Consulting Across Cultures:
Librarians and Project Management in Vietnam

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Abstract

Purpose	This paper offers a number of reflections based on the personal experience of working as a librarian in Vietnam.
Design	The approach is subjective and is based on the author's observations and conclusions as a project consultant to several philanthropic projects in Vietnam.
Findings	The paper briefly describes these library projects and then discusses some of the more significant professional and personal challenges and rewards they involved.
Practical Implications	The paper provides some practical guidance on approaches to project management across cultures and on issues specific to library project management and consulting in Vietnam.
Value	The paper is both a contribution to the small body of literature on the impact of philanthropic assistance and projects on libraries in Vietnam, as well as a personal narrative on the experience of working as a professional librarian in another culture.
Paper Type	Viewpoint
Keywords	University Libraries, Vietnam, Project Management, Philanthropy

Prologue - Melbourne

The first time I reflected on my career as a librarian working overseas occurred in 2002, when I was sitting in an office of the Australian Government Department of Immigration at Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, my home town. I was being interviewed because I had given my occupation as "librarian", but the stamps in my passport indicated that I had passed in and out of Vietnam and other Asian countries at least twelve times in the previous two years. The two did not ordinarily equate, and naturally the officials there were keen to know why.

With mounting apprehension, I attempted to explain that I was employed as a consultant to a number of library building construction and development projects in Vietnam. The more I described my work, the less plausible it also sounded to me, that an Australian librarian could be taken out of a typical management position in an academic library, and apply his professional skills and experience in library projects overseas, immersed in a completely different country, society, culture and professional practice. I anticipated an examination far more searching than anything I had encountered while studying for my librarianship qualification, but fortunately this proved not to be necessary. The Immigration Department accepted my explanation, and perhaps all I had to do from then on was convince myself that not only was it possible for a librarian to work overseas, but that the professional skills we possess are both highly useful and applicable to overseas philanthropic project work of this kind.

Learning Resource Centre Projects in Vietnam

My entry into the world of "international" librarianship came about through the involvement of my employer at that time - RMIT University, Melbourne - in a series of philanthropic projects in Vietnam. In 2000, the University was in the process of establishing its campus in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, after many years involvement in the country, and a lengthy period of preliminary development and negotiations with the Vietnamese Government. (Wilmoth, 2004) In the course of this a relationship had been established with an international philanthropic organization – The Atlantic Philanthropies – which had common interests in education in Vietnam. Atlantic at that time was actively involved in a number of programs in education and public health, and had already established an "Information Resource Centre" at the University of Danang in central Vietnam, utilizing the services of another philanthropic organization – the East Meets West Foundation – in association with the University of

Queensland.

Atlantic sought the assistance of RMIT to implement its own program of educational infrastructure development in Vietnam, which involved the construction of a number of large scale library buildings, or as they were eventually to be termed, "Learning Resource Centres", in collaboration with provincial Vietnamese universities. This began with the development of a Learning Resource Centre on behalf of Hue University in central Vietnam in late 2000 (Hue University, 2006), but eventually grew into a suite of projects for the construction and development of Learning Resource Centres with the universities of Da Nang (commencing in 2002), Can Tho (in the southern Mekong Delta region, commencing in 2003) and Thai Nguyen (in the country's northern mountainous area, commencing in 2004). (Atlantic Philanthropies, 2006)

The initial project in Hue was to be managed by the RMIT University Major Projects Unit, which was also handling at that time the establishment of the University's campus in Ho Chi Minh City. The Unit developed the funding proposal for a Learning Resource Centre - its design, construction and fit-out – but perhaps reflecting Atlantic's experience in developing educational facilities elsewhere in Vietnam and the world, the proposal also included an explicit and detailed program of library development activities, addressing such areas as IT infrastructure, library management systems, print and electronic resources acquisitions, recruitment and training of management and staff, and operational and service development. Once built and operating, the library was to be transferred to Hue University to operate as their own concern.

