Vietnam's libraries: A potential catalyst for building a learning society

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam envisages building a learning society by 2020. A range of initiatives, namely 'SEAMEO Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning' and 'Book Day' have been established. Vietnam aims to implement and develop lifelong learning activities in libraries, museums, and cultural center clubs. This paper reveals interconnection between library, lifelong learning and learning society. It also briefly discusses the initiatives taken by the Vietnam's government and non-government organizations to improve reading habits of Vietnam's people. The present library activities and services, and reading habits of Vietnam's people are evaluated. The paper discusses how Vietnam's libraries could be a potential catalyst to improve the reading habits and to create lifelong learners for building a learning society.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; Learning society; Library; Reading habits; Vietnam,

INTRODUCTION

From 2005-2010, the Vietnam government adopted the lifelong learning (LLL) society strategy by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and the Vietnam Study Encouragement Association (VSEA). Under that project, from 2005 to 2008, more than 163,000 illiterate citizens took part in education classes and over 123,000 attended advanced training courses. In 2008, more than 5 million families registered to become 'Studious Families' and over 50,000 families have been recognized and named the 'Study Encouragement Families' (VOV, 27/10/2008). In 2013, the LLL project was extended to 2020 under a new official project 'Building a Learning Society by 2020', with clear responsibilities and involvement of ministries and agencies. Organization of lifelong learning activities through the mass media, libraries, museums, and cultural center clubs are targeted to achieve this state ambition.

According to the Vietnam Government Portal, under the extended LLL project, 98 percent of people aged between 15 and 60 will be able to read and write by 2020. The project also aims to have 70 percent of rural laborers join courses to improve their education and skills. It will provide secondary school education or equivalent training for 90 percent of export processing and industrial zone workers, and vocational training for

95 percent of workers. Officials and public servants will learn a foreign language and receive IT training. Every official and public servant from central to district levels will attend refresher courses, and all commune level officials will take part in courses on leadership and management skills. Annually, around 50 percent of students and pupils will be taught life skills.

Library, lifelong learning and learning society

The idea of the learning society has featured strongly in recent pronouncements around adult and lifelong learning. But what actually is a learning society? If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society (Faure, 1972). A learning society gives rise to the capacity for lifelong learning through socialization and for individuals to contribute back to the learning abilities of the broader society in the form of wisdom. Torsten Husen (1974) argued that it would be necessary for states to become 'Learning Societies' where knowledge and information lay at the heart of their activities. Reference is often made to the 'knowledge industry', meaning both the producers of knowledge, such as research institutes, and its' distributors, e.g. schools, mass media, book publishers, libraries and so on (Jarvis, 2001).

The strength of the idea of a learning society as a concept is that in linking learning explicitly to the idea of a future society. It provides the basic for a critique of the minimal learning demands of much work and other activities in our present society, not excluding the sector specializing in education. Mark K. Smith (2002) goes further in noting that the 'Learning Society' is an aspect of this movement to look beyond formal educational environments and to locate learning as a quality, not just of individuals but also as an element of systems. In a similar fashion Stewart Ranson (1992) has argued that the notion of a learning society provides us with a helpful way of making sense of the shifts required in the context of the profound changes associated with globalization and other dynamics of social and economic changes.

Library is one of the most perfect places for "beyond the classroom learning." It is the place where students are, or should be encouraged to explore other worlds, to develop their imagination, to think about the impossible (White, 2012). Libraries assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowerment in an increasingly complex world. The role of libraries in promoting lifelong learning is especially critical in developing scientific, reflective thinking and innovation.

Essentially, libraries are at the front line of developing and promoting lifelong learning. "School libraries and public libraries should be pivotal to the 21st century educational experience, and the base for a positive attitude by young people towards information

skills development, lifelong learning and enhancing their life chances" (Bandy, 2006). In addition, libraries are one of the best places that preserve reading resources and by using those resources we become literate and civilized, the main ingredients of a learning society. There are not many alternatives to a good library for the enrichment of lifelong learners. All over the world, libraries are dedicated to provide free and equitable access to information for all in print, electronic and audio visual formats. In effect, libraries have been a part of our community development since the Neo-Assyrian Empire period (2600 A.D.) regardless of race, creed, culture or color, and are the wonderful gathering places to pursue knowledge, whether you are student, teacher, parent, laborer, employed or unemployed.

