Bridging The Digital Divide – Sabah’s Experience With Des@Net and Other ICT Programmes*

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Abstract

This paper explores how Sabah State Library (SSL) is addressing the issues of low internet access and low computer and information literacy rates in the state of Sabah. Projects undertaken by SSL include various forms of IT access points such as the Des@Net, a mobile computer lab, and state-wide electronic centres. Training programmes are being organized to overcome IT illiteracy. Significant content sites include eMas Sabah which is aimed at providing community information for Malaysians residing in Sabah as well as other ongoing joint projects between SSL and the National Library of Malaysia.

Introduction

According to the statistics provided in the 8th Malaysia Plan, Sabah has one of the lowest Internet access rates in Malaysia. The National Library’s “Reading profile of Malaysians 1996” survey also revealed that the computer literacy rate of Malaysia is only 17%. These are indeed causes of concern for the government if the state is to become a knowledge society equipped to meet the challenges of the new millennium. The related issue of information literacy, a skill required for the searching, evaluation and effective use of information, also needs to be addressed.

This paper will explore how Sabah State Library (SSL), in cooperation with other state government agencies, is working towards resolving these issues.

1. IT Access Points

i) Des@Net Papar: Delivering Electronic Services to All

One of the latest programmes that SSL launched is Des@Net, a mobile computer training centre that contains 10 notebooks, a server and a laser printer. The vehicle visits 10 schools in the rural district of Papar. Launched on 21 January 2002, the service targets students in Secondary Levels 1, 2 and 4. Each school is visited once every fortnight for a full day and students are taught basic computing skills, usage of Internet browsing and e-mail, word processing and homepage creation. The objective of Des@Net is to promote the effective use of ICT and an awareness of ICT as a means to improve life, learning, work and recreation.

Only schools with limited or no computer facilities and Internet access for students are selected. A computer programmer facilitates the lessons and is assisted by a library officer. Each Des@Net has a full time driver.

When the schools are closed during the term holidays, road shows will be conducted for other sectors of the community.

The Des@Net notebooks have also been used for other ICT programmes such as the computer training workshops conducted for women in Sipitang by the Sabah Women Advisory Council. The computer equipment have also been loaned to the University Malaysia Sabah for their IT Awareness Camp in Tawau and Lahad Datu.

Cooperation from all quarters has been one of

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the major strengths for the success of the Des@Net programme. The Des@Net team comprises:

- Sabah State Library
- Unit Kemajuan IT Negeri (KIT), Chief Minister's Department
- Jabatan Perkhidmatan Komputer Negeri
- Jabatan Pendidikan/Schools
- KKIP Communications Sdn Bhd

The first few months of the service have proven to be somewhat bumpy in view of the fact that different schools prefer different arrangements and that the response and cooperation from each school differs. As a result, discussions with the schools are held often to iron out any difficulties.

A new Des@Net will be launched during this conference and this time, five secondary schools in each of the rural districts of Kudat and Kota Belud will be served.

Two more Des@Net cybermobiles are in the pipelines under the 8th Malaysia Plan with a total allocation of RM600,000 from the National Library of Malaysia.

ii) Sabah State Library and Information Centre

Phase One of SSL's new RM32 million headquarters building will be completed by July, 2003 with the provision of multimedia PCs providing access to the library's OPAC, the Internet, CD-ROMs, video CD, and other databases. In addition, the building will house a computer training room where the public can receive training on the usage of software and the internet. A hypermedia library for children will be available for children to improve their computer skills. An IT gallery for IT vendors to exhibit their latest products will also be provided. Satellite TV sets will be placed in strategic places together with hardcopy and online news sources to provide worldwide current news.

iii) Electronic Centres

Sabah State Library established its first electronic corner consisting of computers for internet and CD-ROM access for the public in 1996. Today there is an electronic corner in each of the 21 regional and branch libraries throughout the state of Sabah. In the year 2002, a total of 6,601 people used these electronic centres.

At present, these centres have only 1-2 PCs but there are plans to form a smart partnership with a local computer vendor to set up family oriented cybercentres throughout the state that will have more PCs and faster internet access.

iii) Pusat Siber Ilmu

At present, only 2 of the 43 village libraries that SSL built are equipped with computers. However, all new village libraries will now open as Pusat Siber Ilmu with at least 1 PC for public access. In the 8th Malaysia plan, five units of such centres will be opened at a cost of RM100,000 each with funds provided by the Federal Government.

iv) KTKM/JICA Rural Internet Centres

SSL is working together with the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia to provide Internet access under the Rural Internet Centre programme funded by the Japan International Cooperative Agency (JICA.) Computers have been placed at the Kota Marudu Branch Library, Post Office and the District Office to provide free Internet services for the general public.

2. Issues

(i). Internet Access Charges

While SSL charges for Internet access, fees are very nominal at RM2 per hour for adults and RM1 for students and children.

(ii). Training for staff in regional, branch and village libraries

More training for staff at the local levels are required so that they can in turn cascade their knowledge and skills to the local community.

(iii). Sufficient funds for equipment

The library does not have its own supply of state
budget for purchasing computer equipment and accessories. This can be a severe hurdle in developing the ICT services in the library's plans.

