



MALTA LIBRARY AND INFORMATION ASSOCIATION
c/o University Library, Msida MSD 06, Malta.

Member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Association (EBLIDA) and of the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA)

Chairman's Report
Annual General Meeting 2007

Introduction

It has been another eventful year for MaLIA. Although it has not all been rosy, we have our share of success during the last twelve months. The MaLIA Council met 15 times during the last 12 months. Some of the meeting went well beyond the normal 2 hours and I must thank all council members for their commitment. Besides the council meetings, members from council had several informal meetings to discuss specific issues and urgent matters.

In this report, I will provide an overview of the positive developments, the areas that require further development and some issues concerning the MaLIA administration. I also suggest the way forward for the new council and make two appeals, one for MaLIA members and another to the authorities.

Positive Developments

The year kicked-off with the launch of the "Report on the State of Maltese libraries". I must thank all those involved in the preparation of this report as this was a massive task for a voluntary organization like ours. The report had excellent media coverage with reviews in the local press and, possibly for the first time ever, MaLIA got a slot in the 8pm evening news on the national television station (TVM). A review on the report was also published in two influential library journals such as CILIP's Update and the Library World thanks to our ambassador in the UK, Dr Mike Freeman.

Following the launch of the report, the MaLIA Council organized a seminar to discuss the main issues emerging from this report. At a further follow-up meeting a set of resolutions was produced arising from the feedback from both these events.

During this past year, the MaLIA Council was also contacted by representatives from PricewaterhouseCoopers to give our input on a feasibility study on a development of a libraries portal. This study was commissioned by MIIT and MaLIA welcomed this initiative and, as always, gave its full cooperation and supplied the necessary input for this report.

Following several unsuccessful attempts, MaLIA finally managed to meet the Minister responsible for libraries, Dr Louis Galea, on the 4th September 2006. Present for the meeting, were the Minister, his Permanent Secretary, the Director of the Libraries Department, and the Director Policy Development and Programme Implementation. MaLIA was represented by the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and the Secretary. During the meeting, MaLIA had the opportunity to air its concerns about the local situation in libraries as

indicated in the report. We also asked for the endorsement of the Register of Library and Information Professionals and insisted that MaLIA cannot continue to be excluded from major issues and decisions concerning libraries. The MaLIA Council made special reference to the appointment of members on the National Book Council. Strange as it may seem, MaLIA is not represented on this council despite being the national organization dealing with issues directly related to the activities of such a council. MaLIA also emphasised its wish to have regular meetings with the Ministry and Dr Galea referred us to Ms Micheline Sciberras, the Director Policy Development and Programme Implementation as our contact.

MaLIA has so far had the opportunity to meet Ms Sciberras twice and several issues were discussed. During these meetings, MaLIA was invited by the Policy Development and Programme Implementation Directorate to prepare a profile for a College Librarian based on the strategy being currently implemented by government as highlighted in the document *For all children to succeed: a new network organization for quality education in Malta*. This profile was prepared and duly submitted to the Directorate within the established deadlines. MaLIA also issued a detailed response to those sections of the Amendment to the Education Bill where it felt necessary to emphasise the vital importance of having effective and efficient libraries to achieve the ideals being outlined, as well as correct a few misconceptions.

A short course on Basic Library and Information Skills was organized. The initial feedback was so positive that it was decided that another course should be organised due to over-booking. Following the planned course for October-November 2006, a second course was organized during January-February 2007. A note of thanks must go to all lecturers who accepted our invitation to deliver sessions during these courses. The feedback received from participants was very positive and this should encourage MaLIA to organise similar short-courses and seminars on a more regular basis.

The development of a new logo and a new website are two other projects that were carried out during this year. The new logo has been chosen by Council following several discussions and we believe that it will reflect more our identity as an organization looking to the future rather than to the past. The website is a crucial communication tool for MaLIA that needed to be revamped. It has taken longer than expected, but we hope the new website that will be launched during the forthcoming AGM, will provide a much needed tool for Council to keep in contact with its members and also attract potential members in joining MaLIA.

Areas needing further development

As indicated in the introduction of this report, it has not been all rosy during the course of this past year. As one of the main promoters of the need for a report on the state of Maltese libraries, I cannot but remark that it is unbelievable that a full year after the publishing of this report, none of the authorities concerned have come out and made a statement. Is it possible that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, the Department of Libraries, the KNPD, the Local Councils, the political parties, etc. have nothing to say? Are they all dormant? Is it possible that not a single recommendation or part of the report has made them stand up and take notice? Or is it the fact that the status quo is a practical solution and no one wants to change anything? I firmly believe that MaLIA should keep persisting on the need for action to be taken and that the recommendations in the report should be followed up. The resolutions prepared during the follow up meeting should be sent out to the persons concerned and the media, sooner, rather than later and, most importantly, MaLIA should continue insisting about the need to act. It is simply not acceptable that, as Dr Paul Xuereb pointed out during the seminar to discuss the report, you have to make a nuisance of yourself to be heard, but if that is the case, then so be it.