Libraries have become the essential ingredient of a civilized society and their contribution is towards education, research and training. As "education is the most powerful weapon, we can use it to change the world" (Mandela, 2003). Lifelong learning must go hand-in-hand with a capacity for self-learning. Today, education is not limited to the path from kindergarten to university. People must continue learning beyond that. There is no doubt about the fact that development is a product of education and education is a process through which people are formally and informally trained to acquire knowledge and skills. 'Education' and 'Library' are two inseparable indivisible concepts, both being fundamentally and synchronically related to and co-existent with each other. One cannot be separated from the other [.....]. One dies as soon as the other perishes. One survives as long as the other exists (Adio & Olasina, 2010). Therefore, libraries are the crucial factor for educational development and creating lifelong learners for building learning societies.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The specific objective of this paper is to investigate the ongoing 'Reading Habits' development activities in Vietnam that serve as catalyst for building a learning society. It also aims to reveal current reading habits of Vietnam's students and Vietnam's library situation such as collection, services and user satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed methodology using questionnaires and literature review utilizing primary, secondary and tertiary sources. The questionnaires were distributed by hand, targeting fifteen hundred students and teachers in Ho Chi Minh City (HCM City) and its vicinity during 2012 and 2013 period. One thousand and nineteen participants responded (67.93 percent) to the survey. The results of the survey were analysed around the following five Study Questions (SQs), three of which asked to the teachers, one to the students and one aimed at both teachers and students:

SQ1. How would you evaluate the reading habits of your students (teachers)?
SQ2. What is your evaluation about library resources (students)?
SQ3. How do you rate the library services (teachers)?

SQ4. Why do you go to the library (both teachers and students)?
SQ5. What steps should be taken to promote reading habits of Vietnamese students (teachers)?

Eighty-nine (9 percent) of the respondents were university teachers, 168 (16 percent) respondents were high school teachers and 297 (29 percent) were university students. The age of the respondents varied considerably. Four hundred and sixty-five (46 percent) high school students stated their age at around 17. Overall, more than half (54 percent) of respondents were in the age group of 17 to 22 years old. In terms of gender participation, more than twice the number of participants were women (67.19 percent) compared to just 32.81 percent of men.

Figure 1: Respondents' Demographic Background
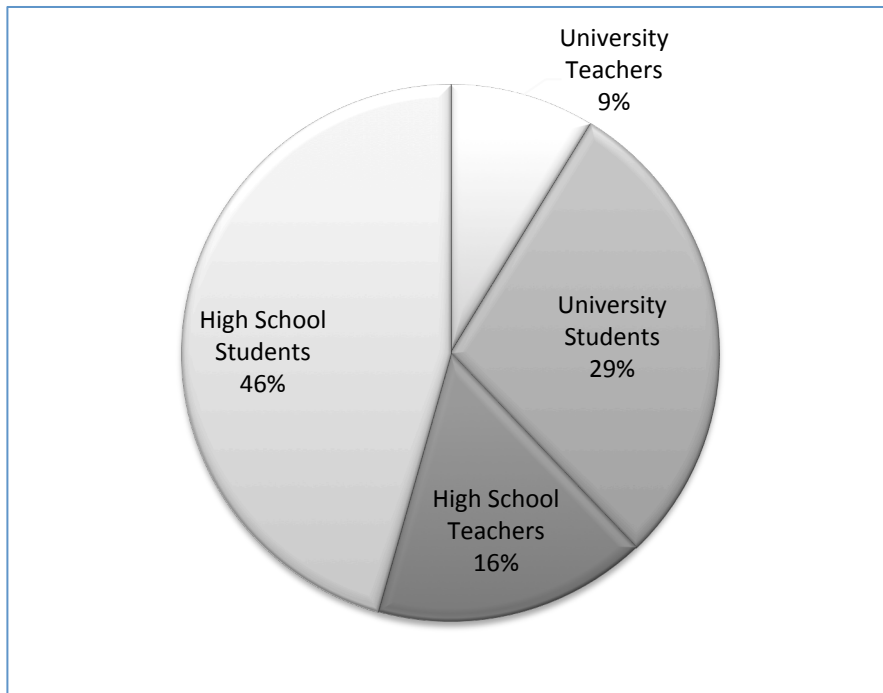
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Reading habits and learning society are intertwined as healthy reading habits are considered an essential and important aspect for building a learning society. It is said that poor reading habits among the Vietnamese is one of the major challenges for building a learning society proven by a 2008 survey report published in the local media: "in Vietnam the average person reads only 0.6 books per year and 80 percent of the books published are textbooks" (VNS, 15/08/2008). In order to explore current reading

