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Access to Scholarly Publications through Consortium in Sri Lanka: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the complicated process of formulating a library consortium in Sri Lanka, and the process of preliminary activities, selection of databases, awareness raising and training and the later developments are presented as a case study, using appropriate Tables, Figures and textual discussions. Insights are provided to the factors that contributed to the slow but steady establishment and development including the support of the top management of the University Grants Commission, participation of as many academics as possible and the collaborative nature of the implementation process. This is the first ever paper written on the formulation of the Sri Lankan consortium and the publishing will help many researchers to gain firsthand information about its beginnings. Also, the library leaders from other countries where the socio-economic and attitudinal conditions are similar can use the lessons learnt from this initiative for their benefit.

Keywords: Consortium; CONSAL; Scholarly publications; Sri Lanka; State universities

1. INTRODUCTION

The State Higher Education Sector of Sri Lanka consists of 15 universities and 18 Higher Educational Institutions affiliated to them, under the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC), several universities established under different Ministries, and many degree awarding Institutes recognised by the UGC[1]. This paper is related to the 15 universities under the purview of the UGC. These universities largely depend on government grants, yet it is rather a low percentage of the government expenditure. For instance, in 2016, expenditure on university education as a percentage of government expenditure was only 2.09 per cent[1]. As a consequence, annual books and periodicals allocations of state university libraries are low making it difficult to provide access to a reasonable collection of scholarly journals.

2. NEED TO INCREASE SCHOLARLY MATERIAL

Some attempts have been made since 1990 to increase access to scholarly journals i.e. Library Support Program[2] funded by Sida/SAREC (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency/ Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation) which provided country-wide access to four large databases and a document delivery service during 2003-2005 period. However, the usage of these services has been low due to lack of technology and awareness of the university communities[2]. Nevertheless, subscription has continued until the project completion in 2008. There is anecdotal evidence that another consortium effort was taken by a few university libraries after this, but failed due to inability of individual libraries to make the financial contribution as expected. Several requests made to the UGC through Standing Committee of Library and Information Studies (SCOLIS) (formulated to advice the UGC) on the developments of university library services, for additional funds for databases subscriptions, were not heeded due to financial limitations. Yet, the poor access to scholarly material has been discussed at SCOLIS, for several years. In 2012, the then Vice Chairman of the UGC rekindled the idea of a consortium to improve access to scholarly material in the state universities.

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3. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the lengthy process of formulating the library consortium in Sri Lanka, and is based on data collected through personal observations and experience of the author, interviews with senior librarians, and review of literature. The project life-cycle approach is used to present the process of detailed preliminary activities, selection of databases, awareness raising and training and the later developments. A review of related literature positions the study in a literary framework.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

A consortium will encompass an informal group with mutual agreements between partners or it may constitute a separate legal entity in itself and a purchasing group may be considered as an example of an informal consortium[3]. Forming a consortium will; serve as a solution to financial problems

within the academic library community[4,5], increase access to e-resources across institutions at lower subscription rates[6,7], be a single window-service for several universities with diverse research interests, attract highly discounted rates, provide technical help and in-house training for optimal use[6], minimise duplication of stock[8], and minimise the oversights by individual libraries through centralised negotiation and administration[5].

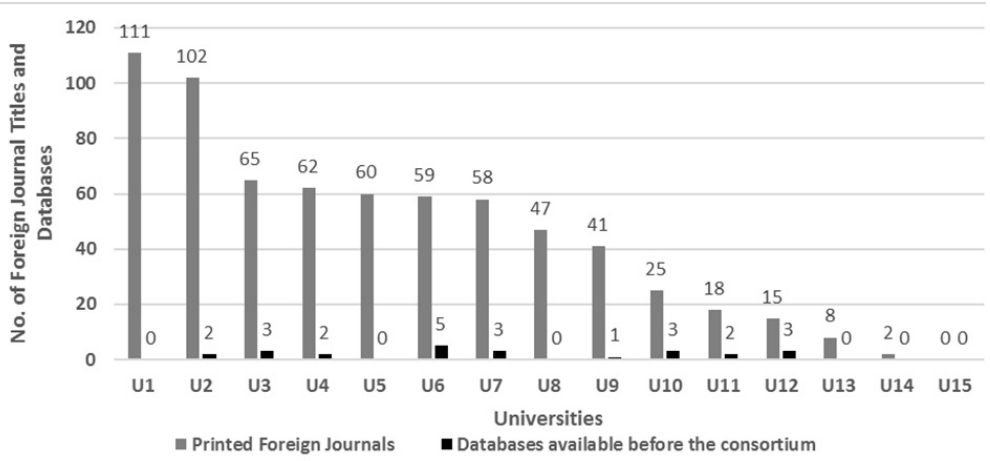
Despite these advantages, many challenges also exist; funds for initial investments in licenses and ICT infrastructure, print-based work practices of libraries, staff skills to handle e-documents, need for investments in administration[9,4], inadequate access to Internet, variations in prices of the same databases for different institutions, complexity of the license agreements, publisher embargos and limitations in resource sharing[7], lack of faith in proposals and lack of legal support[10]. Evans[11] enumerated six critical success factors for consortia; environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose and resources.

