

Chapter 1

The Changing Nature of Information Behavior and the Information Environment: Challenges for LIS in the Arab Gulf States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the changing nature of the information environment and its implications for Library and Information Science (LIS), with a focus on developing countries in general and the Arab Gulf states in particular. Drawing on key findings from previous LIS literature, it explores what is needed to ensure the future viability of the profession in the GCC region so that it can help underpin social and economic development in these states. Examples of successful practice in LIS innovation from other parts of the developing world are included to demonstrate some possible approaches and the chapter concludes by summarizing some key points for consideration by LIS education specialists, library managers, and policymakers in the Gulf States.

INTRODUCTION

It might be said that Library and Information Science in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has arrived at a crossroads. From this time forward, the profession could either play an increasingly important and central role in the ongoing development of these states, or find itself unable to adapt sufficiently to the changing information environment and have its roles gradually appropriated by other specialist groups.

The demand for information in the GCC states has been rapidly expanding in recent decades as their economies develop and diversify, presenting LIS specialists with an opportunity to play a key role in economic and social development by delivering the information services and products required by all categories of users in the personal, academic, business, and government sectors. To date, the field of LIS has been growing steadily within these countries along with an expansion in educational participation and literacy rates;

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reflecting this growth there are now numerous LIS programs in universities across the region (Rehman, 2008). However, LIS in the Gulf States has experienced the types of challenges and problems typical of LIS in other developing countries, such as inadequate technological infrastructure, a lack of reliable information about user characteristics and needs, a paucity of materials in Arabic and low levels of networking and collaboration.

In recent years, the information environment and the nature of information seeking has been dramatically changing, driven by technological developments and the impact of new Web technologies. In common with their counterparts around the world, LIS specialists in the Arab Gulf states must adapt to these changes and become more innovative in their approach to meeting user needs. This is proving a major challenge for the LIS profession even in the developed world; in developing countries such as the GCC states there is the added difficulty of overcoming other longstanding issues and problems, in order to strengthen LIS and enable it to cope with the demands on it. Technological developments help to provide solutions as well as challenges, however; facilitating the types of best practice initiatives that have helped strengthen and enhance the role of LIS in other developing countries and regions.

This chapter examines the changing nature of the information environment and its implications for LIS, with a focus on developing countries in general and the Arab Gulf states in particular. Drawing on key findings from previous LIS literature, it explores what is needed to ensure the future viability of the profession in the GCC region so that it can help underpin social and economic development in these states. Examples of successful practice in LIS innovation from other parts of the developing world are included to demonstrate some possible approaches and recommendations are made for future research directions to provide a firmer evidence base for the future development of LIS in the Gulf States.

BACKGROUND

In 1981, the six Arab Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia--Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE--formed the Gulf Co-operation Council, with the objective of facilitating “coordination, integration and inter-connection between them in all fields” (The Cooperation Council for The Arab States of the Gulf, 1981). Collectively, these countries cover around 3 million sq. kilometers and have a total population of about 30 million, 27 million of whom live in the largest of the GCC states, Saudi Arabia. (Al-Mulhim, 2012) These oil rich countries have experienced rapid development since the Gulf oil boom of the early 1970s and have encouraged high levels of labor in-migration to meet the demands of their growing economies. There is high population growth across the region from natural increase as well as immigration: the total population has been forecast to increase to 53 million in 2020, with the majority under 25 years of age (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009).

The oil reserves on which these countries have built their economies are projected to run out in the near future, and policymakers are now turning their attention to the pressing need to diversify economies to reduce their dependency on oil (Business Monitor International, 2010). Already, between 60 and 70% of GDP in the UAE and Bahrain is accounted for by sectors other than the oil industry (Samba Financial Group, 2011).

In particular, the GCC governments have been placing a heavy emphasis on developing the information sector and on a transformation to “digital societies”, as reflected in Oman’s Five Year Development Plan (2011-2015) (Anonymous, 2010) and in the UAE’s economic development policy. Resulting initiatives such as Dubai Internet City, Dubai Silicon Oasis, and other information industry-focused developments have attracted many high-tech and media companies from around the world into the region (Walters, Kadragic, & Walters, 2006).

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