habits of Vietnam's students both high school and university teachers have been asked the SQ1 *(How would you evaluate the reading habits of your students?).*
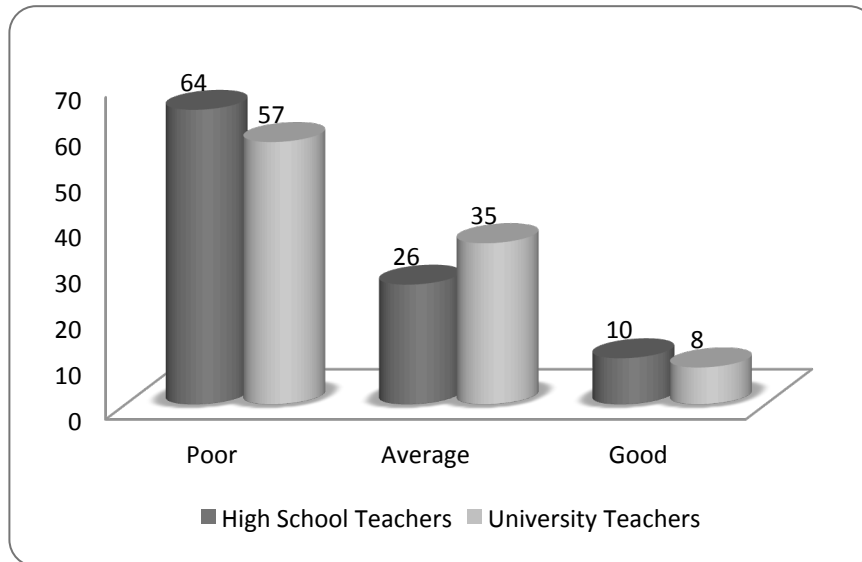
Figure 2: Students' Reading Habits

Figure 2 implies that both teacher groups have the same opinion that the reading habits of Vietnam's students are not at a satisfactory level e.g. 64 percent and 57 percent of high school and university teachers respectively acknowledged their students poor reading habits whereas only 10 percent of high school and 8 percent of university teachers believe that their students have good reading habits. Respondents' feedback is attested by two recent media reports. According to the first report conducted by the Publishing and Printing Department of Vietnam, a Vietnamese read only 3.2 books, including textbooks, on average in 2013 (VNS, 19/03/2014). The second report by Vietnam National University survey found that seventy (70) percent of students said they had little interest in books, with 25 percent saying they loved books and 5 percent only mildly interested (VNS, 23/10/2013).

For a long time, library has the natural advantage of providing an excellent learning environment and good services; therefore it is the best place to enhance reading habits and to nurture the "Learning Society" model. Library not only brings development opportunity for the society, but propels a new generation of lifelong learners. Library activities appeared very early in our society and it is no exception in Vietnam. As a developing country, Vietnam possesses a remarkably sophisticated library system where more than 23,000 state funded libraries and over 25,000 people are working to provide different kinds of library and information services (NLV, 2008). The Library Department is under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Sports (MoCST).

