less active, both as Board members and in other tasks, which is a loss to the organization. The Eastern European countries illustrate this problem since they are more fluent in Russian and German than in English, a major drawback for collaboration.

As for the gateway project, those members whose native tongue is English had to be very conscious about the words they spoke and wrote, ensuring that they were clear and not using col-

loquialisms or jargon. Being clear and precise in the use of language was crucial for the indexing work of the project and a major success for the project team was agreeing a controlled vocabulary and subject concepts for indexing and describing the websites being evaluated.

There are different working styles and priorities amongst the participants. Some members are quick and eager to have things done, others are more contemplative and want to "sleep on a problem" before taking a decision. Different professional backgrounds from social scientists to librarians are represented in the project team. This gave rise to differences about matters of importance such as work methodologies and the use and control of indexing terms. This included many long and passionate debates about indexing terms, standards, and other matters. Problems and differences of opinions were raised, but by being open about concerns respect was built and this helped the project team to handle conflict and respect the professionalism of all. The fact that the ELISAD members do not work together on a daily basis probably also helps, as relationships are not worn out by daily irritation and strain. On the other hand, members lack the opportunity to go and talk over concerns and problems with colleagues of the gateway project.

Another issue was that of conflicting work priorities across the partnership, some of which were imposed by our employing organisations. Many of the participants came from small, specialised libraries – many of them NGO's – so the project work was a challenge. On several occasions, some participants had to neglect project tasks temporarily because of other work demands. Consequently, patience and understanding of one another's differing priorities was required from all of us. This did create slippage on the project, but was overcome by negotiating for an extension of the project's duration from the funders.

As is the nature with this type of project the number of potential websites for evaluation increased daily. This created additional work and time pressures for participants. The project team solved this by suggesting an online evaluation form. This required more database development time and ARCHIDO negotiated successfully for this. However, the evaluation of the growing number of websites was resolved by the partners doing additional hours on a voluntary basis.

The challenge for funding

By the end of 2003, after completion of the 2-year work programme under the coordination of ARCHIDO, ideas about how to continue and extend the project were being aired. The Board of ELISAD picked up on these ideas and considered what was feasible, given our small resources. The Board agreed to investigate the interest in extending the project before seeking funding. The Board approached existing participants' organisations, national governmental agencies on drugs and potential new partners for their views on continuing the work. This produced a very positive response, and a decision was taken to develop a project proposal and seek further funding. In order to take this forward a small steering group comprising three or four persons was established.

The main problem was to find a realistic balance between the project content management, its technical feasibility and the estimation of workload and technical support required. As professionals, project managers and participants always have an "ideal" vision of what they want to achieve. The risk is that, sometimes, this ideal vision is not fully connected with the end-users real needs.

The Board, drawing upon its experience from the first time, broke the project into two stages, which were

1) Information seeking

- identification of potential funding and sponsorship sources;
- gathering of knowledge about relevant European Union programmes such as
- EU Drugs Action Plan 2005–2008;
- EU action plan in the field of public health (2003–2008)
Other EU work programmes on comparable goals: e-europe: e-health and e-content, IST work programs.

2) Project management

- Agree on who would lead the project administration, and submit any bids for funding.
- Appoint the technical coordinator.
- Plan the work programme.

Detailed work was then undertaken on the eight work programmes with the tasks being allocated according to skill and knowledge base. Toxibase (France) and ARCHIDO (Germany) were each

given the major tasks of overall management and technical coordination, with DrugScope leading on taxonomy and translation:

1. Overall management
2. Technical coordination
3. Database refinement (structure and retrieval functions)
4. Multilingual keyword index
5. Translation (search interface and data in 14 languages)
6. Data collection, networking and extension of geographical scope
7. Cross-European info transfer strategy
8. Scientific evaluation and monitoring (with EMCDDA and University of Bremen)

In April 2004, the bid was submitted to the European Commission in the framework of the Public Health Directorate 2004 work programme. The workload for this stage can be estimated at two months full time, spread within a 6–9 month period. Funding from Europe is a very lengthy and complex process. Administrative requirements and checking can be exhausting and what we learnt is that small organisations like ours can be overwhelmed by the workload.

