

**“Setting an agenda for library development:
the role of the Vietnamese Library Association”**

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Abstract

The Vietnamese Library Association was established in 2006, and in the ensuing period has focused its efforts largely on the organizing of Committees and their operating procedures and regulations, in addition to taking part in organizing the CONSAL XIV conference. The Association is now becoming more outward looking, and is beginning to develop strategies and programs to enhance the role it plays in supporting libraries throughout the country. There are a number of factors, however, which combine to make genuine progress difficult to achieve. In this paper, discussion will focus on the efforts that the Vietnamese Library Association has made in the recent past to identify and overcome obstacles to full development. The paper will review the proposed development strategies of the Association - which arose from a recent planning workshop with the author - and will reflect on some of the issues which may be particular to the development and management of library associations in the region.

Introduction

Compared to most professional library associations in the South-East Asian region, the Vietnamese Library Association (VLA) is very much in its infancy. While, for example, the Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean and Indonesian library associations can all claim a history of at least fifty years each, and reflect this in the relative sophistication of their organizations and activities, the political and economic difficulties which have confronted Vietnam in the past have hindered the rate of development of all types of library service in the country, (Tran, 1999) and made the establishment of a broad professional association of librarians a difficult goal to attain.

While a professional library association existed in the former Republic of South Vietnam prior to the reunification of the country (Lam, 1999), in more recent times many of the roles ordinarily assumed by a national professional association – such as the conduct of workshops, training sessions, and representation overseas– have been undertaken in the absence of a formal national library association by other government agencies and libraries, and regional or special interest professional groups. Much of the representative role, for example, has fallen to the Library Department of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, while many public library events (such as an annual conference) have been chiefly co-ordinated by the National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi and the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City. Many similar areas of activity, particularly in relation to scientific and technical libraries, have been undertaken by NACESTI (The National Centre for Scientific and Technological Information) an agency of the Vietnamese Government Ministry of Science and Technology, and offshoot interest groups such as VASTID (Vietnamese Association for Scientific and Technological Information and Documentation). NALA (The Northern Academic Library Association) and VILASAL (Vietnam Southern Academic Library Association)¹ which mainly represent academic libraries, have been particularly active in organizing training programs, seminars, workshops and conferences in the north and south of the country respectively.

Background to the Development of the Vietnamese Library Association

With the above organizations in many ways competently filling the vacuum, it might not be surprising that until quite recently there has not been a stronger impetus towards the development of a national association in Vietnam. However, even the establishment of regional associations such as NALA and VILASAL have been

¹ Formerly FESAL – the Federation of Southern Academic Libraries, before change of title in 2006.

relatively recent events, with - for example - VILASAL originating as the “Library Society” at the Graduate Library of the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City in 1998 (Lam, 2001) before evolving into FESAL (Federation of Southern Academic Libraries) and then assuming its current title in 2006. In the arena of scientific and technical information, VASTID was formed with government approval in 2000.

The origins of the Vietnamese Library Association, however, can be traced back as far as the 1990’s, when the then Ministry of Culture and Information² first planned for the establishment of the Association through its Library Department. The Department commenced by forming regional sub-groups of library professionals throughout the country, with eventually nine such public library groups - and a further two with a focus on academic libraries - being established. Efforts were also made to promote the development of technical and reader services through these groups, as well as broader reading promotion programs. The groundwork for the formal establishment of the Association also effectively occurred with the promulgation of the “Library Ordinance” by the Vietnamese Government, under which the right of librarians to participate in professional associations was mandated under Article 15.³

More recently, an initiative to improve organizational capacity in the libraries of Vietnam through several national information infrastructure programs also identified the establishment of a national association as one of the key priorities in the long-term development of the profession. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies – an international philanthropic organization with health and education programs operating in Vietnam - and managed by RMIT International University Vietnam, an Australian university licensed by the Vietnamese Government to establish its own campuses and programs in the country – a symposium on the possible establishment of a national library association for Vietnam was held in Hanoi on 25th September 2002 and brought together 250 librarians from across the country. (Robinson, 2002) Jointly hosted by the National Library of Vietnam, NACESTI and VASTID, the symposium consisted of a number of presentations by representatives of overseas library associations, such as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the Librarians Association of Malaysia (Persatuan Pustakawan Malaysia, or PPM). In these presentations the benefits of establishing a library association were explored and various examples were provided of professional activities sponsored by library

² Now MCST – the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which through its Department of Libraries has oversight of the public libraries system in Vietnam.

³ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Ordinance on Library (No. 31/200/PL-UBTVQH 10, December 28th, 2000, Article 15 (Translation)

associations in the region. The audience endorsed the establishment of a national association, and representatives of the Vietnamese Government Ministry of Culture and Information⁴ undertook to pursue its formal establishment, albeit under the control of a Library Council consisting of representatives appointed from the different library sectors in the country, under the supervision of the Ministry.

The actual establishment of the Vietnam Library Association took some time longer to take place, with the Association being formally established by Government decree on 22nd November 2006. From that time effectively up until the present, the VLA has mainly focused on establishing its committee structure and appointing the membership of each of the committees, and on issuing guidelines and regulations for committee activities. The Executive Committee consists of 31 members, drawn from the Directors of libraries and government information agencies from throughout the country. In addition, several functional committees – each led by members of the Executive - have responsibilities for key areas of activity such as membership, training, international relations and research.

VLA and LLA Strategic Planning Workshop

It was in this context that the Hong Kong Library Association was approached by Sida – the Swedish International Development Agency – to undertake a strategic planning exercise with the Vietnamese Library Association, together with its fellow organization the Lao Library Association. As both Associations had been established recently, and had arrived at a similar level of development, it was considered to be an opportune time to review their current situation and to assist in developing plans for future programs, activities and management. In particular, the Executive Committees of both Associations had expressed some disappointment at their slow pace of growth, in areas such as membership and programs, and were confronted by a range of problems which were seen as obstacles to further development.

According to the brief from Sida, the key objective of the workshop was to enable representatives of the VLA and LLA to have an opportunity to raise their concerns about progress and to share experiences with another library association in the region. While this was a role which could have been fulfilled by several library associations regionally, the HKLA was approached for a number of practical reasons: - the relative proximity of Hong Kong to Hanoi enabled the project to keep costs within a limited project budget; the HKLA was a relatively small but nonetheless active and successful

association, which had just celebrated its 50th anniversary with an international conference; and by coincidence the then President of the HKLA (and author of this paper) had had several years project experience with Vietnamese libraries, and was responsible for organizing the original symposium for a national Vietnamese library association in 2002. It was thus felt that the HKLA was ideally placed, in that it could not only assist in various matters of organization, but could do so with some understanding of the background to the establishment of the Vietnamese Library Association and the difficulties it had encountered until now. The objectives set out for the workshop were;

1. To study HKLA programs and activities, and how these could be adapted by VLA/LLA.
2. To review the current progress of VLA and LLA.
3. To share experience and discuss issues of implementation in Vietnam and Laos.
4. To develop a strategic plan with one year and three year objectives
5. To draft a plan for discussion with VLA and LLA members

Workshop Format

The workshop program overall consisted of two legs: - one of three days duration in Hong Kong (17th – 20th November 2008), which combined workshop sessions with library visits and other activities, and the second leg of one and a half scheduled days in Hanoi two weeks later (5th and 6th December 2008). The break in the program was intended to provide both Associations with an opportunity to develop a draft strategic plan at their own pace outside of the workshop sessions, and to bring this draft to the Hanoi sessions for review. The detailed breakdown of session contents was as follows;

Hong Kong Planning Sessions

The Hong Kong leg of the workshop program consisted of the following sessions and activities;

1. A “sharing session” between the Associations on the role and activities of the Hong Kong Library Association. This included an overview of the HKLA, its history and current state of development, as well as detailed run-downs on Committee structure and function, constitution and procedure, programs, finance and membership. This presentation was accompanied by the provision to the

delegates of a number of supporting documents, such as the HKLA constitution, meeting minutes and agendas, newsletters and HKLA Year Books to illustrate the range of activities involved.