In order to explore user satisfaction on Vietnam's library collections and services, participants were asked SQ2 (to students) and SQ3 (to teachers) *(What is your evaluation about library resources?* and *How do you rate the library services?*

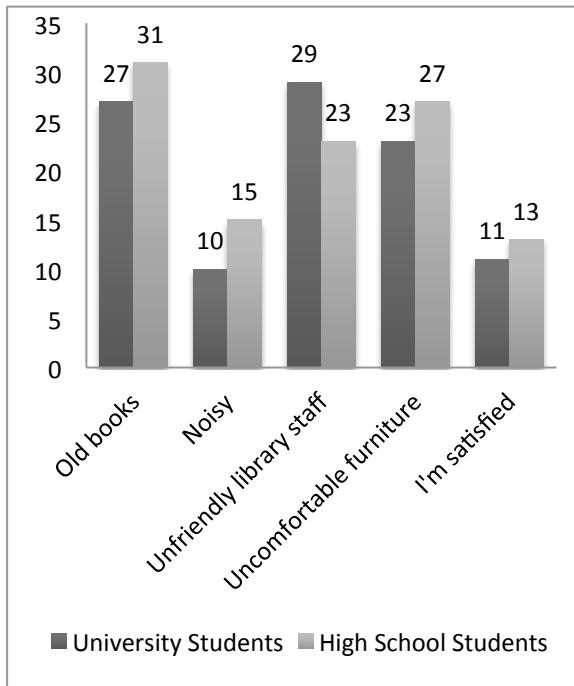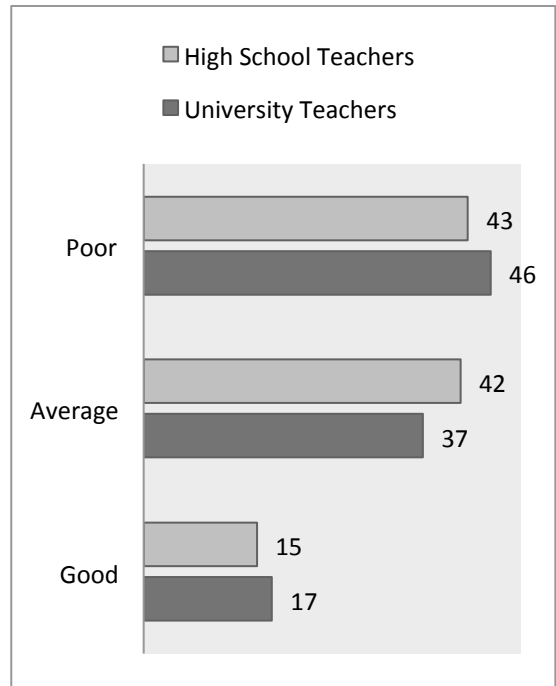Figure 3: Evaluation on Library Resources | Figure 4: Evaluation on Library Services

Figures 3 and 4 depict that only 11 and 13 percent of university and high school students are satisfied with their library collections whereas 15 and 17 percent of high school and university teachers are agreed that their library services are good. The above results could be attributed to the lack of innovative services in Vietnam's library sector, a claim originally made at a recent seminar, organized by the MoCST where educators blamed for the lack of innovation of the country's library system. At that seminar, P. T. Khang, Chairman of the Vietnam Library Association stated: "10 years had passed since the target to upgrade, unify and standardize the library system in the country, but it has yet to be realized." (VNS, 23/10/2013). Further, the MoCST figures show that the average Vietnamese reads only 0.8 books per year in the library. Similarly, another report from Vietnam's Prime Minister's office mentioned that the community library network does not meet the readers' needs (VNS, 19/3/2014).

In comparison, the number of students who read books and use libraries is modest (Table 1). A recent survey conducted by the Vietnam National University (NVU) found that "60 percent of what they [readers] read were comic books. Some of them chose to read short stories and novels" (VNS, 23/10/2013). The VNU study noted that normally, students only read books in the public, school and university libraries during exams, but after exams, the libraries are often deserted. Even though library users visit the library for many other purposes such as the Internet browsing, chatting, social networking,

playing online games, meeting friends etc., the findings of SQ4 *(Why do you go to the library?)* appears to be consistent with the conclusions of the VNU study.

Table-1: Purposes of Going to Libraries

Purpose(s)	High School Students (percent)	University Students (percent)	High School Teachers (percent)	University Teachers (percent)
Read Books	23	27	27	25
Assignments	13	18	27	34
Internet browsing	40	49	37	23
Read Newspapers / Magazines / Journals	20	20	15	20
Others	13 e.g. waiting for next class; meeting friends	06 e.g. taking rest, waiting for friends/ next class	14 e.g. looking for new books/ old newspapers and magazines	08 e.g. looking for old newspapers / magazine

Table-1 shows that 49 percent of university and 40 percent of high school students visit library for browsing the internet whereas only 13 and 18 percent of high school and university students respectively use library for assignments. It also shows that 34 percent of university and 27 percent of high school teachers were using libraries for assignments which is fairly good indication.