3. ICT Training Programmes

i) ICT Workshops by the Sabah Women Advisory Council, Education Subcommittee

Under the Sabah Women Advisory Council Education Sub-Committee of which the director is the chairperson, SSL has a role in the inculcation of education to improve the quality of life of women especially those in the rural areas and to bridge the digital divide for women. IT awareness workshops and creation of web page workshops have been conducted in the rural towns of Sipitang, Keningau, Papar, Kudat, Sandakan and also in the city of Kota Kinabalu. The objectives of the workshops are:

- To raise awareness of the uses and benefits of ICT
- To form an electronic community of women through women's organizations
- To facilitate information sharing among women organizations through the development of an electronic network
- To facilitate dissemination of information regarding the work of the organizations more efficiently through ICT

ii) ICT Awareness Seminars by Sabah IT Council – Working Committee On IT In Social Development

SSL is a member of the Sabah Information Technology Council (SITC), the state’s highest body for the coordination and management of IT in Sabah. The Director of SSL is the chairperson of the IT in Social Development Committee and also a member of the Working Committee for IT Deployment in the Public Sector. The objectives of the Working Committee on IT in Social Development are:

- To create public awareness and to promote IT literacy with the ultimate objective of creating an information rich society
- To encourage the use of IT as a strategic tool in social development at all levels of society.

To address the issue of IT literacy, the working committee formed two task forces.

Task Force 1 – Creation of Local Digital Content

One of the achievements of the task force was the creation of 21 homepages for NGOs which can be found in www.sabah.org.my/org/scss.

Training for updating of homepages was also given to representatives from the NGOs involved.

Task Force 2 – IT awareness and Literacy

IT seminars and exhibitions were organized in districts of Keningau, Kudat, Ranau, Kota Kinabalu and Sipitang. Such awareness programmes will continue in the future to prepare the rural population for the arrival of the Internet in the outlying regions.

4. Content and online services

To make information more accessible to both rural and urban communities, online content development is an important part of the activities of the library.

Major projects include:

i) Web sites

eMas Sabah - www.sabah.org.my

eMas Sabah is a community information homepage for Malaysians in Sabah. The project was set up to help achieve the goals and objectives of the State Government as laid down in the State Public Sector IT Master Plan which are to:

- create an information rich society;
- bring about a radically improved standard of living;
- enable equal access to public services at "anytime, anywhere, anyhow";
- enable communications and interactions through electronic and multimedia channels.
The main objectives of eMas Sabah are thus to:

- Enable equal access to and sharing of information and knowledge
- Promote social harmony and unity.

Categories include eMas NGO, eMas Advice, eMas Consumer, eMas District, eMas Bulletin, eMas Mine, eMas Hot Talk and eMas Diary.

**eMas NGO** consists of a database of Sabah NGOs and their contact details as well as individual homepages detailing their activities and services. **eMas Advice** is an online advisory service set up to answer online enquiries regarding health, legal, consumer and other matters. One notable new partner for this module is the Sabah Medical Association that provides a panel of doctors, many of whom are medical consultants, to answer all health questions.

**eMas Consumer** provides useful information for the consumer such as the prices of over 230 essential goods, as well as the rights and laws that affect Malaysian consumers. There is a detailed section on the Consumer Claims Tribunal, including cases tried and official tribunal forms that can be printed out for submission. Visitors can also e-mail the Minister of Community Development and Consumer Affairs, Datuk Raymond Tan Shu Kiah, about their consumer concerns from this website.

A very popular category is **eMas Bulletin** that allows for free postings of personal advertisements such as house for rent and cars for sale. **eMas District** provides information on the districts within Sabah, such as directories, places of interest, history and population. **eMas Mine** lists any homepages on the World Wide Web that are about Sabah.

For the month of April 2002, eMas Sabah logged a total of 220,296 successful hits for the entire site. The number of visitors increases almost every month.

SSL Online (www.ssl.sabah.gov.my) is the state library's official homepage. Besides the usual features of a library homepage, visitors within the library can access eBrary, a full text database of over 13,000 books, and also the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

SSL has migrated to ILMU, a Malaysian made computerised library system. With this new system, anyone with Internet access can surf the library's web-based union catalogue. Members can check the library's events calendar and new arrivals as well as their reservation status and registration details. They can also renew their loans and make a recommendation in the suggestion box.

**ii) Digital Resources (Joint projects with the National Library of Malaysia):**

- **Pusat Kecemerlangan Sumber Ilmu Negeri** – information on the state governors;
- **Pendigitan Sumber Ilmu Negeri** – K@Borneo project;
- **MyLib**

**iii) Other state projects of significance include:**

- **Sabah Edu.Net** - www.sabah.edu.my - A site for the promotion of lifelong learning and provision of information for the student community.

5. Future Plans

The library plans on having the following services in the near future:

- Fully networked library system riding on Sabah.Net;
- Access from home to electronic books, electronic magazines, journals and databases, CD-Rom and Video on Demand;
- Digitized library materials;
- Information literacy tutorial software and training programmes;
- Use of smart cards.
SSL's role in bridging the digital divide in Sabah has been mandated by the State Public Sector IT Master Plan. The library will continue to champion digital inclusion for Malaysians in Sabah and assist the government in its efforts to create a knowledge society.

Note: This paper was updated in July, 2003 for Sekitar Perpustakaan.

References:

