

Collaboration with sister organisations around the globe: a SWOT-analysis at the EAHIL Council meeting in Cardiff



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The broad field of health science librarianship is not limited to Europe, but is international in its nature. In recognition of this EAHIL has had a longstanding partnership with the Medical Library Association¹ in the US, as well as being open to membership for health science librarians from outside the countries in the Council of Europe. In recent years closer contacts has been initiated with other medical library associations internationally and the number of sister organisations has increased. EAHIL now lists an additional four associations as sister organisations; the *Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa*² (AHILA), the *Canadian Health Library Association/Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada*³ (CHLA-ABSC), *Taiwan Medical Library Association*⁴ (TMLA) and *ALIA Health Libraries Australia*⁵. Agreements regarding collaboration with the different associations varies, and is not always formalised in a written agreement. Collaboration is usually a mutual invitation to annual events, and in the case of EAHIL also a wish that representatives from sister organisations publish a short report on news in their country/continent in the Journal of EAHIL. In Dublin the EAHIL Board organised a much appreciated meeting with representatives from all five sister organisations to discuss mutual strategic issues.

Earlier this spring the Board was contacted by yet another medical library association, with the query on how to become an EAHIL sister organisation. This has triggered a discussion on the Board on the pros and cons of having sister organisations, resulting in the decision to ask the Council member's assistance at the Council meeting in Cardiff. At the meeting the Council members were asked to do a simple SWOT-analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), first by writing their own ideas on post-it notes, and then to try to come up with additional ideas by discussion with the person next to them. At the end of the meeting there was a lot of colourful notes on the walls, in general more positive than negative input, summarised below. The Executive Board will discuss this item at an upcoming Board meeting, with the aim of listing a number of criteria for becoming a sister organisation, and also to draft a written agreement on what the collaboration should constitute, drawing on the input from the Council meeting.

¹ <http://www.mlanet.org/>

² <https://ahila.org/>

³ <https://www.chla-absc.ca/>

⁴ https://www.taiwanmla.org/?page_id=80&lang=en

⁵ <http://eahil.eu/about-eahil/>

COUNCIL MEMBERS' CORNER

Strengths

For EAHIL Members:

- Sharing of expertise, ideas, experiences, information, perspectives and knowledge globally
- Possibilities for staff exchange
- New contacts, intercultural communication
- (Global) mentoring
- Professional development, methodology, what skills are needed for medical librarians
- Creating links for developing research projects
- Stronger financial support for conference participants if working together?

For EAHIL as an association:

- Learning/ Benchmarking from/with different associations in different countries/continents
- Better future, better development for the Association
- Strengthen the association of another maybe not so developed country
- Widens pool of guests/speakers at conferences
- Better lobbying/stronger voices
- Visibility of the medical information professional, stronger profession
- Consistency, maybe we could all agree on professional standards / defining common skills for medical librarians

Weaknesses

For EAHIL members:

- Discussing in English (or French)

For EAHIL as an association:

- Potential over commitment of time or resources (money)
- More work for the Board members, difficulties to follow up all sister organisations, too many other tasks
- EAHIL has no "strategy" articulating the benefits
- Energy and resources spent on external issues instead of EAHIL business
- You give more than you receive
- It may be difficult to define the specific points of possible collaboration, and this could be only theoretical, getting too general, losing focus

Opportunities

For EAHIL members:

- Opportunity to articulate our professional profile (within the health community etc)
- Share best practices to improve/benchmark, getting new ideas for solving similar problems, finding solutions you could never have thought of
- Widen the role of Council members or others with specialist expertise
- Building a worldwide community of colleagues, easier to contact people personally when there's a professional network
- Exchange opportunities for young librarians, exchange weeks/study visits easier to organise
- International exchange/travelling, chance to travel
- Exploit Erasmus funds to visit sister organisations
- Professional identity being even stronger and at the same time being open and wide

For EAHIL as an association:

- New ideas for running a successful organisation, to get information about how sister organisations work
- Strengthen professional voice/impact internationally
- Look for engagement with non-medical library associations
- Strategic alliances, eg. to develop global guidelines of services and competencies
- Developing EAHIL and sister organisations

- Increase/develop your visions
- New working groups (Board or Council members?) with sister organisations about specific issues -> bigger impact
- A global perspective regarding the health information field and its future
- To lighten work load on Board members delegate to Council members
- To be more visible

Threats

For EAHIL members:

- Limiting cultural differences (try to be too “polite”), misunderstandings based on cultural differences
- Too much work for a few people -> burn out

For EAHIL as an association:

- If we plan or promise things that we end up not being able to do – could be loss of esteem/reputation
- We have no strategy – how much collaboration should we do?
- Focus outside of Europe, not on local “unchartered territory”
- Sustainability: costs, distances, logistics, languages, bureaucracy when hosting many delegates from different countries
- You give more than you get/not getting back what was put in (effort wise)
- Losing the focus, becoming a bit too broad (like IFLA conference)
- Losing the “special angle” of looking at things (being influenced too much by non-European themes), being drawn into working towards other organisational agendas or priorities
- Uniformity of thought (group think) and colony behaviour
- Misunderstandings based on cultural differences
- Sister organisation losing people because of closing of libraries or no replacement of retired people (difficulties in maintaining contacts)
- Global financial situation for participants

The EAHIL Executive Board would like to thank all Council members for their active participation and valuable contribution to this discussion.



Council members at the Council meeting, Cardiff 2018.