

**Learning Resource Centres in Vietnam:  
A Case Study in Collaborative Development**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses a program of foreign philanthropic development of Learning Resource Centres in collaboration with four universities in Vietnam. Essentially, each Learning Resource Centre project has involved the bringing together of different organizations and expertise to design and construct the building, implement a sophisticated IT infrastructure, acquire and manage a range of print and electronic information resources, recruit and train management and staff, and develop a range of information services based on contemporary modes of library service provision. The paper examines the objectives of the Learning Resource Centre projects, why the Learning Resource Centres were regarded as appropriate models for library development in Vietnam, the issues involved in a collaborative project of this nature, and the outcomes to date.

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## **Learning Resource Centres in Vietnam: A Case Study in Collaborative Development**

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### **Introduction**

Vietnamese academic libraries, especially in provincial and regional universities, are confronted with an enormous challenge to support the learning needs of their academic staff and student communities. Chronically under-resourced over an extensive period of time, these libraries also in many cases are constrained in the services they can provide by the legacy of piecemeal acquisition of information resources in the past, a shortage of qualified professional staff, and a traditional educational context which does not encourage individual student learning and exploration.

Library buildings, as with many other university facilities in Vietnam, are often inadequate to satisfy the demand for basic amenities such as study places, and a lack of sufficient funding to maintain facilities combined with the impact of a humid tropical climate has often lead to the rapid deterioration of these buildings and the print collections that they house.

Beyond this, while internet accessibility has improved significantly in the recent past, many Vietnamese academic libraries offer little in the way of PC access or networked access to electronic resources, owing to poor local IT infrastructure and management, and limited funds to scale up networks to meet demand. In addition, issues of bibliographic control have also not been addressed until recently, so that international standards such as MARC, AACR2 and DDC – if in use at all – have been subject to local variation in the past, and compete with a variety of other local and adopted bibliographic systems.

There have been a number of recent development projects which have attempted to

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support library services in Vietnam in different ways, such as through donations of materials, grants directly to institutions for library management systems and electronic resources, and through professional training and capacity building. While the situation of Vietnamese libraries has improved in many cases through these and Vietnamese government initiatives in recent years, the conditions described above have also given rise to philanthropic projects which attempt a strategy of accelerating the development of existing library services through the establishment of completely new facilities, combined with extensive programs of IT infrastructure development, information resources acquisitions, professional training programs and library services development. This paper discusses a series of such projects, funded by an international philanthropic organization - The Atlantic Philanthropies<sup>2</sup> – to develop library facilities known as “Learning Resource Centres” on behalf of selected Vietnamese universities.

### **The Learning Resource Centre Projects**

The Learning Resource Centre projects were commenced in 2000, and entail the construction of library buildings in four regional Vietnamese universities, supported by a program of capacity building and resources and IT development in each case, and more generally by a broad national program of development of bibliographic standards, professional development and other activities. This suite of projects has succeeded an earlier initiative, also funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, in which an “Information Resource Centre” was established in collaboration with the University of Danang and the University of Queensland.<sup>3</sup>

Through the construction and resourcing of the LRCs, the overall objective is to support a paradigm shift in approaches to teaching and learning at a university level in Vietnam, creating the pre-conditions for change by opening up student access to information, and by supporting this access with high quality learning environments as well as the professional capacity to support independent student learning with appropriate information services. It is a development program which aims not only to improve the level of resources and facilities available to students in the recipient Vietnamese universities, but to act as a catalyst for change by suggesting alternative models for library development elsewhere in the country.

Each Learning Resource Centre project involves the design, construction and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uq.edu.au/about/docs/annualreport/annual-report00>

development of a large-scale library facility based on contemporary models and standards of information service, together with the provision of information technology infrastructure, high quality teaching and learning facilities and a range of current print and electronic information resources and services.

Four Learning Resource Centre projects have been either completed or are currently under development in Vietnam. These are;

### ***Hue University***

Commenced in 2001, the Hue University Learning Resource Centre consists of a four storey building of approximately 7000 square metres, and includes a range of facilities such as a network of 500 PC workstations, group study and audiovisual facilities, a range of print and electronic resources, and a training, seminar and conference facility. Centrally located on a separate site in Hue, the LRC serves the needs of staff and students from the six faculties and colleges in the city. The formal hand-over of the LRC occurred at its opening ceremony on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2004, with services to students commencing in June 2004.<sup>4</sup>

### ***University of Danang***

The 5500 square metre Learning Resource Centre at Danang has been built at the College of Engineering campus approximately 10 kilometres west of the city centre. As the University has several colleges spread out across Danang city, the primary focus of this Learning Resource Centre is to serve the needs of the Engineering and nearby Education Colleges, and in addition the LRC is linked with the existing University of Danang Information Resource Centre in the centre of Danang City, to create an integrated information service for the whole University.