In July 2004 the European Commission selected the project but placed it on a reserve list because of EC Budget limitations. In January 2005 final approval was granted. This approval required us to submit further information to gain final contract approval. This involved Toxibase in setting up a subcontracting procedure with clear deliverables funding allocated according to EU guidelines. This was a time consuming and exhaustive task.

The benefits

One of the key aims of ELISAD is to encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences and to develop professional knowledge, skills and work. This is done through networking and interaction. Opportunities for participants to gain work experience in one another's libraries have occurred. This has led to other activities such as mentoring and training one another on the Gateway work. Clearly, this enhances professional skills and deepens our subject knowledge, which in turn benefits the enquiry work and users of the information and library services. The work has brought those with common professional inter-

ests together. A thesaurus group has been established to look at language and taxonomies in AOD and to comment on the new British standards for thesauri development. The ELISAD email list is a useful resource when one requires information about drug or other substance matters from another country. In some countries the work of ELISAD has strengthened existing networks of substance misuse libraries and has enabled the establishment of country specific networks.

On a general professional level ELISAD members have been invited to give joint presentations on their work. From this experience the members have found that they have common concerns. Many of the member libraries face financial strain. Some have been closed down and some have had to decrease their activities. To bring to the attention of public authorities the deterioration of financial support for specialist addiction libraries across Europe, ELISAD has issued a declaration. The declaration was issued at the annual meeting in Bremen in 2002 and is known as the Bremen declaration. The declaration highlights the concerns about access to unbiased information on addiction matters and raises the profiles of the services, both corporately and individually, among other professionals working in the AOD field. In particular though the Gateway Project benefited the partners by:

- stimulating and enhancing co-operation between information & library professionals across Western and Eastern Europe;
- sharing professional expertise and knowledge both on information management and on drug misuse;
- enabling more effective retrieval of quality AOD websites;
- enhancing networking with professionals in the field of AOD;
- raising the profiles of our libraries, ELISAD and our employing organisations;
- enabling a cooperative approach to fundraising for European drug libraries to develop joint projects;
- developing skills and experience of bidding for funds;
- developing knowledge and skills in using IT, information systems and metadata;
- developing skills in critical evaluation of websites;
- developing skills in electronic information retrieval;
- developing skills in promotion and marketing;
- developing presentation skills.

At a personal level, friendships have developed and there are other benefits, such as improving language skills, enjoying travel and social activities.

On a wider international basis ELISAD has also worked closely with SALIS, our equivalent international organisation in North America. This is done through supporting an ELISAD member to attend the SALIS Annual Conference, having an ELISAD representative on the SALIS Board and encouraging respective members to belong to both organisations. This exchange has been going on for many years and has led us to start planning for a joint conference in 2006 at Boston.

SALIS operates a very useful email list, particularly for those whose language and collections are in English, where one can ask for assistance with enquiries, disseminate information and resources and seek professional advice. Both the SALIS and ELISAD lists provide instant access to substance abuse collections worldwide, and enable us to access international perspectives on both professional and substance related matters. These lists also operate as a source of support, for instance with many kind thoughtful messages when tragic events happen such as the bombings in London on 7 July.

Key observations

The world today is more global and in the current political climate there is an emphasis upon partnership working. The Gateway participants, all from small organisations and libraries, recog-

nised that it would be essential for the project to run on a partnership basis. From the evaluation and review activities the observations about partnerships are:

- Partnership projects are hard work.
- Partnerships take time to develop.
- Partnerships must be able to cope with change.
- Partnerships must be realistic in their aspirations.
- Partners must be involved, commitment and good communication is crucial.
- Partners must agree on a definition of partnership.
- Trust and mutual respect for variety of professional skills is required.
- Good human interaction is the key to successful partnerships – “no man is an island.”
- Partnerships can strengthen existing groups and networks.
- Effective planning processes need to be in place.
- Partners use the collective skills, experience and knowledge that exist within the team and our employing organisations.

In conclusion, although the work involved is time consuming particularly for small organisation the benefits far out weigh the barriers. The learning from this work is very valuable and will be applied to the next phase of the project, which is just beginning.

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