

**RLST^[1]: ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT,
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. JAFAR MEHRAD**

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Regional Library of Science and Technology (RLST), located in Fars State, is one of the international institutions of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology which is active in the area of information production and dissemination. The following interview is aimed at providing the information societies as well as our respectable readers with useful information regarding RLST.

Question 1: Would you please explain about the history and the formation of Regional Library of Science and Technology (RLST) in Shiraz?

In 1989, when I was on my sabbatical leave in UCLA^[4], I was informed of the appointment of Prof. Mostafa Mo'in as the Minister of Science, Research and Technology (the ex-Ministry of Culture and Higher Education). My acquaintance with Prof. Mo'in goes back to the time when he held the Chancellorship of Shiraz University after the Islamic Revolution in 1978. Establishing of libraries and information centers was one of his utmost priorities. His most important endeavor, in this regard, was the establishment of Allame Tabataba'ee Library in 1970. In the first meeting, Prof. Mo'in invited me and put forward the idea of establishing Regional Library of Science and Technology in Shiraz. The main reason behind this suggestion was Prof. Mo'in's meeting with Prof. Abd-UI-Salam, the Nobel Prize winner in physics from Pakistan and the President and founder of the Third World Academy of Sciences. In the aforementioned meeting, the establishment of a number of research institutions were discussed and agreed upon of which the following were the most important:

1. The establishment of Regional Library of Science and Technology in Shiraz.
2. The establishment of the International Center for Science and High Technology and Environmental Sciences (ICST).
3. The establishment of Graduate Studies in Basic Sciences in Zanjan.

Because I had worked a lot on bibliographic databases during my sabbatical leave, I willingly received and followed Prof. Mo'in's proposal.

Prof. Mo'in asked me to compose the draft of RLST's Charter and its establishment with cooperation and consultancy of Prof. Reza Mansuri, faculty of the Department of Physics in Sharif Industrial University; Prof. Sobuti, Department of Physics, Shiraz University and Prof. Firuzabadi, Department of Chemistry, Shiraz University.

In the first meeting held in Prof. Sobuti's house, several points were discussed with regard to RLST, i.e. its regional scope of activities, its information resources and holding, its difference with other existing libraries, and also the ways through which it could be enriched to meet various needs of universities and research centers in various parts of the region.

The main emphasis of these professors was on comprising a holding embodying a comprehensive collection of scientific journals. They believed that if a library embodying the most important scientific journals of the world is established, a considerable amount of information needs will be met and satisfied. Later, we considered the possibility that a scientist may go to other resources such as standards, scientific and research reports, technical books, theses, ..., or a combination of them to meet his/her information needs. In this way, the first draft of the Charter was prepared and delivered by Prof. Sobuti to the Minister in 1990. As this draft had to be sent to the Third World Academy of Sciences, it was translated into English and then edited by Prof. Morteza Yamini, Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Shiraz University. Later, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology and the Third World Academy of Sciences signed a Letter of Understanding, based on which RLST was established and started its activities. Since Prof. Mo'in was previously the President of Shiraz University and was completely familiar with facilities required, he roomed RLST in a temporary place at the Central Library building in Shiraz University. Simultaneously, RLST's Charter was compiled by the Ministry. This was, in fact, the first Charter of RLST. In this Charter, it had been specified that Regional Library of Science and Technology had to be ruled by a Council on the belief that the collective efforts of the members would quicken the establishment process.

At this time, Prof. Mo'in appointed me as the President of RLST and the Director of the High Council. Prof. Soroush, Prof. Sobuti, Prof. Mansoori, Prof. Shariatmadari and Prof. Salehi were also appointed as members of RLST's High Council by the Minister of Science, Research and Technology. The Head of RLST's High Council was the Minister himself. The most important reason for choosing these professors was their high academic rank in the areas of science and technology. One of the most important points in this Charter was its emphasis on holding three-monthly meetings. Another important point was RLST's use of the physical room of Shiraz University. This gave RLST two varying natures. On the one hand, it was dependant on Shiraz University and on the other hand

it was taken as an independent institution who worked under the auspices of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. That was why the President of Shiraz University also attended RLST's High Council meetings. Due to the importance that the establishment of RLST bore, Prof. Mo'in himself, rather than the Vice Minister for Research Affairs, monitored the establishment issue directly.

Question 2: Please explain more about RLST's Charter.

RLST has had two Charters since its establishment. The first one was valid from the beginning of the establishment of the library in 1991 up to 1996. The second one was put into effect after the approval of the establishing of RLST by the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Guardian Council in 1996. Prof. Mo'in ordered the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to compose the first Charter which was later notified to RLST. Although this Charter was executed, the Organization of Administration and Employment declared that the Charter had to be approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly. So, in 1996 the law for establishing RLST was approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly and confirmed by the Guardian Council. The second Charter was also prepared by the Cabinet.