Consortia are differentiated using many characteristics[12] i.e. co-operation activities among its members[13], governance, and organisation[14], funding sources[15], mandates, licenses, other services and legal status[16], management styles[12], geographic regions[17-19], and knowledge sharing among consortia[18]. Nevertheless, it is concluded that there is no single best model for a consortium[12-16]. A development life cycle consisting of six-stages common to all consortia, despite social, political, cultural and technological differences is evident; embryonic, early developmental, developmental, maturation and disbanding or developing in to meta-consortia[20].

There are two significant consortia established in South Asia; the National Digital Library in Pakistan and the INFLIBNET in India. Digital library provides access to high quality, peer-reviewed journals, databases, articles and e-books across a wide range of disciplines. The e-books support programme provides access to most of the important text and reference books in a variety of subject areas. Around 75,000 items are provided through this digital library programme[21]. INFLIBNET Centre is an autonomous Inter-University Centre of the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India, initiated in 1991 with the primary objective of promoting information transfer and access that support scholarship, learning, research and academic pursuit through cooperation and involvement of agencies concerned[22].

5. FORMULATION OF THE CONSORTIUM

The following section discusses the formulation of the Sri Lankan consortium in accordance with the project development life-cycle.



Source: unpublished survey findings

Figure 1. Number of foreign journals and database subscriptions in 2013.

6. PROJECT INITIATION

Initially, a project proposal was submitted by the author to the UGC through SCOLIS which was forwarded to the UGC in 2012. Once this was approved by the UGC, the author was assigned to conduct a preliminary survey of the access to scholarly journals and databases by the 15 state universities. It revealed that the library networks of the 15 universities, subscribed to 673 printed scholarly journals (with some duplicates) in 2013 as shown in Fig. 1, and there was no network to share them across the universities. There was no document delivery system to supplement the subscriptions. As Fig. 1 indicates, a severe disparity prevailed across the universities in access to scholarly content.

To address this issue, in 2013, SCOLIS initiated setting up of a consortium for the 15 public universities under the purview of the UGC. Considering the previously negative experience, the consortium was planned to adopt a centrally financed model. The primary objectives of the proposed consortium were; to provide access to scholarly journals in a cost-effective manner, and thereby to underpin the research productivity of all participating universities with the increased access to high quality research articles.

A project of this nature, is prone to failure due to many organisational, cultural, and technological dimensions. Several factors and suggestions to minimise the risks were identified as depicted in Table 1.

7. PROJECT PLANNING

Another proposal together with the findings of the journal availability survey was submitted to the UGC through SCOLIS and to continue with the process, To continue with the process, a Working Group of University Librarians consisting of the Librarians of University of Peradeniya, Sri Jayawardenepura, Moratuwa, Kelaniya, Open University and the then Acting Librarian of University of Colombo was formulated. They worked together to develop the product evaluation forms, to conduct the negotiation meetings and to prepare various reports to SCOLIS while the author was co-ordinating the entire process. There were no support staff, infrastructure or any financial support from the UGC or any other body for

Table 1. Potential risks of the project and suggestions for minimising them

Dimension	Factor	Suggestions to minimise risk
Organisational	1. Project not appreciated by the authorities	Dealing with discussions and justification
	2. Lack of technical knowledge	Assigning a dedicated project team with expertise
	3. Hesitation to allocate funds	Dealing with discussions
	4. Sudden cancellation/withdrawal of funds	Maintaining a contingency plan for funding
Technological	5. Absence of technology in universities	Enhancing infrastructure
	6. Weak connectivity	Increasing bandwidth / alternative methods of connectivity
	7. Complex technical platforms	Providing training
Cultural	8. Reluctance to share	Dealing with discussions and justification of benefits to all
	9. Lack of enthusiasm to use e-resources	Providing awareness and adequate training
	10. Collection not adequate for individual universities	Liaising with individual universities
Content	11. Highly specialised subjects not included	Such universities to support themselves
	12. Loss of content due to cancellation of subscription	Ensuring perpetual access.

the preparatory work, and the Working Group volunteered throughout the whole process.