The Learning Resource Centre was opened in July 2005 and contains a similar range of print and electronic resources, as well as IT and study facilities, to the other LRCs.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Cantho University***

At Cantho, in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, the LRC development is being

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lrc-hueuni.edu.vn>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dnu.edu.vn>

established on the main campus of the University but will serve the staff and student communities from all three campuses in the city. Unlike the Hue and Danang projects, the Cantho LRC will absorb the existing University library service. While incorporating similar services and facilities to the LRCs in both Hue and Danang, a range of building design principles are being introduced to reduce energy consumption and minimize waste, and to lower the ongoing operating costs of the facility to a manageable level. Construction work on this project is nearing completion, with management development and training programs and acquisitions and library systems development also in progress. The 7,200 square metre building is scheduled for completion and hand-over for service commencement in March 2006.<sup>6</sup>

### *Thai Nguyen University*

Work is currently underway for the development of an LRC at Thai Nguyen University, to serve University staff and students and the people of the northern mountainous area of Vietnam. Project planning and the development of a building concept plan have been completed, and construction commenced in late 2005. The Thai Nguyen LRC is expected to be completed and opened at the beginning of 2007.

### **LRC Projects Brief**

While each of the Learning Resource Centre projects has its specific situational and design requirements, there are a number of common objectives and project deliverables. These are;

- The design of a quality building which introduces contemporary models of library design and amenity to Vietnamese universities.
- The development of a “stand-alone” library facility which would serve as a central resource and service for all of the University’s faculties, staff and students.
- The construction of the library building using modern construction techniques and high-quality materials
- The introduction of techniques or features in the design to reduce the operating costs of the building and to promote the long-term sustainability of library services.
- The development of a robust IT infrastructure to support access to electronic

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ctu.edu.vn/library>

resources such as full-text databases and internet services, and the development of web-based access to all library resources.

- The acquisition and organization of a range of print, electronic, audio-visual and other forms of information in both Vietnamese and English, and their management through a sound library management system.
- The development of an organizational framework for the management and service provision of the LRC, and the recruitment and training of management and staff.
- The development of information services which promote student resource-based learning and facilitate independent student access to all forms of information.
- Independent project review and evaluation, identifying areas for future growth and development.

## **LRC Design Concepts and Features**

For the Learning Resource Centre projects overall, an attempt has been made to develop a basic “blueprint” for the layout and overall development of the library service, and to then modify and adapt this blueprint to meet local conditions and requirements. This has assisted in reducing the overall costs of the projects and has also enabled the projects to learn from each other as they develop, so that expertise and experience acquired in one project can be applied to the others in a much more systematic and efficient way. Fundamentally, this has given rise to the following key features common to all projects;

### ***Layout***

The floor layout of each of the LRCs has been designed in open plan to promote ease of navigation and to facilitate a student’s independence in accessing both resources and services. Services, facilities such as PC workstations and study spaces, and collections are all visible from the key traffic areas of the buildings, and unlike many traditional Vietnamese libraries are on open access and do not require the mediation of library staff to use.

Figure 1 below presents a typical LRC layout from the Hue Learning Resource Centre, which demonstrates the integration of electronic access at the PC workstations with access to a centrally located Information Services counter, and a range of print, audiovisual and study facilities.