Having considered some of the factors responsible for poor reading culture in Vietnam, it is pertinent to suggest some strategies that can be adopted to transform the country into a learning nation and make its citizens lifelong learners for building a learning society. In question SQ5 *(What steps should be taken to promote reading habit (for building a learning society) of Vietnam's students?)*, teachers suggested to improve library activities and establish more libraries while others advised to offer free books and stop online games facilities as summarized in Figure 5.

In this circumstance, according to the majority of the respondent teachers (Figure 5), it can be assumed that libraries are obviously able to play a significant role in building a learning society in Vietnam by improving library activities, services and establishing more libraries.   Respondent teachers' feedbacks are also reflected on Vietnam's government and non-government organizations effort on library centric reader development enterprises discuss below:
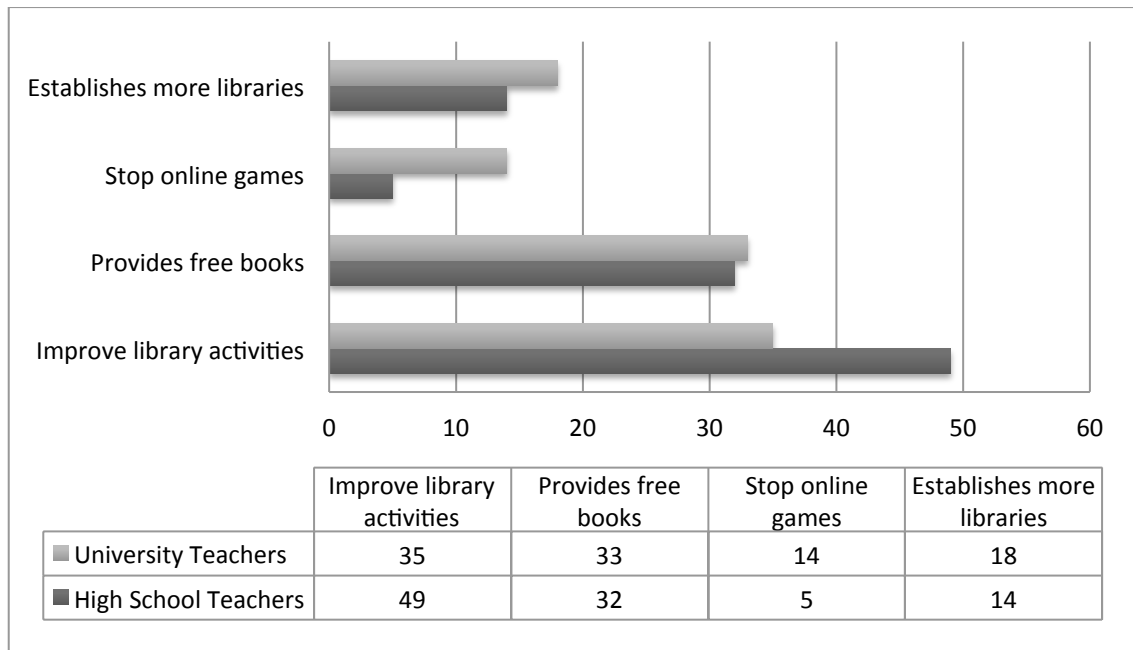
	Improve library activities	Provides free books	Stop online games	Establishes more libraries
▪ University Teachers	35	33	14	18
▪ High School Teachers	49	32	5	14

Figure 5: Respondents' Suggestions to Promote Reading Habits

a. Vietnam's government projects for building a learning society

To accomplish this national goal e.g. building a learning society by 2020, Vietnam government alone has taken a number of innovative enterprises such as: between 2005-2008 it established more than 9,000 community learning centers in 10,600 communes and wards throughout the country; in 2008 it approved 2nd of October annually as 'Vietnam's Day for Study Encouragement'; a week in response to lifelong learning that delivers the message: 'Lifelong learning – key to every success' launched in 2011; and in 2013 it established a lifelong learning center, namely SEAMEO Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning under the auspices of SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization), UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, as well as other SEAMEO associate member countries.