Following this approval, RLST's Charter was prepared and both the Charter and the law of establishment were approved by the Guardian Council.

Question 3: Other than its regional mission, does RLST have other responsibilities and national objectives?

Yes, it has. In fact, RLST has its regional and national objectives at the same time. That is why in almost all the 25 Articles of RLST's Charter, an emphasis has been put on the terms, 'national' and 'regional'.

Question 4: What do you mean by region? Do you mean the 57 countries the scientific journals of which you are including in the ISC database?

Yes, The term 'region' and 'geographical area' has been well defined in RLST's Charter. Of course, in some cases, RLST offers its information services to some Islamic countries which are not in the region, such as Indonesia. I believe that when we are able to serve the world by our information services, there is no justification why we should not do so.

Question 5: Would you please speak about the outlook of RLST's activities in the future?

As mentioned before, RLST's Charter has been approved by the Cabinet and the Guardian

Council. Therefore, our activities, at the moment and in the future, must be carried out such that our long-term objectives, as mentioned in the Charter, could be achieved. I, as the President of RLST, have already endeavored to make the best use of the resources to attain to that objective. In this library, a number of activities are specially paid attention to, i.e. establishment of information databases, by presence and electronic information services as well as services through telephone and post, cooperation in promoting the discipline of Library and Information Science, attending Seminars, etc. It is evident that the database for books and other databases of RLST are permanent databases which will meet, as they do now, the information needs of the users in the years to come.

As far as governmental and research centers in Iran and the region are active, the need for information will exist. Seminars, conferences, training programs and workshops all imply the need for information. In fact, we have an approved and legal Charter that I should not only put into implementation its content but I should also develop it. For example, I am allowed, based on the Charter, to establish branches of the library in regional countries. Our branch in Sudan is going to be established in 2007 and we are planning a program for establishing more branches in other regional countries. (Of course, we have already established a number of branches in Syria, Yemen, etc.).

Question 6: Why was RLST established in Shiraz and not in Tehran?

As Prof. Mo'in was President of Shiraz University before being appointed as the Minister of Science, Research and Technology (the ex-Ministry of Culture and Higher Education), his familiarity with and influence in Shiraz University made it easier for RLST to use the facilities of Shiraz University. On the other hand, my presence in Shiraz University enabled me to support RLST scientifically and practically. This was another reason for establishment of RLST in Shiraz.

Question 7: What supporting strategies did the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology adopt with respect to RLST?

As mentioned before, because of the importance of RLST, the Minister of Science, Research and Technology monitored RLST's activities himself. Prof. Mo'in emphasized on holding meetings of the High Council every three months. The members of RLST's High Council and the respectable Minister attended these meetings continuously with other members of the Council during which Articles of a prepared agenda were discussed for approval. Sometimes, these meetings were held at 5 A.M. or 6 A.M. in Tehran at the Minister's Office. When an Article was related to development or construction proposals, the Minister for Development and Construction Activities also attended the meetings.

In the first meeting of RLST's High Council, Prof. Mo'in approved the rooming of RLST at the third floor of Mirzaye Shirazi Library in Shiraz University. In 1991, As the establishment of RLST had not been approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly, no budget had been appropriated for it. For this reason, Prof. Mo'in allocated 100 million Rials from the Public Aids of the Ministry to RLST. This amount of money made it possible to build rooms, install electrical cables, etc. which were all necessary prerequisites for initiating the work.

Question 8: In RLST's Charter who holds a higher position than the president?

As RLST is one of the independent research centers of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, the Minister himself is to be superior to the President of the library.

By an independent research center, I mean that it is not dependent to any other organizations, and like other research centers or universities which are affiliated to the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, its President is appointed by the Minister.

Question 9: How much organizational independence has RLST's President in his works?

RLST's President has been authorized to act independently with regard to the objectives set in RLST's Charter.

Question 10: Please speak about job opportunities at the library. What kinds of skills are required for each position?

In RLST's job specification notes, all details related to the positions and skills required have been stated clearly. In order to control and observe the contents of this note a job classification committee has been introduced. This committee's meetings are held and chaired by the Vice-President for Administrative Affairs. The responsibilities of the staff of the library, i.e. faculty members and others, have been described clearly and this forms the basis for the activities of each person. Although sometimes in urgent cases some forces are used in other positions, this is not a rule and happens just in certain cases and temporarily.

Question 11: How did RLST succeed in continuing its activities and specialized operations during the imposed war of Iraq against Iran and international sanctions?

Establishing a library in each field needs a plan that can best illustrate its services, materials, sources, etc.