2. An “issues raising” session each for the VLA and LLA to discuss matters of concern to the development of both Associations and to consider the experience of the HKLA in addressing these problems.
3. A session focusing on the strategic planning process and on identifying the factors affecting the current situation of both the VLA and the LLA, through undertaking a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats) analysis.
4. Visits to the libraries of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (where the workshop sessions were held) the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Central Library.
5. A working lunch with Directors of JULAC (the Joint University Librarians Advisory Committee) and former Presidents of the HKLA to discuss issues in the development of professional library associations.
6. At the end of the Hong Kong sessions, representatives of the VLA and LLA were requested to draft a strategic (SWOT) analysis and to commence work on a draft strategic plan, for review at the Hanoi leg of the workshop.

Hanoi Review Sessions

The Hanoi leg of the workshop commenced with a review of the SWOT analyses and draft strategic plans of both Associations prior to the meeting, and this formed the basis for subsequent discussions in the workshop itself.⁵ In the workshop the draft strategic plan of the VLA was reviewed, including a discussion of the strategic analyses which had been undertaken by the Association, as well as a review and discussion of the objectives outlined in their strategic plans. The main themes of this discussion were;

1. To identify what role the “national’ Library Association of Vietnam should play, and how this integrates with the activities of the regional associations.
2. To link the planned activities with coherent objectives, related in turn to an overall strategy for the development of the Association.

⁵ Owing to difficulties in obtaining visas in time, the representatives of the Lao Library Association were unable to attend this second leg of the workshop, and consequently the draft strategic plan of the LLA was not considered further in this meeting.

3. To work through issues of how these objectives might be achieved, what resources were required, and what strategies could be adopted to undertake these activities without involving the Association in high costs and an unduly heavy workload.

The Hanoi workshop was attended by a number of members of the Executive Committee of the VLA, in addition to original workshop participants, which was beneficial insofar as it enabled the discussion of the draft plan to take place in the context of how it would be promulgated amongst the larger Executive group and the membership in general.

SWOT Analyses

In the process of the workshop discussions with the HKLA, the representatives of Vietnamese Library Association identified what they perceived to be the main impediments to the further development of the Association. Chief among these was a lack of financial resources to implement programs, and it was noted that at this stage of its development, the VLA has no sustainable income stream through membership fees or income from professional activities such as workshops. The second major issue focused on the lack of status of the Association, as it struggled to be recognized as the national association both internationally and within Vietnam itself. As mentioned earlier, in the absence of a formal national association, many professional activities supporting librarians in Vietnam which are typically the responsibility of a national body have been successfully undertaken by other regional or special interest associations, or by institutions such as the NLV and NACESTI, and that this in turn has created some ambiguity about the role that the VLA can play in future. In attempting to establish its current situation and future prospects therefore, the Vietnamese Library Association focused on several main strengths, weaknesses and opportunities and threats, which are paraphrased below;

Strengths

The Vietnamese Library Association is the official national professional association for library and information professionals in Vietnam, and is accorded this status by the Vietnamese Government Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The Executive Committee consists of representatives from all types of library from throughout the country, and therefore has a genuine national representation. Almost all senior librarians in Vietnam are members of the Executive, representing considerable collective experience.

Weaknesses

There is not a great deal of awareness about the Vietnamese Library Association as the official association for the country both regionally and internationally. Aside from organizing its internal committee structure, the Association has yet to achieve much in terms of mounting programs to support Vietnamese librarians, and perhaps on account of this has not attracted many “registered” members. As a result, the Association is not yet in a position to charge membership fees from prospective members, which eliminates one of its key potential sources of income. While the VLA has a large Executive Board, its membership is spread throughout the country, making regular meetings very difficult to organize. This membership is voluntary and consequently time available to participate in the work of the Association is limited. As the VLA is a “new” Association, its Executive Board also lacks expertise in organizing and managing a national professional association.

Opportunities

As the accredited national professional association in Vietnam, the VLA is ideally positioned to develop strong international relationships – through IFLA and with library associations in the region – to assist in developing its own international profile. As the national association also, VLA is well placed to offer programs (such as workshops and training courses) at a national level, and to advocate to government on behalf of libraries and librarians throughout the country through its close association with the Ministry.