In order to undertake the project in Hue, RMIT needed the expertise of a senior librarian, not only for design development but for the development, co-ordination and implementation of these programs in IT and library systems, acquisitions, and training and service development. At that time I was an Associate Librarian with responsibilities which included business development and facilities management, and I had worked on redeveloping library buildings and facilities at a number of RMIT campuses both in Melbourne and in Hamilton in western Victoria. I had been employed as a librarian in various positions for over fifteen years and had often wondered about the prospects of working overseas, but had not done much to pursue this. Two weeks after being invited to join the Vietnamese projects, however, I was on a Vietnam Airlines flight to Ho Chi Minh City, along with the then University Librarian, several other senior RMIT staff, and my first project meeting for the Hue

LRC.

Over the course of the next five years I gradually became more involved in the Learning Resource Centre projects, moving from my initial role - which was to draft the design brief for the Hue University LRC - to a full-time secondment as a library consultant to the RMIT Major Projects Unit, and finally in August 2002 to be re-located to Ho Chi Minh City as the Director of the LRC Projects at the newly established RMIT International University Vietnam. (RMIT Vietnam, 2006)

Professional Challenges

Moving from a mainstream career in Australian academic library management to one as a consultant to Vietnamese university libraries presented a significant number of changes and challenges. Joining the Hue LRC project just as it began to take on some momentum, I had little time to prepare myself both personally and professionally for working in Vietnam. Like any tourist, I consumed what I could from guide books, but from a professional perspective, there was little information to go on except through the briefings of the RMIT Major Projects Unit and the hand-holding of its more experienced and well-traveled staff.

With few precedents anywhere for this type of library project, much of my experience in managing different aspects of the projects was subsequently accumulated first hand through my work over a period of time, and involved not just a major shift in professional role from manager to consultant, but an adjustment to a new country, to Vietnamese life, customs, language and traditions, and to different political and organizational cultures. The following are a few of the professional challenges that emerged.

Infrastructure Issues

One of the most immediate challenges was that my working environment was not an existing library as such, but a project which began with a building site and quite literally developed from the ground up into a functioning academic library service. The brief for each of the Learning Resource Centre projects was to design, construct and fit-out a library building of between six and nine thousand square metres, and to develop the whole range of library facilities, resources and services which would be typically encountered in a "western" academic library. What the brief didn't mention was that in almost every respect, this would need to be done without the benefit of an

existing infrastructure of library facilities, resources, bibliographic management, trained personnel and a corpus of professional practice in Vietnam upon which these projects could be based.

While there have been some dramatic improvements in Vietnamese academic libraries in the recent past, the Learning Resource Centre projects were undertaken at each university largely without the presence of an infrastructure of library services which would be typical in an Australian tertiary institution. As a typical example, the library services encountered in Hue at the beginning of the project were in a bad state, with buildings and collections both in poor condition, some of them severely water damaged by flooding in the city in 1999. Most of the libraries were chronically short of funds, without much professional or management expertise to deliver services, and little relationship to a curriculum which was itself in need of reform. Bibliographic management was rudimentary and lacking in standardization, and materials were sometimes simply accessioned and organized by size. This was possible because collections were usually held on closed access, and housed in several separate rooms. With limited resources for acquisitions, many of the libraries at Hue continued to rely heavily on foreign donations of materials, with the result that most had holdings in a number of foreign languages, largely unused and irrelevant to student needs. Services were generally custodial in nature, without active reference and support services for students. Although library management systems exist in Vietnam, at this stage there was considerable development work still to undertake, and a number of libraries continued to use the CDS-ISIS system provided by UNESCO. There was virtually no access to electronic resources, and internet connectivity was painfully slow and highly unreliable.

