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University Library Cooperation in Israel: The MALMAD Consortium

Information Technology and Libraries

The MALMAD (Israel Center for Digital Information Services) consortium was set up by the eight universities of Israel to serve as a common framework for the procurement and licensing of digital information. Now in its second year of operation, MALMAD provides a group of bibliographic and full-text services from a common budget and serves as joint negotiating and purchasing agent for additional services on behalf of ad hoc groupings of its members. MALMAD also initiates and manages special automation projects of common interest.

* Background

The history of university library cooperation in Israel began in 1969 with the founding of the Standing Committee of the National and University Libraries (SCONUL). SCONUL was set up as a voluntary forum of the directors of the central libraries of the seven then-existing universities in Israel.(1) SCONUL initiated the interlibrary loan system between the universities and set up a group of professional committees dealing with cataloging, acquisitions, reference, periodicals, circulation, and interlibrary loan. With the formation of more formal interuniversity bodies dealing with various aspects of library automation, SCONUL today deals primarily with nonautomation topics. Its committees are, however, still very active and serve as the de facto automation forums for each of the functions. The SCONUL cataloging committee is the only active forum setting cataloging policy, which is generally followed by the rest of the Israel library community.

With the advent of automation, the Planning and Grants Committee of the Israel Council of Higher Education decided to become actively involved in funding development of the ALEPH system, originally developed at the Hebrew University, as a general system for all the university libraries. For this purpose, the Planning and Grants Committee in 1984 set up the ALEPH Steering Committee, consisting of the directors of the SCONUL libraries as well as representatives of academia and university computer centers. This committee negotiated both development of the ALEPH system (centrally funded) and prices of the services for the individual institutions. It also set up a subcommittee of the system librarians of the university libraries.

In 1993 the Planning and Grants Committee decided that library automation was sufficiently mature to stop direct funding and be left to the universities themselves. The ALEPH Steering Committee was subsequently reorganized as the ALEPH Users Committee of the Association of University Heads, the organization of the universities themselves. The committee currently

consists of the directors of the seven university central libraries, the director-general of one of the universities, the director of the InterUniversity Computer Center, and a faculty representative, with two additional nonvoting departmental library directors representing the faculty libraries of Hebrew and Tel-Aviv Universities. This forum currently deals with all policy matters relating to the ALEPH system in the university libraries. Its current chair is the director of the Jewish National and University Library.(2)

Until 1996 the ALEPH Users Committee had no staff and its activities were performed on a voluntary basis, primarily through its system managers subcommittee. As it became clear that interuniversity coordination of standards, union catalogs, etc. required dedicated personnel, the Association of University Heads was convinced to fund the position of network coordinator. This position was created in 1996 and is currently held by the author of this paper.

Gradually over the past few years, the ALEPH Users Committee found itself discussing automation matters other than those related to the ALEPH system. It became clear to the committee that there were significant potential benefits to jointly negotiating and providing digital information services. The ALEPH committee, however, was not a suitable formal framework to serve as a consortium. Both the committee and its parent body, the Association of University Heads, are not legally defined entities capable of signing binding contracts. In 1997, therefore, the committee presented to the Association of University Heads a proposal to create a consortium framework with the necessary legal status. This proposal was approved in winter 1997, leading to the creation of the Israel Center for Digital Information Services--ha-Merkaz le-sherute meda' digitaliyyim (Hebrew acronym MALMAD). The position of consortium director was assigned to the existing network coordinator.

* Organizational Framework

Since the Association of University Heads itself does not have legal status, much thought and discussion were devoted to the creation of the formal status of the consortium. Three options were considered: having one university serve as the "legal guardian" of the consortium, registering the consortium as a nonprofit organization, or attaching the consortium to an existing body with the necessary legal status. The third option was finally chosen. The Israeli universities had already set up a computer centers' consortium, the InterUniversity Computer Center (Hebrew acronym MACHBA), with responsibility for the interuniversity communications infrastructure and coordination of supercomputing and other major projects. Making MALMAD a unit of this body provided it not only with the legal status to sign agreements with data suppliers, but also with the necessary administrative and legal advisory services.

There were some natural misgivings among the university library directors at the idea of making the libraries' consortium subservient to the computer centers' consortium. In practice, however, MALMAD has retained complete professional autonomy. All policy decisions are made by the MALMAD Steering Committee (identical to the ALEPH Users Committee, with the addition of a representative of the Open University). MACHBA is represented on this body by its director only, and the library and information professionals retain eight of the eleven voting seats on the steering committee. The MALMAD budget is approved by the directors-general of the universities (just as they approve the MACHBA budget as well).

From a legal standpoint, agreements are signed between suppliers and MACHBA (usually noting "on behalf of its department, the Israel Center for Digital Information Services"). All such

agreements are signed by an authorized signatory of MACHBA in addition to the MALMAD director.

* Budget

The initial proposal for the creation of MALMAD emphasized the additional expense entailed in the transition period between print and digital information, and that the consortium would be the most cost-effective way to manage this transition. In this light, the universities were asked to fund MALMAD over-and-above their library budgets. In parallel, the Planning and Grants Committee of the Council on Higher Education was convinced to match the amount approved by the universities. This, and some income from other network-related services, provided MALMAD with a first "pilot" year operating budget of some $700,000. In view of the success of the first year of operation, both bodies have agreed to significantly increase their contribution to the 1999 budget, which stands at $1.3 million. Both bodies have, however, made it clear to the libraries that they consider this extra-library funding to be a temporary step for the initial years and that gradually more and more of the consortium funding will shift to the libraries themselves.