Individual University Librarians collected the wish-lists covering every academic department in every faculty in their universities to identify the requirements, and these lists were refined by removing duplicates, inaccurate and incomplete entries, and a master list of about 4,000 journal titles was compiled. This master list was the sorted by the publishers to realise that it contained titles by 8-10 core international publishers. These publishers were invited to Sri Lanka for product demonstrations and discussions in August 2013. To facilitate this process, a product details form (PDF) was developed for them to complete and return before they attend the demonstrations in Sri Lanka which were attended by the top UGC officials, academics, and librarians. Subsequently, 7 publishers were short-listed and UGC approval was obtained to invite them for negotiations in December 2013. A campaign was launched across the universities, to raise awareness and to obtain feedback of the faculty members for the proposed activities (this will be discussed further under raising awareness).

Short-listed publishers were met in December 2013, and based on the outcomes, five products were selected to be included in the consortium at the initial stage and the recommendation of the UGC was sought to finalise the decisions. Subjects covered, number of journals in the package and the concessions offered to the consortium, as well as the areas in which the lack of access is critical were considered in selecting the final five publishers.

Table 2. Distribution of access to databases across the universities

University	Management	Multi-disciplinary HSS	Research Methods	Multi-disciplinary	Science
U1	x	x	x	x	x
U2	x	x	x	x	x
U3	x	x	x	x	x
U4	x	x	x	x	x
U5	NR	CA	x	NR	NR
U6	x	NR	x	NR	x
U7	x	x	x	x	x
U8	x	x	x	NP	x
U9	x	x	x	x	x
U10	x	x	x	NP	x
U11	x	x	x	NP	x
U12	x	x	x	x	x
U13	x	x	x	NP	x
U14	x	x	x	NP	x
U15	x	x	x	NP	NP

NR-Not relevant, CA-Complementary rccess to special titles for one year, NP-Not provided due to high cost

9. PROJECT EXECUTION

Once the products were finalised, the journal titles included in their packages were again matched with the initial wish list and an attempt was made to maximise the inclusion. It was also carefully checked whether any of these titles are subscribed to or available to the libraries through any other source. In such cases, either the individual subscriptions were cancelled from 2014 onwards or such titles in the prospective databases were replaced by other titles to avoid duplication. The selection policy was to provide at least a few journals for as many disciplines as possible, yet a 100% satisfaction rate was not possible due to financial constraints. IP authenticated access to the selected five databases was provided from January 2014, denoting a landmark in the history of university libraries.

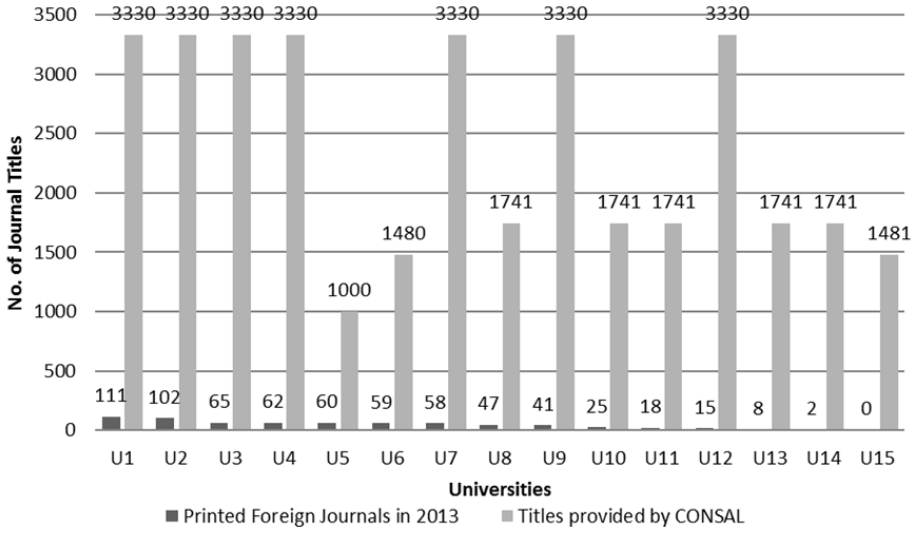


Figure 2. Increase of journal titles per university after the formulation of consortium.