The response to a number of these problems was often to innovate and to develop infrastructure which provided a framework from which not only the Learning Resource Centres but other Vietnamese academic, public and special libraries could benefit. As an example, having identified some fundamental weaknesses, considerable development work went into the Vietnamese library management systems in place in each of the LRCs, to bring them to the desired level of functionality. (Denison & Robinson, 2004) In addition, workshops were conducted with librarians from throughout Vietnam to identify appropriate standards for bibliographic control, which subsequently lead to projects for the authorized translations into Vietnamese of bibliographic utilities such as MARC21, DDC and AACR2. Low cost access to electronic resources was sourced through several vendors, and the introduction into Vietnam of programs such as PERI (Programme for the Enhancement of Research

Information), (INASP, 2006) leading to the development of a consortium of Vietnamese libraries, was initiated through symposia funded through these projects. Issues of professional practice and standards were also explored in a symposium on the possible development of a Vietnamese library association. With the assistance of Atlantic Philanthropies, these and several other projects have emerged from the LRC projects, not only addressing capacity issues at a local level but providing sustainable infrastructure for all sectors of Vietnamese librarianship. These programs have also included professional training and sustainability management projects for the LRC's, involving a number of library schools and professional librarians from around the world. (Atlantic Philanthropies, 2006a)

Organizational Issues

Beyond the immediate practical problems, working on the Learning Resource Centre projects also required sensitivity to Vietnamese social, political and professional cultures. The typical systems and arrangements of tertiary institutions in Vietnam, for example, include a number of characteristics of which a project has to be aware in order to achieve successful outcomes.

As the Learning Resource Centres were relatively high profile projects, involving major issues of finance, prestige and reputation for the client universities, it is not surprising that there was a considerable level of active involvement in the project at all levels of each university. In most cases, this was a significant advantage for the project, as it facilitated processes such as obtaining government approvals for different aspects of the project. In some cases, this involvement could have negative consequences, and there could from time to time be extreme sensitivity around issues such as employment of staff, or choices of contractor or supplier. On the other hand, in other cases some University administrations were demonstrably reluctant to participate in the major decisions of the project, to avoid any suggestion of corruption on the part of University officials, and to keep such a possibility at arm's length.

The outcomes that have been achieved in each of the projects, reflect to some extent the style of the university's engagement with the project, and its aspirations, leadership styles and levels of co-operation and risk taking. This was evident for example in the designs of the LRC buildings themselves, which in some cases were relatively traditional structures intended to "fit in" with existing building stock, and in other cases quite innovative buildings for the current state of public architecture in Vietnam, to serve as flagships for the ambitions of the universities concerned.

The vision and commitment of the Vietnamese universities to the Learning Resource Centre projects could also differ from one institution to another. The most successful outcomes in the LRC projects were achieved where there has been a local champion for the project within the recipient university, who has not only engaged most frequently with the project management team, but also acted as an advocate for the project within the parent university, working to secure agreements and approvals within its administrative machinery. While these people provided great leadership to each project, it is a feature of Vietnamese universities to turn-over key administrative positions with a change of University President or Rector. Consequently, in the life of a project in Vietnam, these key personnel could change and their loss represented not only the loss of expertise and accumulated experience of working on a project, but also a loss of continuity and momentum and the need to re-establish the working relationship with a new group of people. It is also not uncommon for such people to be employed in more than one position in the university, often on account of the modest salaries offered in the tertiary sector. As a result, from a project management point of view, this can be occasionally frustrating in the fulfillment of project commitments, as key decision makers are distracted or unavailable owing to other professional commitments, and the centralized nature of Vietnamese bureaucracies does not allow for greatly devolved levels of responsibility as an alternative.