Our input into the feasibility study commissioned about the development of a libraries portal has not produced anything tangible so far. To date, MaLIA has not received a copy of the report but we know it has been forwarded to MIIT. MaLIA is concerned that, as has

happened in the past, no further progress will be made on this important initiative. We know that the study includes inputs from a number of relevant authorities so we look forward to receiving feedback and perhaps having an open discussion on the way forward.

The meeting with the Minister left MaLIA concerned about the importance being given to libraries in our society. It seems clear that libraries and the educational system are two distinct and separate functions for the Ministry. This is also confirmed by the yearly budget allocations for libraries that continue to be ridiculous. The fact that libraries are not seen to form an integral part of the education system, is a point of real concern for MaLIA. We believe that libraries, if adequately supported can play a vital role in the development of students and adults and can contribute effectively to satisfying the educational, informational and recreational needs of their users.

Another area of concern this year was the progress, or lack of it, made by the Committee for the Development of Public Libraries under the Local Councils (KILP) set up by the Hon. Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici. As part of this committee, I can report that apart from the seminar organised in Gozo, to which only a handful of people were present, the committee continues to face difficulties in handling "real" issues concerned with libraries. It seems that the complex relationship between the Ministry in charge of local councils and the Ministry in charge of libraries is beyond the committee. Add to that the local councils themselves who, in most cases, do not really seem keen on libraries and you cannot but be overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu.

Internally, MaLIA has been unable to solve its membership problem. I must reiterate that unless MaLIA goes all out on an advocacy campaign, this problem will persist. The cooperation of the authorities is crucial in helping MaLIA to become more visible amongst library workers. Unfortunately we continue to find obstacles in very simple issues like asking for a list of state primary school libraries or the dissemination of our course leaflet amongst public libraries. This contributes to the problem of lack of visibility of MaLIA's activities amongst library workers. The lack of paying members leads to another crucial problem – finance. We all know that NGOs in Malta survive mostly thanks to contributions, gifts, sponsors, donations, call them what you will, from the private sector. These are normally achieved through personal contacts and we need to emphasise this to the new Council that will be elected. All council members should work towards establishing contacts with local entities that can assist MaLIA to organise events. It's not an easy task but I consider it to be fundamental for our survival.

The delay in the publishing of the bye-laws concerning the Register of Library and Information Professionals is another disappointment. A lot of hard work has been done on this project but for various reasons, the launch has kept eluding us. One of the main reasons for the delay has been MaLIA's wish that this is endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment. A copy of the bye-laws has been forwarded to the Minister during the meeting held on the 4th September 2006 but no feedback has been received to date.

Academic Sector

After this overview of the high and low points concerning the working of MaLIA during the past 12 months, I must comment about the developments in the academic sector concerning library and information science. For the first time ever, a full undergraduate degree in library and archival studies is available at the University of Malta. This is indeed a positive development. This was also the year during which Dr Lillian Sciberras retired following several years of sterling service as Coordinator of the Diploma in Library and Information Studies. I consider Dr Sciberras as the pioneer of library education in Malta and MaLIA would like to thank her for the hard work and commitment throughout these years. Ms Martes Paris has taken over as coordinator and MaLIA, besides congratulating her and wishing her luck, promises its full support.

The way forward

Looking forward, I believe the new MaLIA Council has to concentrate on 3 main issues during the coming year. The first should be implementing the resolutions that were prepared during the follow-up meetings to discuss the report. These resolutions include meetings with library representatives that include the Director at the Department of Libraries, the Officer in Charge Public Libraries, the Director Library Services at the University of Malta, the School Library Services and others to discuss the way forward and possible avenues of cooperation.

The second issue is membership. This requires an effort from Council to go out and meet potential members, explaining the work and objectives of MaLIA and why it is important that they join. In other words, an advocacy campaign must start as soon as possible aimed at recruiting members and encouraging participation in our activities.

The third issue is that MaLIA should start discussions with the MSLA in an effort to explore all possible avenues of cooperation. Whatever happened in the past, this should not influence the discussions that need to be based on a single objective – the improvement of libraries in Malta and Gozo.

Conclusion

Finally, I have to conclude my report by making two heartfelt appeals.

The first appeal goes to all the members receiving this report. We need your support. We need you to be active members, to sit on council and to pay your membership fees regularly. Without active members, our association will find it very hard to achieve its objectives. I believe the new Council should make an effort to communicate with members and involve them in the organization of forthcoming activities.

The second appeal goes to all the authorities concerned with the running of libraries, information units, documentation centres etc. Let us build bridges and cooperate with each other. We need to get our libraries out of the 60s and help them move towards the 21st century. This will not happen if we continue to build our niches and defend the status quo. The catalyst of this development must be the Ministry concerned with libraries. Let us not keep libraries on the backburner any more. We must acquire the vision of what libraries can contribute in a modern society, devise a strategic plan, get everyone on board and move forward. It is time to move from rhetoric to actions.

Robert Mizzi
Hon. Chairman, MaLIA.