The university library community was invited to suggest a suitable name, and out of many submitted, SCOLIS members agreed upon the Consortium of Sri Lankan Academic Libraries (CONSAL). By end of the 2014, Sri Lankan academic community has started enjoying the access to about 3000 scholarly journals which were not accessible before. In 2015, the author was formally appointed by the UGC as the co-ordinator of the consortium, but without any financial assistance, support staff or infrastructure for a co-ordinating centre. Therefore, the consortium can be seen as labour of love of the Sri Lankan university librarians.

10. INCREASED ACCESS

The five databases selected for the consortium were on management (220 titles), multi-disciplinary with social science orientation (261 titles), research methods (1000+ items), multi-disciplinary (1589 titles) and science (260 titles). Table 2 depicts the distribution of access to the databases by the universities. Database on research methods was provided for all considering its significance to teaching, learning and research. Two highly specialised universities (U5 and U6) received only a limited number of databases as their highly specialised needs could not be accommodated at consortium level. The database with the highest number of titles was provided only for seven established universities due to its high cost and the other 8 universities were expected to obtain full text from these seven.

When the scenario in 2013 was compared with the post-CONSAL access to journal titles, the increase was remarkable and varied from 1000 (the least number of titles) to 3330 titles per university as shown in Fig. 2.

UGC decided not to reduce the annual books and periodicals allocation of the libraries, as a result of CONSAL, and that it will be continued to enable individual universities to purchase specific material to suit their individual requirements. The payments for the databases provided through CONSAL are directly made by the UGC to the respective publishers, so that the individual university polices, needs or priorities do not affect the continued subscription to the databases. In this way the sustainability of the consortium was assured.

11. AWARENESS AND TRAINING

At the beginning, raising awareness of all stake holders was considered important; hence, the need for a consortium and the progress of the formulation was publicised among the university community especially to overcome the possible negative issues. Primarily, a memo illustrating the current scenario (Fig. 1) and a description about the short-listed databases was circulated via the respective University Librarians among their senates, faculty boards, research committees, library committees and other appropriate bodies, so that the academic community of every university gets acquainted with the initiatives taken by the SCOLIS. Librarians were also informed to convey the feedback or suggestions by their universities, to the Working Group. A presentation was made to the top management of the UGC illustrating how a consortium would increase access to scholarly journals by all state universities. Once the databases to be subscribed were finalised, similar method was adopted to inform the academic community about the forthcoming access to the increased journal titles. An event was planned by the UGC to mark the launching of CONSAL by inviting top officials from the universities.

When the consortium was being planned, the Sri Lankan university librarians did not have adequate training related to consortia. Two organisations provided invaluable support to strengthen the capacity of the librarians involved. International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), UK provided a series of ten training programmes, across 2013-2015, under their strengthening research & knowledge systems (SRKS) programme**.** These enabled the librarians to learn the entire process of formulating, managing, monitoring and systems management related to consortia, filling the hitherto existed void. The support of INFLIBNET, India is unforgettable in developing the Product Evaluation Forms and the visit of the Director as a resource person to Sri Lanka. Once the consortium was established, some publishers visited the individual universities according to an annual schedule across the initial three-year period to train the university communities in using the databases.

12. PROJECT CONTROL AND MONITORING

The co-ordinator communicates with the working group members regarding all issues, and the recommendations are submitted to the SCOLIS. Chairman/SCOLIS communicate to the UGC and UGC approved decisions are conveyed to SCOLIS. Then the Chairman/SCOLIS conveys the decisions to the administrative staff of the UGC for necessary action i.e. payment of annual subscription. Co-ordinator communicates with the publishers formally in sorting issues related to access by individual universities, scheduling training programmes

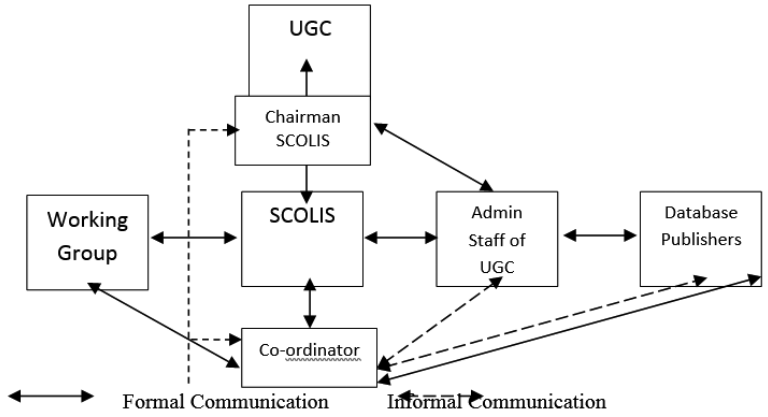


Figure 3. Communication model adopted throughout the implementation process.