Professional Culture

The projects also involved significant challenges for the working cultures and habits of the librarians involved at a day to day level in the development and management of the Learning Resource Centres, and therefore a challenge for foreign librarians such as myself to successfully introduce new concepts and practices. As the brief for each project explicitly sought to change professional practices in Vietnamese libraries, moving for example from closed to open access collections to encourage a far greater level of independent access to information for students, this entailed substantial changes in thinking for local librarians, not least because existing practice placed heavy emphasis on the librarian's role and responsibilities as a custodian of the physical collection, rather than as a facilitator of access to information. In addition, day to day work habits and commitments could intrude and clash with the demands of the project schedule, so that for example changes would occur to work and training schedules frequently with little or no notice. In some parts of Vietnam, the working day commences very early but is punctuated by a long break for lunch in the middle of the day, making it difficult to get through a demanding work schedule in limited

time. In other areas, lunch itself could sometimes effectively signal the end of the working day!

Many foreigners who travel or live in Vietnam – if they do not speak Vietnamese – can possibly be forgiven for failing to recognize also the extent of the influence of politics and government on all levels of the day to day business of the country, as they encounter an open, friendly and vibrant society. In a working environment, however, this presence is more visible. Organizing professional meetings, and inviting foreign professionals to address these meetings, for example, can require prior approvals at different levels of government and its security agencies. Cultural and ideological clearances must be obtained for the importation of foreign books and journals. While of course similar issues exist in many other countries, by definition projects involving libraries and librarianship are concerned with improving access to information, and a great deal of sensitivity was required to address these issues while also achieving positive outcomes.

Communication

Language, culture and history inevitably have had an impact on the communication and working dynamics between a largely foreign project team and the Vietnamese client institution. While in many cases key staff in the Vietnamese universities could speak English, it was commonplace for most meetings and correspondence to be in both languages, and for discussions to be through interpreters. This inevitably created some separation between Vietnamese client and foreign project team, which was bridged to some extent by the employment of both local and overseas Vietnamese in the project team.

However, a complex range of issues are involved in the relationships between a foreign funding body and its project management on the one hand, and the local client on the other, and for any librarian working in this environment there will be significant challenges to overcome. A Vietnamese university which finds itself the recipient of generous and prestigious assistance from a foreign donor may also have difficulty in openly asserting its interests, and patterns of communication evolve at all levels of the project which allow the views of the institution to be heard. Coming from the more straight forward management environment of Australian universities, the manner in which this communication takes place is not always understood or appreciated. The communication gap may be breached, for example, through

intermediaries, involving a completely separate layer of discussion on an issue, and unsettling the established decision making processes of the project team.

Vietnam from a Professional Perspective

Although there were a number of complex challenges and issues to deal with as a professional librarian working in Vietnam, my personal experience of working as a consultant on the Learning Resource Centre projects – and being based in Vietnam - was very largely positive and rewarding. Living and working in the country involves an immersion in the culture and society of that country, and this naturally is a significant advantage for developing effective working relationships and goodwill, and for achieving positive and lasting outcomes in the project.

For the particular requirements of this work, acting as advisor and consultant to the projects but also managing the "library" aspects of the project on a day to day basis, it was more effective for me to operate from a base in Ho Chi Minh City than from Melbourne. It meant that supervision of work at each of the sites was improved, that regular contact with client universities and their lead personnel for the projects could be maintained, and that if issues developed on a project they could be identified and responded to relatively quickly, especially if they required travel to the site. While a "fly in fly out" operational style had been manageable for the early stages of the projects, this lacked the continuity and depth of understanding that working within the country could offer.

The closeness of the contact, too, allowed me to understand the past experience of Vietnamese librarians, and the substantial challenges they face in resourcing and managing library services. This, I hope, enabled me to provide assistance which was practical and meaningful, and relevant to the Vietnamese context, rather than to impose foreign concepts, systems and practices, without considering their impact locally. Vietnamese library professionals of many years experience will quite sensibly not automatically accept the advice of foreign professionals, as they are more conscious of the restraints under which they work. It is consequently fundamental to the provision of worthwhile assistance from foreign organizations that these limitations are recognized, and that a collaborative process is developed.