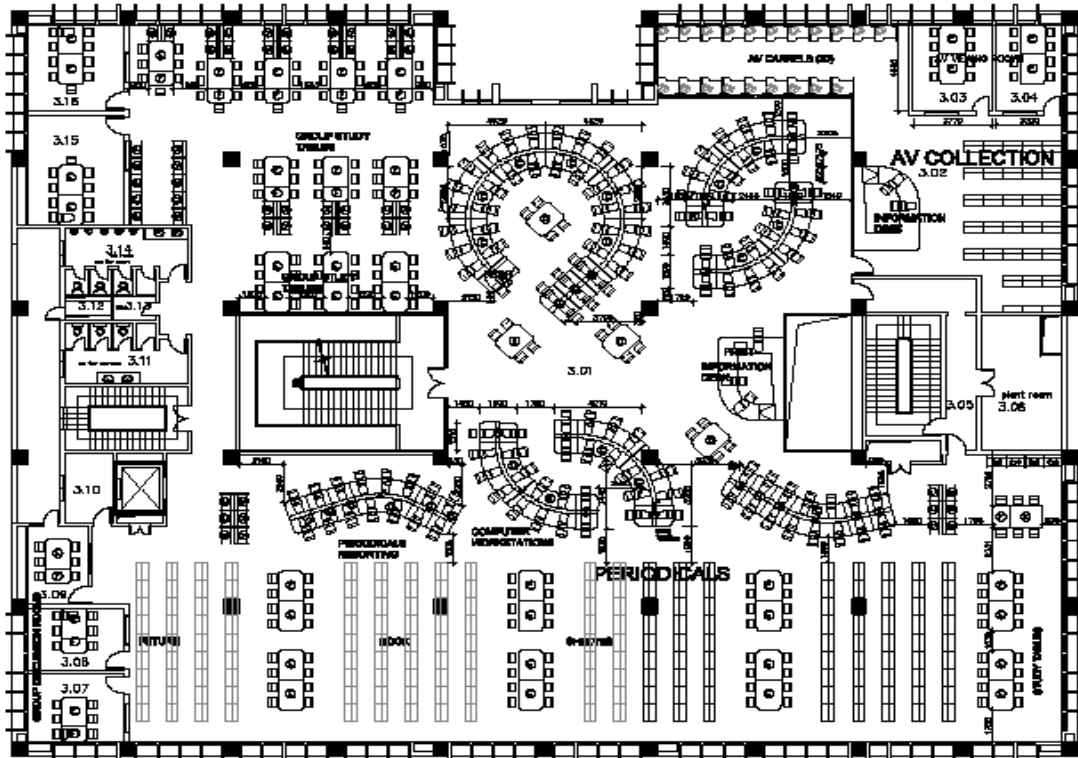


Figure 1 – Hue University Learning Resource Centre, Third Floor

As students ascend the stairs to the third floor of the Hue LRC, they are immediately met with a large bank of PC workstations. These have been deliberately located in the central area of each floor to invite students to explore and use electronic resources as a complementary alternative to print, in a country where access to electronic resources is still very much in its infancy. As an additional design principle, the location of the workstations in the centre of the floor also reduces glare and offers LRC information professionals better opportunities to supervise and assist student PC usage.

The design of the workstations also incorporates features to encourage students to work in ways which suit their learning needs and styles. Each PC workstation provides ample space on either side of the PC to allow students to work with other print materials at the same time. In addition, the workstation benches are curved to allow students the choice to increase the space between themselves and other students, or to reduce this space to such an extent that two students can work comfortably at the same PC.

The other key feature of each floor is an information service point, staffed by trained library professionals. This is central to the floor layout, to enable LRC staff to

effectively supervise the PC and general study areas, and provide support to students, but also to provide students with a clear indication of where assistance can be sought when required.

### ***Study Environments***

A range of group and individual study facilities are made available in the Learning Resource Centres, to offer students choices in the way in which they work. These include individual study carrels for private study, tables and discussion rooms for group work, and individual and group audiovisual spaces. Space is also set aside for post-graduate and research work, incorporating long-term study facilities with common areas for post-graduate students, researchers and academic staff to meet and work together. Many of these study areas are also wireless enabled to provide greater flexibility in the use of space and the choice of study environment.

### ***Information Resources***

The Learning Resource Centres offer a comprehensive mix of print, electronic and audiovisual resources. While there is a heavy emphasis on the use of electronic resources as the most cost-effective means of offering current information, the need to address student information needs at an undergraduate level across a range of subject areas is acknowledged in the provision also of extensive monograph collections, in both Vietnamese and English. In each LRC, there is capacity for between 100,000 and 150,000 volumes.

Electronic resources include some of the major international full-text databases, sourced at heavily discounted prices in consideration of the Vietnamese market for these products, as well as a small number of databases produced locally in Vietnamese, and a range of public domain databases. In order to support access to electronic resources in a way which could be financially sustained by Vietnamese academic libraries, a significant secondary project has been undertaken by the LRC project management to source and introduce a program of low-cost access to databases for all Vietnamese libraries.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, each LRC offers an extensive range of academic and general print periodicals in Vietnamese. Coinciding with the acquisitions program has been the

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.inasp.info/peri/countries>



formulation with each LRC of a collection development policy which takes into account issues such as the mix of Vietnamese and English language material, availability of electronic and print resources in either language, student English language ability on a discipline by discipline basis, and strong interest particularly at a post-graduate level in gaining access to the most recent overseas research and scholarly publishing.