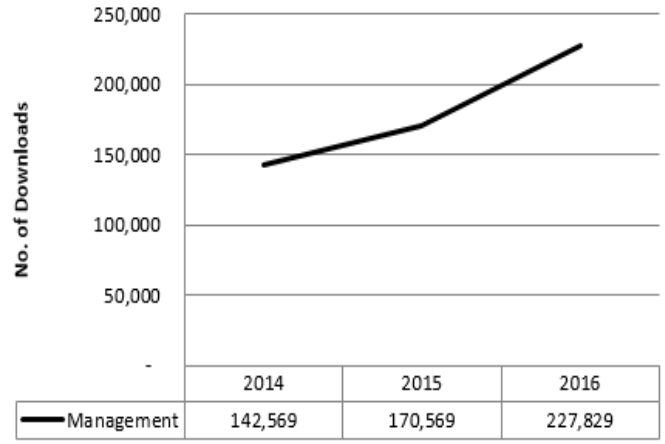


Figure 4. Downloads of management database 2014-2017.

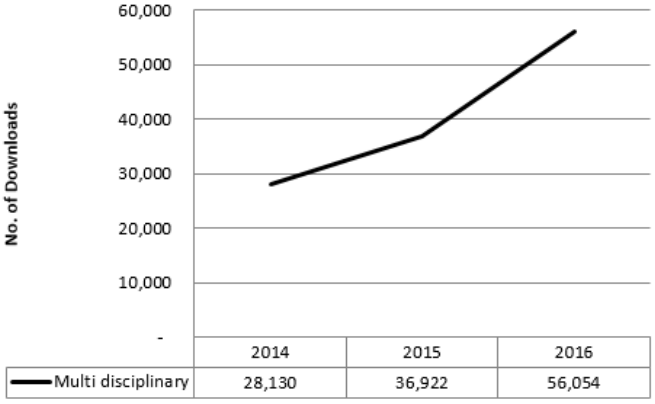
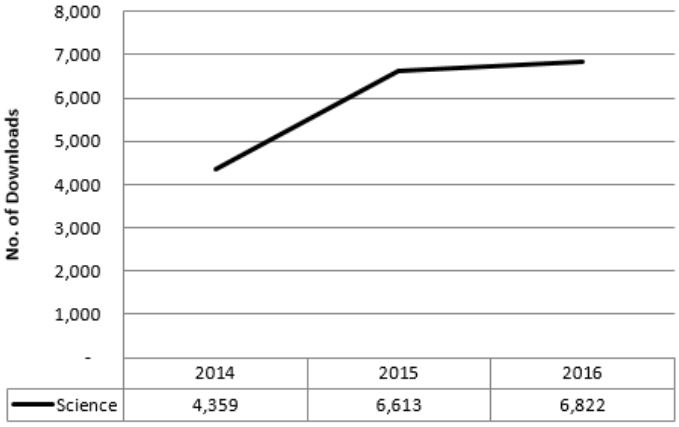


Figure 5. Downloads of multi-disciplinary database 2014-2017.

etc. and informally communicates in certain issues like getting clarifications for licensing agreements, serving as a link between the UGC and the publishers. Figure 3 indicates the communication model adopted from 2013 to date.

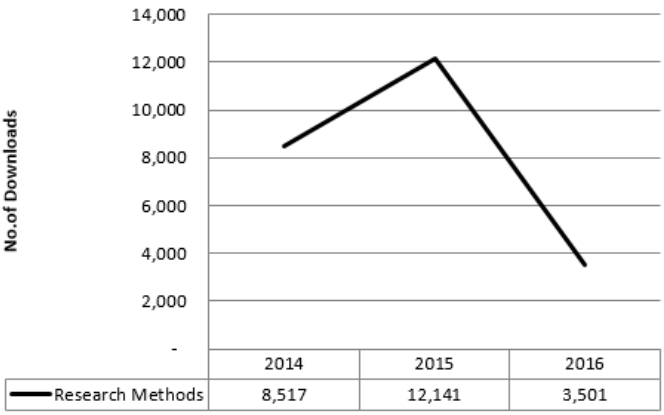
Figures 4-8 illustrates the cumulative usage across 2014-2016 while the initial number of titles included in the packages remained constant during this three year period. Usage of the Management database was the highest. The multi-disciplinary database depicted the second highest usage, with a slight decrease across 2016. Usage of Research Methods database dropped from 2014 to 2016. Multi-disciplinary database with a HSS orientation depicted an unusually sharp increase during 2016. Science was the least used database and has remained almost the same.