For an expatriate, one of the key personal benefits about living and working overseas is that every day includes new and altogether different experiences. I was extremely fortunate to be involved in project work which required me to travel the length of

Vietnam, and I frequently had to wonder if I was really allowed to do this for a living. The commute to work at Cantho, for example, involves crossing the Mekong River on a ferry, while a spare hour in Hanoi can allow plenty of time to wander through the fascinating streets of the Old Quarter. The work itself was also intrinsically interesting, almost manically varied and engaged me in the work of other professions so much that this in itself was a learning experience. For much of the time, I was fortunate to work with experienced project managers from Australia who had worked in Vietnam previously, and I benefited greatly from their guidance and experience, and spent a great deal of time at construction sites, being schooled for example in the differences between bored and driven piles (actually, it's really quite interesting!), formwork, cold pours, floor loadings and all the other details of building construction.

One of the most rewarding professional aspects, though, was to be able to contribute my experience and expertise as a librarian to this mixture of talent and expertise brought together for each project. Managing across different professional cultures can be demanding, especially as it was my role to ensure that the issues of developing and running a library service remained central to the projects, and that we did not lose sight of this when confronted with the competing pressures of architects, builders, and engineers, all of whom had their own time, cost and quality constraints. Conveying what librarians do - and why - was a constant theme of my work in Vietnam, and not always readily understood by the many stakeholders in the projects. In one meeting I recall a construction manager advising me earnestly of the exact time in the project I would be required to install the Dewey Decimal System, as if like everything he dealt with, it arrived on the back of a truck and could be off-loaded and installed. In retrospect I wish it had been that simple! Playing this professional role cheek by jowl with other professions reinforced for me the value of librarianship and the contribution that I could make in this situation, and also gave me a new appreciation of the depth of my experience and how it could be utilized.

One of the difficulties, however, is that librarianship of course involves a number of specializations, and sourcing the relevant expertise to be applied to the projects at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way has been one of the most significant challenges faced. Working overseas, my network of professional colleagues that could be turned to for advice or assistance was more remote, and the feeling of being professionally isolated was also exacerbated by working outside the mainstream of the profession. While I subsequently developed a similar network amongst Vietnamese librarians, this was not of great use to me in engaging more foreign professionals in project work. In the course of the projects, different methods were

used to apply professional library expertise to project tasks, including locating staff on-site, fly-in-fly-out contractors, and short-term secondments from RMIT University Library. For various reasons, each of these approaches can be ideal when applied to certain project requirements, but have not been without difficulties, not least because each new appointment involves a whole new process of acclimatization and adjustment before an effective contribution can be made.

A sense of isolation could apply also to maintaining up to date knowledge of practices and trends in the information professions overseas. This was important not only for my own sake but for the information and skills which I and other professional colleagues were passing on to counterparts in Vietnamese libraries. Possibly because I was more directly engaged in project management rather than library management, I found that I very quickly lost track of the latest activities in Australian libraries, and only with some effort maintained contact with colleagues in Australia. I relied in particular on conference attendance for professional development, although because of project commitments this too was infrequent and was usually only possible if it included project related work. Ironically, while my connection with Australian librarianship diminished during my time in Vietnam, my knowledge of libraries, library schools and other institutions and agencies involved in philanthropic project work improved greatly, as these became my most frequent points of contact with librarianship in the "outside world".

Vietnam from a Personal Perspective

At the time I was first offered the opportunity to move to Vietnam, I had already been working on the Learning Resource Centre projects for almost two years, and had the benefit of regular trips in and out of the country. I had become familiar with many aspects of Vietnamese society and daily life, I could speak some basic Vietnamese, and was used to traveling up and down the country regularly. Even so, the prospect of re-locating to Ho Chi Minh City was daunting, as it involved resettling my wife and young family into a country and a lifestyle with which they were mostly familiar only through my stories, photos and the souvenirs that came home with each trip. It also meant in many respects a much more definite departure from a continued career in mainstream professional librarianship in Australia, and of course a disentangling of many of the ties that bind us to a place: - family, work, homes, mortgages, friends, lifestyles.