Threats

Given its official status, the VLA perceived that its main threat was from within. Representatives of the VLA Executive believed that the Association could not improve its status, influence or acceptance in the profession in Vietnam unless it developed a range of relevant programs to actively engage members.

In similar circumstances to the VLA, the Lao Library Association also noted similar issues of finance and the absence of regular programs affecting membership as key issues for them, although the LLA has commenced the irregular publication of an Association Journal. One opportunity that the LLA also identified was that it could play a role in the implementation of bibliographic tools (such as DDC, MARC21) through training and support programs – a role already shared in Vietnam between the National Library of Vietnam and NACESTI, but still in need of further support across the country.

Issues and Responses

From a review of the above issues, the members of the Executive Committee of the Vietnamese Library Association began to identify and prioritize the objectives and activities which were not only necessary but also practicable given the restraints that the Association was working under. In the Hanoi leg of the workshop, the following suggestions for the Association's development were discussed;

Profile and Visibility

The VLA could improve its standing both regionally and internationally with relatively little effort, by first seeking to accredit the Association with IFLA, and by establishing closer ties and partnerships with neighbouring professional associations. The VLA could also establish a "presence" reasonably quickly through the development of a website (in Vietnamese as well as at least one or two foreign languages such as English or French) which could also act as vehicle for subsequent communications with both members and with the outside world. This also provides outsiders (such as funding bodies) who are seeking to learn more about Vietnamese libraries a convenient portal into, and point of contact with, the profession in the country, linking for example to many other library and library development websites in Vietnam. For inquiries of any sort, an easily identifiable and convenient point of contact for the VLA – both virtually and in person - is essential. The Association's close relationship with the Library Department of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism could be regarded as a liability which restricts its scope of action. However, potentially, it also places the Association in an ideal position to advise and advocate on government policy and initiatives to support libraries and librarianship, and in so doing raise its own profile and influence in the consultative process, should the VLA wish to exploit this advantage. The VLA also has plans to promote its visibility through the adoption of a logo in the near future.

Mission and Vision

As a "national association" perhaps it is still not clear both outside the country and to prospective members what the mission and role of VLA is, and how this is different from other groups and institutions supporting libraries in the country. This mission and vision needs to be articulated not only in terms of what the Association aspires to at a nationwide level, but how this is different from the mission and programs of the smaller regional or sectoral associations and interest groups.

Programs & Activities

With a number of other organizations supporting professional activity, and in view of the significant logistical and cost issues associated with bringing librarians together from all over the country for conferences or workshops, the VLA needs to focus initially at least on programs of a national application and to distinguish its role from the activities of the regional and local sub-associations and groupings. To some extent this can be achieved by identifying the “gaps” in professional activity and exploiting these. Some examples of “national” activities may include; the publication of a national Association newsletter or journal – preferably online to reduce distribution cost while increasing readership – the similar production of specific publications – such as a directory of Vietnamese libraries – of use to the profession and others; assistance in the implementation of technical and bibliographic standards such as DDC and MARC21; and conferences and seminars of a national and cross-sectoral appeal.

Organisational Structure

While the VLA has focused considerable time and effort on establishing and recruiting to its committee system, the Association appears to be aware already that this Committee arrangement may not be the most effective. Consequently, some review of the Committees may be desirable to firstly link Committee effort with the different professional sectors (such as academic, public and government libraries) but secondly to channel Committee resources where they are most needed. The logistical and cost difficulties of bringing together unpaid volunteers on a regular basis to participate in Committee meetings could also be circumvented by attempting to conduct Committee business online as much as possible, by reducing the number of meetings held, by attempting to coincide meetings with other events (such as conferences) where Committee members might be expected to be present, and in the final analysis to concentrate more of the administration and day to day decision making in the hands of the central Executive Committee. In addition, the Association – lacking in resources as it is – could begin to attain some of its practical objectives by co-opting librarians with expertise in particular fields (for example, website development), rather than relying on Committees and their membership to carry out all tasks.