Monograph and periodical collections are usually arrayed as one unbroken sequence of shelving. Open access collections are not common in Vietnamese libraries, where traditionally access to materials has been tightly controlled, and the collections have been partitioned and enclosed according to their intended use (such as for external circulation, or in-house use). Consequently, the introduction of open access collections into the LRCs has been done in such a way as to make it simple for students to navigate classification sequences and locate materials unassisted. All collections are also catalogued using MARC21, AACR2 and DDC, this practice being supported at a national level in Vietnam through other projects initiated by the LRC projects management – principally RMIT International University Vietnam – and funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, for the authorized translation of these standards into Vietnamese<sup>8</sup>.

### ***PC Network***

Each of the LRC projects includes a large scale student PC network which integrates access to electronic resources, such as full-text databases and e-books, with internet access, catalogue access to the LRC print collections, standard desktop applications and email facilities. This is supported by a robust network architecture and strong leased line and ADSL internet links to ensure that the difficulties of typical low-speed internet services in Vietnam can be overcome, and that it is feasible from both a technical and a service point of view to deliver full text electronic information to the desktop. Electronic and online catalogue access is managed at the desktop through a web interface developed by the LRC project management team with each of the universities.

### ***Teaching, Research and Commercial Spaces***

A range of teaching spaces have been integrated into the design of the Learning

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rmit.edu.vn/community.php>

Resource Centres, primarily to provide venues where library professionals can transfer their knowledge of resources and information seeking techniques to staff and students. In addition, however, these spaces have been designed into the buildings in order to offer the university high quality fully equipped conference and seminar facilities, which can be used both as a teaching venue and also as a means of generating external revenue to contribute towards the operating expenses of the LRC. Depending on the requirements of each university, this concept is taken a step further with the integration into the LRC designs of a range of other spaces to accommodate research projects, bookshops, cafeterias and other commercial activities.

### ***Information Services***

Student and staff access to resources is supported and encouraged not only by layout of services but in addition by the delivery of reference services and information literacy programs aimed at transferring skills to enable independent research and application of information. Faculty liaison programs have also been introduced to promote awareness amongst academic staff of the resources and services available, and to encourage staff both to integrate resources into the curriculum as well as to adopt different approaches to their teaching. Beyond the physical development of facilities, resources and infrastructure, one of the major features of the LRC projects has been an extensive training and development program which has been implemented concurrently with the construction phase of each project. This has included study tours and management training as well as development programs in library skills, IT competencies, network management, and extensive periods of training and services development on-site with the LRC staff. In particular, this has involved a process of practical development of services hand in hand with counterpart training in a comprehensive range of library skills.

### **Collaborative Development**

One of the main features of the Learning Resource Centre projects is that their objective is not focused simply on the construction of the building, nor on one aspect of a library service (such as information resources, or professional expertise), nor explicitly to build on existing library services within each University. Instead, these projects have sought to establish a library service “from the ground up”, incorporating facilities development, resources development and professional capacity building into a single turnkey project, which is then handed-over to the recipient University once operating.

To achieve the above outcomes in this type of development model has required the input of a diverse range of professional expertise, including architecture, building and engineering, project management, information technology and of course librarianship and education. With the intention of importing relevant expertise into the different phases of each project, the funding for these projects has not been granted directly to the client universities, but to an external project management team consisting of a number of different organizations, brought together to undertake the building, resources, infrastructure and library service development of each Centre. This maintains a high level of direct control over the implementation of the project, its outcomes, the sourcing of the expertise, and the expenditure of funds.

Consequently, the core management of each of the LRC projects has been through partnerships formed between Atlantic Philanthropies on the one hand, the client university, and a number of “third party” institutions which have undertaken different aspects of the project implementation. The two principal organizations which have been involved in the implementation of the Learning Resource Centres are an Australian university – RMIT, chiefly through its Vietnamese subsidiary RMIT International University Vietnam – and an American philanthropic organization with a Vietnamese focus and base of operations – the East Meets West Foundation.

