

“All change” in South African Higher Education

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A new survey of the member libraries of the largest South African consortium – Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium (GAELIC) is to be undertaken in June 2005. Previous GAELIC research has gathered data about the use of digital resources, and it is clear that there is considerable uncertainty about their place, even amongst those institutions that have been pioneers in their use, and which understand that they have a potentially important role to play in the mergers of South African higher education institutions.

The re-construction of the higher education system in South Africa is a key element of policy of the South African Government, identified in the first days of the Government of National Unity and re-affirmed since. It is regarded as a major contributor towards the creation of a democratic society and an essential condition for sustained economic development. There is a clear commitment to making higher education accessible to more people, and implicit is a recognition that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will have a strong role to play.

The inheritance in 1994 (the year of the first democratic election), was a dysfunctional system of thirty-six institutions, organised along binary lines (universities and “technikons”), with separate provision for the major race groups identified in the social engineering of the apartheid state and

further complicated by the choice of language of instruction. Resources were replicated, sometimes in close proximity to each other, and there was evidence of gross under-funding, inequitable distribution of resources, poor management and an inability to offer students the breadth of education needed for life in a modern society.

Proposals for how to ‘fix’ the system included radically reducing the number of institutions and concentrating on sustaining a few well-resourced sites. Other options considered included the extensive use of ICT to link campuses so that collaborative teaching and research could be supported. Political sensitivities had also to be taken into account: Provinces, which are the top-level local government unit in South Africa, regarded higher education institutions within their boundaries as of cultural significance as well as of importance for social and economic development in their regions. History, too, could not be ignored: several of the “historically Black universities” were associated with the education of prominent members of the Government and to close these was also unthinkable. The National Plan for Higher Education (2001) establishes goals for the transformation of the system: access, equity and diversity, building high-level research capacity and establishing new institutional and organisational forms.

The political solution is a series of mergers between institutions and the adoption of the title “University – or Institute – of Technology” to replace the term “technikon”. The proposals have met with opposition, some of which has focussed on the difficulty of creating a merged institution from components that are, in several cases, separated by long distances or differences in culture.

The practical is a commitment to upgrading the ICT infrastructure for many institutions, with the welcome recognition that academic and support staff skills also need to be improved or developed in order to make better use of the technology. The Department of Education has recognised the need for managerial support and has formed a Merger Unit to oversee, support and monitor the process, including the provision of expertise in the key areas of finance, legal, human resource matters, academic and student issues, governance, and ICT development.

A start has been made but the journey towards coherent and comprehensive higher education provision will be long.

The Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC 2005) at Imperial College 4th-6th April 2005
Organised by CILIP Community Services Group – Information Literacy and supported by ASSIGN

Jane Secker and Maria Bell

LILAC (http://www.cilip.org.uk/groups/csg/csg_ilq/events.html) was a new conference organised by the CILIP Community Services Group sub-group on Information Literacy (CSG-IL), and supported by ASSIGN. As Committee members of these respective groups we joined the conference organising committee just over a year ago, full of enthusiasm for this event, and not without some anticipation. As a new event, LILAC had to be entirely self funding and while we had both been involved in organising one-day events, a three-day event of this scale that attracted international delegates and

librarians from across the sectors was rather daunting. We worked with an excellent committee: different people took responsibility for specific areas (papers, sponsorship, social events) and there was, of course, a lot of advance planning. The conference went smoothly and LILAC proved to be an inspiring and exciting event. This is a brief report on the conference, including a summary of each of the six keynote sessions and some information about the parallel sessions. Further information will be made available on the LILAC website, including presentations and papers from the parallel and keynote speakers. There are also three short reports on LILAC available from Sheila Webber's Information Literacy Weblog (<http://ciquest.shef.ac.uk/infolit/>).

**Opening Keynote Address:
Harnessing technology to the needs of education: what roles so library and information services play?**
Diana Laurillard, Department for Education and Skills.

Diana Laurillard, the e-learning guru, formerly of the Open University gave the opening keynote paper. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published its much anticipated strategy document on E-learning on the 15th March 2005, entitled *Harnessing Technology: transforming learning and children's services*. This strategy is wide reaching across the education sector, and argues that technology and systems needs to be joined up throughout the lifespan of the learner. This was one of the first public occasions on which Diana spoke about the document, which had been published following a wide consultation with the education community.

Diana initially highlighted the specific problems of engaging with the library community as a whole, as libraries are represented by several government