Finally, in 2014 the country granted a 'Book day' (21st April) along with a 'Book Street' and a 'Book Week' organized in the central cities and provinces, and promoted through seminars on books, exchanges between writers and readers, and a book auction. According to the Vietnam Prime Minister's decision, the annual event aims to raise people's awareness of the important role of reading culture with the improvement of people's knowledge, skills, thought and personality. The day will also be an opportunity to emphasis to important role of books in social life, and to give recognition to book collectors, writers, publishers and distributors. Moreover, the day will help to raise the responsibility of functional agencies and social organizations on building and promoting the reading culture in Vietnam. Besides, the MoCST organizes an annual reading festival on 23rd of April, an effort to promote a culture of reading among people, especially students. In 2011 the reading festival entitled 'Reading for Tomorrow' included many

activities such as a painting contest, presentations on reading culture and speed-reading techniques, and an exhibition of books featuring library activities (VOV, 23/04/2011).

b. Vietnam's non-government projects for building a learning society

NGOs and Non-profit organizations play a significant improvement in the library activities and enhance all kinds of modern library services and facilities: provide books, build and renovate libraries, and train librarians through their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSRs). Besides government the following non-government library based projects are working for increasing reading habits of Vietnam's people mostly patronize by national and international non-government and non-profit organizations:

i. Book Box

Book box is a community reading encouraging project in HCMC. It was initiated by a group of young inspired by the 'Little Free Library' project in several countries such as USA and Pakistan. Book Box has scattered several boxes in public cafés where anyone can pick up a book and replace it with another. The take-and-give model means that each location features a diverse set of books, with each becoming a unique mini library. The project initiators encourage readers to replace the books they take out with their own treasured digests so that they can pass the value of good literature on to future readers. Book Box aims to strengthen Vietnam's reading culture and to encourage sharing and respect of public property.

ii. Park Library

Park library is not a new concept in Vietnam. Hue City, for example offers free book reading at park. Every weekend, members of the group will display more than 500 books arranged on various subjects including education, psychology, and economics, as well as novels, newspapers and magazines made possible by the charity group Bup Sen Hong (Pink Louts) (Zakir, 2013b). Hence, park library would be another popular place for developing reading culture if government and other stakeholders support and encourage this initiative.

iii. Coffee House Library

This project is a relatively new concept in Vietnam. Having a coffee while reading a book at a nearby café would be wonderful! It is said that coffee houses are one of the favourite places of students and young couples in Vietnam. The Hub Café in HCM City, for example, stacked with more than 10,000 book titles on topics including philosophy and history, as well as fiction and reference books in Vietnamese and foreign languages. Besides HCM City, Hanoi city and Hue city also have a number of coffee house libraries however the quantity and public awareness of these initiatives are still very low. In order to increase reading habits and provide reading with pleasure, it should be recognized that coffee house library activities and services in Vietnam need a boost regardless of urban or rural locations.

iv.   Book Corner and Book Shelf Library

Book corners offer a wide selection of fiction and non-fiction hardback and paperback titles including some CDs and DVDs. Bus, railway and boat stoppage corners would be much more inviting, where people can choose a book to read and drop it off at the next stoppage book corner. Imagine a library where there are no due dates and no librarians telling you to be quiet! Israel and Brazil are two examples using this practice to promote literacy. A book corner can be organized in the hotel, such as the Alcove Library Hotel and Hotel Equatorial in HCM City where they have hundred of books to serve their customers. Similarly, Thu (2013) reports that Entertainment and Education Bookshelf, a voluntary programme run by a veteran physician that makes bookshelves in the remote areas, collects and donates books to poor children in rural mountainous areas in Vietnam; the organization has more than 700 bookshelves across the country and one in Ethiopia.