RMIT International University Vietnam is Vietnam’s first fully-foreign owned and operated university. Established in 2001, the university is a subsidiary of RMIT University, Melbourne, which has been engaged in educational programs in Vietnam since 1992, and has a license with the Government of Vietnam to develop educational facilities and to offer programs and training courses as a fully foreign owned university. The university currently has three campuses operating in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and is headquartered in a 12 hectare campus development at the Saigon South district on the edge of the central city.<sup>9</sup>

The East Meets West Foundation (EMW) was established in 1988 specifically to undertake philanthropic activities in Vietnam, and is the largest non-government organization currently operating in the country. The Foundation is based in California and has its operational headquarters in Danang, in Central Vietnam. It has a long-standing relationship with Atlantic Philanthropies, which has funded many of its other operations in Vietnam. The EMW Foundation specializes in community based

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rmit.edu.vn>

development assistance, such as the construction of schools, orphanages and clinics, as well as medical and dental programs, but has recently expanded operations to manage more substantial building projects (such as specialist hospitals, educational facilities as well as the LRC projects)<sup>10</sup>

While the actual organizational model and the composition of the project team has varied for each LRC project, the projects have essentially been implemented through the joint leadership of these two organizations: - RMIT Vietnam for overall project leadership, management and direction, and for the specific development of library services, resources and IT infrastructure; and the East Meets West Foundation for building construction and fit-out.<sup>11</sup> The design process in each case has been a shared process, combining the expertise in educational facilities and library management which RMIT Vietnam contributes to the project, with the practical experience of building and construction in Vietnam contributed by the East Meets West Foundation.

As the two principal institutions involved, RMIT Vietnam and East Meets West have been responsible for sourcing and deploying expertise in the form of sub-contractors and consultants for the different project stages, in addition to bringing the expertise of their own organizations to bear on project outcomes. In the case of RMIT Vietnam, this has specifically entailed project management consultants, IT expertise and training providers in library skills to support a core staff of librarians, building experts and administrative staff responsible for the overall direction and management of the project. In the case of the East Meets West Foundation, it has chiefly involved the contracting and supervision of architectural, construction and engineering services in the completion of the building and its fit-out.

In addition, throughout each project, there has been a strong desire to take into account the needs and interests of the client University at every stage of the project, such as in project planning, design, development of services, recruitment and training and acquisition of resources. Consequently, while the projects have been managed externally, the client Universities are not only the ultimate beneficiaries of the projects but active partners in the development process as well.

## **Future Development**

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.eastmeetswest.org>

<sup>11</sup> The main exception to the shared responsibility for project implementation is in the case of the Cantho University LRC, for which RMIT Vietnam has complete responsibility for design, construction and fit-out as well as for organizational and library services and resources development.

The Learning Resource Centre projects have attracted a considerable amount of attention within Vietnam, and while contributing specifically to the development of library services in regional Vietnamese universities, have begun to act as a catalyst for change in thinking about the physical development and provision of services in other academic libraries in the country. The purpose of this paper has been to provide an overview of these projects, and to illustrate how a synthesis of quite different development initiatives – such as in library building construction, information resources acquisitions and professional development – can be achieved and managed effectively in a single project to deliver a quality outcome. Each of these disparate project activities also builds on and adds value to the others, so that the eventual outcome of the project is a comprehensive information resource and service that can be managed and sustained by the recipient university, without heavy ongoing reliance on foreign expertise and assistance.

To this end, The Atlantic Philanthropies has also considered how best to support the ongoing sustainability of each of the Learning Resource Centres, so that the recipient universities can capitalize fully on the significant infrastructure development that each project represents. These issues are being addressed through other long-term training and development projects, involving not only the Learning Resource Centres but other libraries in Vietnam. In particular, programs are being introduced to support the LRCs in achieving long-term financial sustainability, as well as diverse educational programs to build up a body of overseas trained information professionals in the country. In addition, issues of affordable access to print and electronic resources, and of the ongoing development of bibliographic standards, initiated originally through the LRC projects<sup>12</sup>, continue to be addressed by the funding programs of Atlantic Philanthropies.<sup>13</sup>

The Learning Resource Centre building and development program is still in progress, and is expected to continue through until 2007 with the completion of the Thai Nguyen LRC. The achievements to date have created a solid foundation for this development work to continue, and to make a contribution to the overall development and provision of library services in Vietnam.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.rmit.edu.vn/community>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/giving\\_statistics/giving\\_statistics.asp](http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/giving_statistics/giving_statistics.asp)