

International Training Programs in Brussels Related to Scientific Information and ICT

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Abstract

This contribution reports on international training programs organized mainly in the 'Vrije Universiteit Brussel' on scientific and technological information and on related aspects of information and communication technology. The programs are primarily aimed at participants from developing countries. Topics discussed in this text are the aims and contents of the programs, the evolution of the programs, the teachers and contributors, the participants, financial aspects, methods to announce the programs, difficulties and lessons learned, and the future of this kind of programs with some suggestions for co-operations.

Introduction

International training programs on scientific and technological information have been organized in Belgium since 1991. They have been aimed mainly at participants with a university degree or similar qualifications, and who function as young and promising information intermediaries in organisations in a developing country. The length of each program has been three or four months. Suitable accommodation close to the university is searched. The course language is English. At the end of the course, participants receive a certificate and a detailed, final, printed version of the course program scheme. The sponsors of the organization of the training programs also sponsor participation in the form of about 12 travel grants. For each program, more than 100 applications for grants have been received. The number of applications reflects the high interest in participation. No similar alternatives are offered in the world, as far as we know; so there is place for similar initiatives.

The organization of such training courses needs a lot of time, work and funds. On the other hand it is a rewarding activity. Worldwide contacts among participants and teachers can be developed and maintained. The experience gained by organizing the first series of training programs has been published earlier [1, 2].

Aims and contents of the training programs

After being actively involved in one of the training programs described here, every participant should have improved the ability

- to appreciate and explain the importance of access to information for their organization,
- to retrieve information that is publicly accessible on an international scale through the Internet,
- to present information to (potential) users,
- to collect and store information for later retrieval and access by potential users, for instance at the level of department, institution, region or country,
- to train interested persons in management of information,

- to apply quantitative methods in decision making related to information systems and services,
- to contribute to the planning of the (further) development of an information service, and
- to communicate through the Internet with users of information, colleagues and others.

The increasing importance of computers and local as well as international networks as tools in this kind of work is emphasized, and participants are offered free access to these facilities at the university, during their stay in Brussels.

The organizers urge the participants not only to apply the newly acquired knowledge well (once they are back in their home countries), but also to transfer their knowledge to their colleagues as well, according to the “teach-the-teachers” approach.

The sharpened skills and increased knowledge of the trainees can be of great benefit to the teaching and research activities going on in their institute and to the further development of their organization and region.

Besides the courses that take place at the campuses of the organizing universities, some study visits are organised. More culturally oriented guided visits are organised also. For some participants, the course provides a first opportunity to travel outside their own country.

At the end of the course, each participant completes a presentation supported by slides managed on computer, with constructive comments on the training program experienced and with concrete recommendations to the director of their own organisation.

More details are available from our WWW site at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: <http://www.vub.ac.be/BIBLIO/itp/> where “itp” is the abbreviation of “International Training Programs”.

Evolution of the training programs

Up to the end of 2003, seven programs have been organised.

The first three went under the name “Management of Information in Science and Technology”, abbreviated with the acronym “MIST”.

The program named “KNOW-HOW” ran in the winter of 1997-1998. That name is again an acronym, in this case derived from “Knowledge Organisation for Water-sciences - Hydrology, Oceanography, Water-resources management”. Of course the acronym refers also to the need to use, manage and exploit existing “know how” (information) as well as possible.

In 2001-2003, three other programs on “information” were organized, named “STIMULATE”. This acronym is derived from “Scientific and Technological Information Management in Universities and Libraries: an Active Training Environment”. These programs aim primarily at persons who work in universities, information and documentation centres, and libraries, including of course university libraries, and who have a few years of practical experience. The term “Active Training Environment” in the title of the project is not only made up to obtain the acronym STIMULATE for the training program, but it reflects our wish to create an environment in which each participant is stimulated to get involved actively, supported by the lecturers and the infrastructure provided by the training program. This fits well into the general, worldwide trend away from “teaching” to “learning management”.

According to the wish of the sponsors, each of these programs are proposed and in the end organised formally by more than one university, in this case Vrije Universiteit

Brussel (VUB), with as partners the Universiteit Antwerpen (UA), and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL).

Besides the formal, guided course activities, the participants have access, as any student at our university, to several rooms equipped with microcomputers connected to the Internet, and to the University Library which offers printed material, CD-ROMs and PC's with Internet access as well.

Teachers and contributors

It has been a pleasure to have more than 50 teachers and contributors with a high level of expertise and with varied intellectual and geographical backgrounds. Most of them work at our university and in other institutes or private companies in Belgium, but several came from other countries: The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Slovakia, Italy, U.S.A., and from UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

Participants to the programs

In accordance with the aims of the programs, most participants work in developing countries where English is spoken as the first or second language. The highest number comes from Africa.

Financial aspects

For each program, the proposals to organize it were screened by the university and then by an expert committee of the Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR). This has resulted in recommendations directed to the Belgian government, to sponsor these activities, by providing about 50 000 euro or US\$ to the university for the organization, plus about the same amount in the form of travel and accommodation grants to about 12 selected participants.

Methods to announce the programs

Communication methods have evolved very fast during recent years. Now the next international training program is announced and described through

- classical hard-copy leaflets, posters and more detailed brochures produced by VLIR and distributed through the mail;
- the WWW site of VLIR on the training programs:
<http://www.vlir.be/os/icpitp/intprogs/itpicp.htm>
- our WWW site dedicated to the training programs on information, mentioned elsewhere in this text;
- electronic mail by the organisers to hundreds of addresses (of individuals and mailing lists) that have been collected over the years.

A positive evolution is the growth of the Internet so that more and more remote and poor areas can be reached. However, those who are most in need of training in the poorest countries and organisations are probably not made aware of the training opportunities, which is due to poor technical infrastructure and lack of skills related to computers, software and Internet access.

Difficulties and lessons learned

Some of the difficulties involved in organizing the programs are:

- the participants' lack of experience with travelling and their confrontation with a very different culture;
- a classical difficulty in training: the unavoidable heterogeneity of the scientific, technical and cultural background of the participants;
- the irregularity of the financial support and uncertainty about future support for similar programs, which is typical for all international training programs in our region;
- the lack of explicit and planned support for follow-up activities;
- the required investment by the contributing experts to be able to focus on the particular problems faced in the developing countries and on the recent evolutions of appropriate methods to cope with these problems;
- the unrealistic expectations of some participants who do not realise that resources available are always limited, even in our rich country.

Over the years we have of course made steps towards better coping with these difficulties.

Important: the future and co-operation?!

The next training program in this series, named "STIMULATE 4", will probably take place during October-December 2004.

The most important aim of this contribution is to underline that we are open for any co-operation with interested institutes and organisations to join forces and to exploit the experience gained in an efficient way.

In particular, on the one hand, other individuals and organisations can

- announce our future programs to suitable candidates for a participation grant;
- provide grants to suitable candidates, so that more persons can participate and benefit from the training programs;
- provide expertise in teaching, particularly on topics focusing on solutions and methods suitable for developing countries.

On the other hand the expertise built-up over the years in this framework can be exported to other, related initiatives in other countries in the form of advice, teaching...

You are invited to contact us if you have any question or proposal.

References

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