v.   Mobile Library

Mobile library services in Vietnam are worth streamlining. There are number of mobile library projects that are operated by public libraries and NGOs. Singapore International Foundation Mobile library (SIF), widely known as 'Words on Wheels' is the first mobile library in Vietnam that not only distributes books, educational games and toys, but also offers access to the internet and multi-media facilities. A mobile library for the blind is operated by HCM City General Science Library and funded by Standard Chartered Bank and the Force Fund of The Netherlands. Another Mobile Internet Library inaugurated at the same library provides its services to army personnel with funding from LG Electronics Corporation and the Amcham-United Way Vietnam. This mobile library is a customized coach equipped with eight Internet-connected computers in addition to peripheral devices, two TV sets, DVD players as well as some 1,500 book titles.

vi.   Toy Library

Vietnam Toy Library (VTL)**,** the first community public library, began in Hoi An by Aid for Kid (AfK), a NGO with support from the local government in 2007. It has offered books and other non-book materials to the children and the general public. The VTL loaning books programme is a new concept in Vietnam which helps around 4500 area people to access books for education and enjoyment (Zakir, 2012).

vii.   Book Swapping Clubs

Book swapping club helps bibliophiles to obtain new reading material without having to worry about purchasing expensive books. The idea of book swapping is a fresh concept in Vietnam. Dong Tay Book Exchange Club, for instance, in the capital city of Hanoi is one in a growing number of organisations that allows readers to swap their old books for the ones they need. According to Ngoc (2013), the club now has nearly 200 members including students and graduates. The club has also enable readers to gain new circle of friends. They can build lasting relationships through book swapping, often sparked by a discussion about a good paperback or a bad film adaptation. Nguyen Huy Truong Book

lovers' club in HCM City that has over 6000 books is another example of book clubs. During a period when the culture of reading is not given the attention and encouragement it deserves, book exchanges have become a meaningful way to store, preserve and popularise useful books in the society. Perhaps the birth of more book clubs similar to Dong Tay and Nguyen Huy Truong Book Lovers can open a new chapter for the country's avid readers.

viii.   Book Festivals

Book festivals both online and traditional are essential to the cultural expression of a society or nation. For many people books are their best friends. Book festivals play a great role in encouraging good reading habits among all age groups. They are a platform for writers, readers and librarians' to gather and exchange ideas characteristic of a learning society. The professional event of librarians is also one of the special features of the book festivals. Vietnam holds a number of book and reading festivals mostly in Hanoi and HCM City such as Spring Book festival, Autumn Book festival, Comic Book festival, and Biennial Book festival. Book festivals can be organized online like HCM City based Tiki Joint Stock Company where it attracted more than 100 international and Vietnamese publishers with more than 20,000 displayed titles (VNS, 05/11/2013). Libraries could get a boost in their recognition if they would participate in book and reading festivals, which could be extended to remote areas to encourage reading among a wider population.

ix.   Other Non-Government And Non-Profit Organizations Library Projects

In Vietnam, the national and international NGOs/NPOs such as Room to Read, The Library Project and Aid for Kid built and renovated over one thousand school and community libraries throughout the country (Zakir, 2012). Among others, Room to Read (RtR report 2011) an International Non-profit organization built and renovated over 667 school libraries and donated more than 1,294,696 books among the participant school libraries of which over 364.000 children have been benefited towards their lifelong learning (Zakir, 2013b). Samsung Vina Electronics Company handed over 28 hi-tech libraries, offering more than 40,000 books to 22,000 pupils across the country through a project called 'Smart Libraries'. The company also introduced another project titled 'Books that change my life' to encourage a reading habit among society, especially youngsters (VNS, 11/28/2013). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation project has provided 280 computers, 42 printers, 42 cameras and other devices to equip the province's 18 public libraries and 24 communal post offices. The $50 million project, aimed at improving computer use and internet access in Vietnam is being implemented in 400 public libraries and 1,500 communal post offices in 40 disadvantaged provinces across the country (VNS, 08/10/2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The value of knowledge and information lies in its usage. Education, information literacy and lifelong learning are the three pillars for putting knowledge to work (Singh, 2012).

Libraries and information networks have a pivotal role to play in human progress by preserving and serving knowledge and information across frontiers. However, library cluster is only one player or stakeholder in reader development. The importance of building partnerships with other interested sectors is also crucial. There is a need to form alliances with all those who promote reading or reap the benefits of a literate population. Radio and television media for example, can play a vital role by broadcasting interesting books on air. This will encourage children to listen and thus enhance their pronunciation skills and reading habits. They also can include 'Children Reading' in their programs.