Finance & Support

While clearly lack of financial resources is a significant problem for the VLA as it attempts to consolidate and grow, it is equally clear that the Association needs to establish some basic financial management in place as a first priority. Part of this

involves understanding how much finance will be required to undertake a range of programs in addition to operational and administrative requirements. At least in its early development, the Association may need to think less about membership as the key income stream, and to cultivate instead other ongoing and one-off sources of income. In this regard, the Association views a key role for itself in the immediate future is in fund-raising, and is intending to establish a fund-raising committee to identify possible sources and to solicit funds for specific purposes. In addition, the VLA will seek in-kind support from individuals and organizations (such as the use of Ministerial meeting rooms) in an effort to build up activities and operations at minimal cost.

Communications

As with any national library association, the VLA must deal with the issue of maintaining communications with a widely distributed membership and potential membership in the different library sectors and libraries throughout Vietnam. While one of the most effective ways to do this is by newsletter or professional journal, the costs of printing and distributing print versions suggest that at least in its early stages, the VLA should focus on electronic publishing – e-journals, email and web based communications - as a means of reaching its target audience in the short term future. It is suggested that at least part of these communications – such as an electronic journal – should also be in English or French to encourage foreign interest in the Association.

Membership

The VLA is committed to introducing membership fees and to that end intends to begin by levying a fee against institutions joining as members from next year. The Association recognizes that applying a fee for individual membership may be more problematic while programs and activities which would bind members to the Association are still under development. To counter that effect, the VLA is encouraged to segment their potential membership according (for example) to level of qualification, sector of origin, or ability to pay, and to apply fees commensurately. One possible activity is to encourage membership from librarianship students, at membership fees which are low enough not to be a disincentive to joining. Measures to develop affinity with existing and potential members, such as securing member discounts to library seminars or conferences, can provide compelling reasons for Vietnamese librarians to join and remain as members of the Association.

Draft Strategic Plans of VLA

At the end of the Hanoi session, the Vietnam Library Association had produced a draft strategic plan, and was committed to incorporating the further discussions from the day into a final draft of the strategic plan for review and ratification by the larger VLA Committee. While the presence of the Vice-Presidents of the VLA was not expected at the Hanoi session, this was beneficial insofar as this Executive group had an opportunity for an early review and discussion of the draft prior to it being circulated to the wider General Committee.

From these types of considerations, the VLA has begun to draft a strategic plan for the next triennium, for the ratification of the wider Executive Committee. This plan recognizes the specific restraints and difficulties that the VLA is working under, but begins to map out a future of gradual development and a building up of both a membership and a resource base.

The VLA delegates present indicated that they had a clearer understanding of their role as a national professional association, which assisted them to focus on activities of a national character, and not to attempt to duplicate the role or work of the regional sub-associations. Improving the profile of the Association internationally (for example through membership of IFLA) and recognition of the Association within Vietnam (for example through the development of a website) were seen as priorities for the VLA at this stage. While the Association does not have substantial finance at its disposal, strategies were discussed – such as the co-opting of appropriate staff from within the member libraries – to achieve objectives with minimal resource implications. Strategies were also discussed for reducing administrative and cost overheads, for example by communicating with both Committee and the general membership electronically as much as possible, and by avoiding expensive face to face meetings. Developing a program of activities which encourage membership and demonstrate its benefit were urged as a means of building up the membership base, and making membership free as a means of establishing the national representation of the Association was suggested for the early stages of development of the VLA.

Conclusion

Both Associations have made some progress and commitment towards the development of strategic plans which contain coherent and practical objectives for their development. The next challenges before both the VLA and LLA are to obtain a

wider acceptance of these plans and to implement them with their broader Committee systems, and within the constraints of the respective Government Ministries.

In addition to being a means of providing some assistance to two fledgling library associations in the region, the co-operation of the Hong Kong Library Association in this process is also a demonstration of how library associations in the South-East and East Asian regions, many of whom have dealt with similar issues to the VLA and LLA, can work together to encourage the development of strong and sustainable professional associations and support for libraries and librarians in developing nations.

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