Optimizing Access to Scientific Information for Universities in the Maghreb (ISTeMag)

TEMPUS IV. A European Project of Inter-University Cooperation

Abstract: ISTeMag is a cooperation project between universities from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) and the EU (Belgium, France, Romania). Its main goal is to expand access to scientific and technical information, by training the Maghreb negotiators for international resources and building local open access repositories. Collaboration is built on national library consortia. Activities include capacity building, study tours and internships.

Keywords: Maghreb-European Union; library cooperation; ISTeMag; information access; Open Access

The purpose of the ISTeMag project is to enhance access to Scientific and Technical Information for the Maghreb university professors, researchers and students. This project is coordinated by the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), in collaboration with the Aix-Marseille University (AMU), the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca (UTCN), the Transylvania University of Brasov (UTBv) and in partnership with Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL).

The following countries and institutions from the Maghreb region are partners in the project: for Algeria, the Research Center on Scientific and Technical Information (CERIST), the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) and the universities of Boumerdès (Maghreb coordinator of the project), Batna and Tlemcen; for Tunisia, the National University Center of Scientific and Technical Documentation (CNUDST), as well as the universities of Monastir, Sfax and Gafsa; for Morocco, the universities of Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakech.

The project has a budget of 986.695 Euro of which 98.700 Euro are co-funded, and expands over a period of three years (15th October 2010 to 14th October 2013).

The five specific objectives of the project are as follows:

- carry out a detailed evaluation on access conditions to S&T information for teachers-researchers and students of the Maghreb universities
- create information resource portals for the university libraries
- create library consortia to support collective negotiation for online access to the primary sources of information
- define, develop and roll out an effective institutional policy on open access archives
- publish and communicate this experience to disseminate it to all of the higher education institutions of the three mentioned countries

Project activities are designed to reach a significant impact on the research and teaching capacities of all the Maghreb universities.
universities. Apart from the improvement of access to scientific and technical e-resources from abroad, the project also endeavors to optimize access to data research and results produced in Maghreb universities. Thus project activities focus on collecting, processing and publishing those research achievements. As a result, outdated and traditional procedures for library management will be replaced by innovative services more likely to match modern university needs.

Ensuring availability of STI produced either locally or internationally is a major challenge for the entire scientific community. The development of an information society based on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) is an important factor for the economic, scientific and social development of the whole region.

Ubiquitous access to scientific and technological information has become the norm for library users in developed countries. However, access in the Maghreb region and STI production by local universities is confronted with structural shortcomings making it precarious at all times. Nevertheless, university libraries in the project partner countries represent ideal platforms to ensure the availability of information to the scientific community. To pave the way, significant progress has been made over these last years by some North African universities in terms of hardware equipment.

Efforts have been recently made in order to set up a network of university libraries. In the case of Algeria this effort supported by another EU-Tempus project (RIBU) led to a unified national university library catalogue. In the whole region, the university libraries are involved in a modernization process. The optimization of STI access in Maghreb universities is a middle and long term strategic objective. This includes consolidation of current joint indexes, creation and promotion of the consortium model, scanning of heritage collections held by some libraries, the constitution of ad hoc virtual libraries and the training of researchers and students on STI usage.

Up to now, the quality of research performed in Maghreb institutions is hampered by the difficulties in accessing STI by researchers and students. It is the main objective of the project to improve this situation. Currently no one doubts the importance of libraries and the significant role they play in university institutions, be it in the field of education or research.

The wealth of holdings is an essential condition to allow libraries to run effectively, but this is not sufficient. In a situation where the number of students is rapidly increasing, it is impossible to make enough up-to-date articles and books available by using the traditional process. Moreover, inherent research competition requires scientists to have rapid access to comprehensive information. It is therefore essential that university libraries act in common to provide the maximum of online information, at an affordable price, and facilitate access by students and researchers. It is also essential for the development of a knowledge based economy within the Maghreb that all scientific and technical information be quickly shared.

Within this context, the ISTeMag project is built on three pillars: e-resource portals, consortia negotiations and development of an open access policy. All activities have been based on a detailed study relating to the current STI access situation by academics and researchers in the Maghreb. This study conducted during the first phase of the project included a large number of aspects of STI in each of the partner libraries. At the same time, an analysis was carried out at country level by the Maghreb partners, where a maximum number of universities were surveyed via questionnaire, revealing a detailed picture. The results of the study were publicized during two seminars, one in December 2011 another in May 2012.

The activities related to the “documentary portals” are intended to define the specifications of the portal, e.g. the needs in terms of information origin and services provided by the portal in each library. The objective is to develop portals adequately structured to enhance document visibility and transform them into efficient information platforms allowing the development of future digital work spaces. Specific training on their usage is planned for technical personal and portal administrators from partner libraries. Regarding administrators, a traineeship within European libraries, is scheduled for the second quarter of 2013. Training cycles will also be held for users (researchers, students, and teachers) from each of the partner universities.

Project activities related to the “consortia” are intended to promote a culture of cooperation and sharing of digital resources between libraries, to enhance their negotiation capabilities for digital resource acquisition, and to structure the flow of information between negotiators and end user beneficiaries. The project partners as well as staff from libraries not in the project were trained and supported by EIFL experts, in 3 separate workshops – in Alger November 2011, in Rabat January 2012 and in Tunis May 2012. The workshop topics were negotiation and licensing of e-resources, and the set up and management of a sustainable consortium per country.

The “open access policy” pillar of the project promotes an innovative path to constitute a reservoir of information based on Maghreb research results. The stake-
holders involved in this process are the researchers, students, librarians and decision makers. The objective is to set up structures allowing methodical harvesting of STI produced locally, and to ensure local interoperability. A specific training module has already been given by EIFL experts, in May 2012, to personal responsible for collecting and publishing online data to guarantee the sustainability of structures implemented during the project. An open access traineeship within libraries of European partners is scheduled for librarians of each Maghreb partner library. Finally, information seminars for stakeholders regarding open access archives will be held within partner universities.

It is essential that actions, results, benefits and learning are made available to Maghreb universities that were not partners in this project. With this idea in mind, a communication strategy had been elaborated and sustained from the beginning. First of all, to help broadcast the project and its results, a tailor made website was created and is updated on a daily basis. The website allows everyone to track implementations, activities and project results. Paper documents have been widely sent to all higher education institutions in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

In addition, a series of information and awareness days are held across the three Maghreb countries. The target audiences are the other universities as well as national authorities responsible for higher education. Three sessions have already been organized in each of the Maghreb countries from May 2012 until now. A conference is scheduled at the end of the project to present results, future directions and plans.

Finally each partner is invited to present the project during institutional meetings, to publish online all the reports, training media and useful information to involved stakeholders. The project is intended to include all Maghreb universities, and trained staff will be responsible for rolling it out. Frequent contacts are maintained with the supervisory authorities in each country, to mobilize and maintain support and commitment to extend project results within the next few years.