Activities directed at children rely on a strong relationship having been created with the education sector. Library and school co-operation are at the heart of 'Want to Read's programmes' to develop and enhance reading skills. To inspire a love of reading in students, school libraries play a vital role. Vietnam's school libraries should be pivotal to the 21st century educational experience, and the basis for a positive attitude by young people towards information literacy skills development, lifelong learning and develop important life skills. However, in Vietnam, school timetables are too rigid to take advantage of useful public library events (Nhung, 2011). To overcome these shortcomings, school libraries should be the strategic partner of local public libraries. Local government should ensure a collaborative atmosphere between teacher and librarian to foster a school curriculum inclusive of library literacy skills (Zakir, 2013a). Where there is an absence of libraries in some schools, students could be taken on excursions to libraries in other schools, topped up by tours to book exhibitions and fairs. During such visits, children would be introduced to the library and its resources, and be educated on the importance of books and reading to their intellectual well-being.

These days' teenagers perpetually scan screens for something new. Redesigning the library space by including a café, social and digital media based services, would inspire a sense of love for reading therefore create lifelong learners. Using Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and Zing Me (local SNS) as means of library outreach programmes should be a significant 21st century consideration by Vietnam's library and information professionals. A 2011 survey reported that about 54.3 percent Vietnamese internet users use SNSs and more than 66 percent and 73 percent of users use Facebook and YouTube respectively, whereas 60 percent of the Vietnamese teenagers use Zing Me, a locally developed social networking site. These rapid developments in technology and their use have affected librarians too, who now utilize different forms of social media for different purposes. Therefore, the library and librarians need to reach users through avenues familiar to them, in their own space or environment in order to extend library services beyond the physical library walls. For this reason, libraries are adopting, and should adopt, SNSs as a part of their services, specifically outreach services.

The project (Building a Learning Society by 2020) targets 98 percent literacy rate for people aged 15 to 60 by 2020. To accomplish this national target, library professionals should play a vital role in helping to accomplish this important goal. Similarly, Vietnam's

libraries must perform as reading clinic not only to eliminate the online game 'virus' (although studies have shown the positive effects of gaming on cognitive development) among the young generation but also to create a reading and lifelong learning nation in order to make for a literate, peaceful and prosperous Vietnam. In Vietnam, for instance over 86,000 students quit school during the September-December (2012) semester, according to MoET report. They can be invited to the libraries to enjoy reading and non-reading activities, such as lectures, movies or discussion groups to facilitate their first step back into learning. Over the past twelve (12) years the Vietnam Study Encouragement Association helped to develop academic activities into a far-reaching public movement. They introduced learning models such as the 'Studious Family', the 'Study Encouragement Family' and the 'Study Encouragement Residential Quarter'. However, the achievements from these initiatives are far less than expected.

To strengthen libraries, it is important to raise the awareness of the role of libraries and also to improve library activities and services. Service attitudes and quality of service must be developed. There are also impressive examples of ambitious services such as the General Sciences Library in HCM City, the National Library, and the brand new Public Library in Hanoi. However, there is a gap not only between urban and rural areas but also between different provinces. The Vietnam Library Association (VLA) should be an important player in promoting library services and to increase the understanding of the role of libraries in society and national development. Librarians should also be more dynamic in their connection with information seekers. The VLA should boost regional cooperation with the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) and the Library Association of Singapore and Malaysia, and pursuing international collaboration with the IFLA, ALA and CILIP to develop library and information science professionals to meet the needs of *netizen library users. Therefore, the Ministry (MoCST) should set up an action plan for training library professionals on different levels. To create a comprehensive public library system there is a need for national coordination and standardization in certain fields. The National Library should play a more strategic role in public library development. It should have a clear mandate and adequate resources to act as a central resource for library automation, digitization, standardization, coordination and professional training. As the incumbent providers in the current system, governments, schools, universities and libraries must not only seek to drive innovation but also learn to be 'good adopters'.

*netizen: *A person who is a frequent or habitual user of the Internet.*

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