* Budget Division between Institutions

Dividing the universities' share of the budget among themselves has been a topic of much discussion. The first year's budget was divided among the universities based on two models: half according to each university's share of general government funding, and half according to its percent of the total digital information expenditure in 1997. This model was seen to be unfair in that it did not take into account the fact that not all institutions benefited equally from the services provided: Not all fields are studied at all universities, and those universities that spent less on digital information in 1997 benefited more than those "information richer." In advance of the 1999 budget year, the MALMAD Steering Committee approved a complex model which analyzes the number and level of students and staff in various fields, and uses the resulting factor to "allocate" each institution's potential benefit from each service provided. For example, adding a legal database would increase the benefit factor of only those universities with law faculties. The resulting calculation provides an overall percentage of the MALMAD budget to be paid by each institution. We feel this will provide a fairer division of cost than the previous system.

The Steering Committee deliberately based this calculation on potential rather than actual use. Some of the 1998 services began rather late in the year and therefore usage statistics were rather premature. In addition, there was a feeling that dividing costs according to actual use statistics might be a negative incentive to encouraging use of these services. The committee will reconsider using usage statistics as one of the budget division factors in preparing allocation of the year 2000 budget.

* Services

MALMAD supplied three services in 1998: ISI Web of Science, ABI/Inform via Proquest-Direct, and the Academic Press IDEAL/APPEAL service. In 1999 several additional services were added: Proquest Research Library, FirstSearch (OCLC databases only), and three Chadwyck-Healey databases. Negotiations are also underway for a major legal database, and several additional databases and e-journal services are under consideration as well.

All services except ISI Web of Science are provided directly from servers abroad. In order to improve the quality of Internet response, all incoming data from MALMAD suppliers is upgraded to so-called "business class" priority on the overseas link of the Israel universities WAN at MALMAD's expense. While this link may not be the sole bottleneck between the service supplier and the end user, it is often the slowest segment. Israel is about to join the Internet-2 project, and this will lead to a general upgrading of bandwidth throughout the universities' communications infrastructure which should further improve the quality of service to MALMAD suppliers.

* Nonbudget Services

The above services are all funded from the MALMAD budget directly. MALMAD, however, also can and does serve as a joint purchasing agent for additional services funded by the libraries themselves. This framework is used primarily for services that interest only some of the universities, and that those universities are willing to purchase from their own budgets. In many cases, joint purchase of these services through the consortium can bring significant discounts for the participating institutions (even if only two or three participate).

Examples of such services negotiated by MALMAD for ad hoc groups of its members are: INSPEC (ERL version), American Chemical Society e-journals, Churchill-Livingstone and W.B. Saunders e-journals, Bibliography of Asian Studies, and Science Online.

Negotiating such services is in many ways more difficult and time-consuming than full-consortium services as the number of interested institutions keeps changing, and the group terms along with them.

* Services to Other Institutions

Until recently, higher education in Israel was synonymous with university education. In recent years, however, a large number of colleges, both public and private, have opened (or upgraded from nondegree institutions) and today there are over forty accredited nonuniversity Israeli academic institutions.(3) These colleges usually specialize in a few popular fields (particularly education, technology, management, and law) and would not be interested or financially able to participate in the full MALMAD program of services. To meet the needs of these institutions, the MALMAD Steering Committee re cently approved an "associate" membership, which would allow colleges to pay only for the services they need. Several government research institutes also have recently shown interest in participating in some of MALMAD's services.

* Other MALMAD Projects

In addition to the licensing of commercial digital services, MALMAD also serves as the common framework for joint projects and has initiated several projects of common interest to the university libraries. Among these projects are:

* Developing the Infrastructure for a National Bibliographic Database on the Information Superhighway: A project funded by the Israel Ministry of Science to examine the problems of converting Israeli bibliographic data to international (MARC) standard format. As part of this project, two Israeli union catalogs and a major Judaica bibliographic database will be made Internet accessible.

* Union Catalog of Israel: Creation and maintenance of a union catalog of the machine-

readable holdings of all the university libraries and many college and special libraries.

* Union List of Serials: Enhancement of the existing Union List of Serials to include links to full text for MALMAD-subscribed electronic journals as well as links from the Union List to the Web OPACS of participating libraries.

* Central Cataloging of Electronic Journals: A project to centrally catalog all electronic journals available to the MALMAD member libraries, creating both central listings and records that can be uploaded into local catalogs.

* Future Plans and Considerations

One of the primary reasons behind setting up the MALMAD consortium was to assist the university libraries in making the conversion from print to digital information. A large part of the consortium operating budget has been raised from nonlibrary funds, specifically for this purpose. In the coming years, administration will be looking both to see savings (or at least stability) in information costs and to see the digital information costs being met from regular library funds. There are already pressures to show savings deriving from cancellation of print, and these will increase greatly in the next two years, particularly in science and technology. The success of the consortium and its future will be measured to a large degree by the ability and willingness of the Israeli university libraries to advance and market digital information services.

References and Notes

(1.) Hebrew University, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Tel-Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, University of Haifa, Ben-Gurion University, and Weizmann Institute of Science. The Open University of Israel, founded in 1973, is not a member of SCONUL, although it is a member of the MALMAD consortium.

(2.) The Jewish National and University Library is both the national library of Israel and the central library of the Hebrew University.

(3.) In addition, a large number of foreign universities have opened branches in Israel in recent years. The Israel Council on Higher Education does not accredit these institutions, although their degrees may be recognized for various (usually work-related) purposes. Most of these institutions do not have significant libraries or information services.

Elhanan Adler (elhnan @libnet.ac.il) is Director of the Israel Center for Digital Information Services (MALMAD) and Coordinator of the Israel InterUniversity Library Network.

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