To study the usage further, a survey was conducted during 2016-2017 with funding from INASP, UK and 336 academics responded from 14 universities. According to the unpublished findings, 39.3 per cent commented that 26 % - 50 % of their information needs are fulfilled by the e-resources available in the university, and 29.5 per cent have said that 51 % - 75 % of their needs are satisfied. Level of satisfaction among academics, with the databases provided, indicated that the majority (40.5 %) are somewhat satisfied while 31.8 per cent are



*Data were not available for the last quarter of 2016.

Figure 6. Downloads of science database 2014-2016.



*Data were not available for the last quarter of 2016.

Figure 7. Downloads of research methods database 2014-2016.

satisfied. These figures indicate that there is scope for further developments in the resources provided to achieve higher rate of satisfaction by the academics. Absence of remote access to databases was highlighted by the academics.

13. MODIFICATIONS AFTER THREE YEARS

After the initial three-year period, a special committee appointed by SCOLIS reviewed the usage and recommended

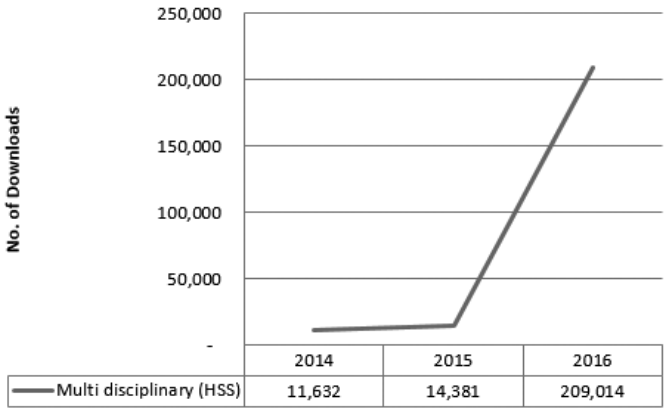


Figure 8. Downloads of Multi-disciplinary (HSS) 2014-2017.

discontinuation of the subscription to the Science and research Methods databases as renewal of their subscription could not be justified. Utilising these savings, a document delivery service with the British Library was started in 2017 with the library of University of Colombo serving as the co-ordinating centre and an e-textbook collection was subscribed to from mid 2017 up upon the request of the medical academics. Further, under CONSAL, a plagiarism detection tool was provided for fourteen universities (the other opted to join from 2019) from August 2018. Several more products are under evaluation for inclusion in CONSAL from 2019. The changes occurred during 2017 and 2018 indicate that the consortium has passed its embryonic stage and entered the early developmental stage according to Shachaf's (2003) classification.

14. CONCLUSIONS

CONSAL has slowly but steadily developed across almost five years. This slow but steady growth can be attributed to several positive factors; it was started with a top down approach with the interest of the top officials of the UGC, the political situation prevailed during the time had a positive outlook towards increasing access to e-content to underpin the internationalisation of universities, the survey of journal subscriptions supported the proposal strongly as there was no previous data to prove that the access to scholarly journals and databases were so poor, and from the initiation academic communities of the 15 universities were informed and involved, Quarterly usage circulated among universities encouraged marketing and training, and all University Librarians played a significant role within their universities. In a winding-up message of SRKS, the Senior Programme Manager of INASP stated that

Harle, J. has apprciated the Consortia through his personalised e-mail to author, where he stated that "Sri Lanka is in a much stronger position than many consortia in the network. You have a strong cadre of skilled and experienced trainers, and a strong structure for CONSAL under the UGC… We hope that instead, CONSAL and the Sri Lankan library community can continue to be part of INASP's work, but play a different role as "elders" in the network, allowing others to benefit from your expertise and experience".

However, several negative issues to be addressed by the UGC and the individual universities are there. Poor connectivity in some locations, low recognition of e-journals by some, absence of remote access in many universities and the still-limited coverage of disciplines need to be addressed soon. Convincing the funding authorities, that it takes time to develop the usage is a challenge and the large student population who studies in national languages need to be encouraged to access the CONSAL databases published in english. Addressing these issues will enable CONSAL to evolve in to maturity with expanded resources and membership in the years to come.

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