While this process for us was assisted by a prior knowledge of Vietnam, it was

nonetheless challenging for all members of our family. Vietnam, despite its colossal economic growth, is still very much a developing nation with all its attendant health and social issues. With time it becomes second nature to drink bottled water out of necessity rather than preference, or to think about where the salad came from before you dare to eat it. At the beginning, however, there is an extended and sometimes difficult period of acclimatization and of learning how to get things done, where to buy, how much to pay, who to contact, and a range of other new experiences.

My children were initially won over to the idea of living in Vietnam by a holiday which consisted exclusively of five-star hotels and resorts, which of course gave them absolutely no preparation for living in the country! They nonetheless adjusted quite quickly once we moved to Vietnam, and developed new friendships and interests, and settled into a new routine at one of the international schools. Not long after moving to Ho Chi Minh City, my wife was also able to continue employment as a librarian, and we settled into a new home, made new friends and started to become familiar with the western as well as Vietnamese aspects of the city. My employer, RMIT University, also provided allowances which were essential to cover the basics of health, accommodation and children's education, in a city which is rated in the top twenty most expensive cities in the world for expatriates. Being able to achieve some level of stability in all of these areas was essential to our settling in Vietnam and remaining there for three years.

However, we now live in Hong Kong and have remarked on many occasions on how much easier it is to live here. Children whom I thought had adjusted completely to life in Vietnam are now delighted to be living in Hong Kong instead, and point out the availability of movies, books, places to visit, things to do and friends to hang out with, which makes me reflect much more on their stoicism when living in Vietnam. There is a well established and very supportive network of expatriates in Hong Kong, and friends both for adults and children alike do not re-locate so frequently for their work. By contrast with Vietnam, the "normal" life we now live in Hong Kong has highlighted for us how different life had been in Ho Chi Minh City, on the one hand pleasant, but on the other lacking in the social, cultural and other activities one would assume of a developed city.

Epilogue – Hong Kong

Not long after moving to Hong Kong, I was chatting to another expatriate professional and he asked me how I came to be living there. When I told him I was a librarian he

was frankly astonished. What on earth is a librarian doing earning a living overseas? Even librarians can be "expats" these days?

I suppose that he had never considered librarianship as a career with international possibilities, and I have to confess that until a few years earlier I had much the same impression. However, while many of the issues associated with working and living overseas are the same for all professions, I believe that librarianship opens up some unique opportunities and possibilities, and can be a highly "portable" career.

I had the opportunity after my initial trip to Vietnam in 2000 to move back into my old management role at RMIT if I preferred. Instead, I chose to become more involved in the Learning Resource Centre projects, and have thrived on the professional and other opportunities they have offered me. Since those initial few damp days in Hue, the Projects Unit at RMIT International University Vietnam – in collaboration with many other organizations and individuals – has proceeded to complete and deliver three of the four Learning Resource Centre projects, with Hue opening in June 2004, Danang in July 2005 and Cantho in April 2006. While these projects have been described in more detail elsewhere, (Robinson, 2006, 2006a) these LRC's provide the most advanced academic library services and facilities currently available in Vietnam, and offer a model for library development elsewhere in the country.

During my employment on the projects, I had been concerned from time to time that the longer I stayed in Vietnam - removed both by geography and occupation from my Australian professional base - the less employable I would become. In fact, the reverse has occurred. We continue to enjoy living in Asia, and indeed I continue to remain involved in Vietnamese library projects as well as in a whole range of new activities and projects which have come about through my current position as the Director of a Hong Kong academic library. I am not only pleased but grateful that I was given the opportunity to step outside my traditional role, and to make a contribution to librarianship in other parts of the world.

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