It is natural that preparation of this kind of plan needs enough man power, time and budget. So, as the first step, by concluding a contract with great producers of information, I tried to establish a dial up access to their files. This was used in early 1990's when there was not an Internet line access. Simultaneous with the implementation of the dial up access program at RLST, this type of connection was also established in Pars Sopaleh Corporation which cooperated with the Industrial Research of Science and Technology (IROST) in Iran. In fact, universities and other organizations could make use of services of Pars Sopaleh company by signing a contract with IROST. Pars Sopaleh acted as a host and provided universities, research institutions, etc. with an access to the biggest bibliographical information networks of the world.

In spite of the fact that some sanctions were imposed on Iran at that time, and thus, it was hazardous to rely on a single host as a source of information provision, I took advantage of my Professors' help at University of UCLA and concluded a separate contract with Dialog – one of the biggest suppliers of databases at that time. I should thank Prof. Shank in this regard. It worths mentioning that professor Shank is one of those invited to build the ex-library of Pahlavi in Iran and because of this he was well informed about the libraries of Iran before the revolution. At that time, he was Vice-President of libraries of University of UCLA. At the University of UCLA, there is a Vice-President besides the Vice-Presidents for Research and Educational Affairs. By the way, I could conclude a contract with producers of the biggest databases in the world with his help. In addition to concluding a contract with Dialog, there were other contracts with producers such as Questel in France, STN in Germany, JIX in Japan and Blaise in Britain which were from both east and west.

Question 12: What problems did users face to access your databases during that time when the dial up connection was weak and there was no internet line?

It should be noted that the price of the information was very high at that time one of the reasons of which was the limited dial up connection available to access information. For example, a person connected in this way from Tehran to Shiraz had to pay more compared to a user from Shiraz and this was a big problem because most of the users were students and professors of universities who were not able to pay high expenses. For example, the expense of searching in Chemical Abstracts database depended on the type of connection to the database. This goes back to 15 years ago. At that time, in order to search in a file such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology or Engineering, users had to pay about 300000 to 400000 Rials that was not economical for them. However, Nowadays taking an article from British Library costs about 140000 Rials.

Question 13: How did RLST, during the first years of establishment, provide its services to international & regional centers?

Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quite supportive and cooperative in this regard. This Ministry by introducing one of its Offices to RLST, helped us to publish our advertisements in high circulation newspapers of the regional countries. The expenses of these advertisements were paid through Shiraz Melli Bank. The publication of Information search forms and advertisements concerning the establishment of RLST informed regional universities and research centers of regional countries of the help RLST could offer them.

They therefore could contact RLST and use its information services. Besides, we identified and listed the biggest universities and libraries of the regional countries through "the World of Learning." At that time, RLST informed them of its information resources by sending them search forms and instructions on how to complete and send them back to RLST.

Because at that time it was possible for regional countries to request their information from British Library or other libraries which had more facilities than Regional Library, RLST's High Council approved the free of charge delivery of information to regional countries. This Council believed that the free of charge delivery of information could attract scientists and higher education and research centers of regional countries better and easier. Although most of these countries were previously familiar with Islamic Republic of Iran, universities and higher education centers came to know another institution in Iran named RLST which could deliver them with free information. This practice could well be labelled as one of the biggest services of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to the regional countries regarding provision of information resources.

To publicize RLST's services, two attractive brochures were published the contents of which were based on the content of RLST's Charter. The publication of such brochures and dissemination of them amongst universities and research centres in Iran and the region played a positive role in bringing fame to RLST. In fact, the distribution of these brochures amongst the attendees of the meeting of the Third World Academy of Sciences in 1993 and 1994 in Venezuela was quite impressive. Questions like "how has the Islamic Republic of Iran been able to make such a great move during a short period of time?", all showed that the attendees had been impressed by RLST's achievements. This was while some other countries such as Turkey, Kuwait and Pakistan were also looking for a chance to establish a library like RLST. In fact, it was for the efforts of Prof. Mo'in that RLST was established in Iran and Iran gained an alofted status amongst members of the Third world Academy of Sciences.

Question 14: How does RLST establish contact with its home customers? And how does it cooperate with home rival information and research centers?

I am sure that none of these centers are RLST's rivals. The most important reason is the different services we offer at RLST. The world of science is very vast and specialists in this field never face shortage of information subjects and resources. We also tried at RLST to work and think differently and use all our talent and power to create job opportunities in information industry.

Regarding the question on how we cooperate with information and research centers and universities, it should be stated that RLST is a well known center. In evaluations of universities, research centers and science and technology parks carried out by the High Council for Cultural Revolution, it was shown that universities and research institutions make frequent use of the electronic information resources available at RLST. For example, science and technology parks in Yazd, Khorasan and Markazi Provinces have established access to RLST. Science and technology park in Fars Province has established access to Irandoc in Tehran. This is illustrative of the fact that these centers are completely known by universities and research centers in Iran. All these universities and centers, etc. can get access to RLST's databases on line. The possibility of delivering information through post, fax, ... has also been taken into account.

In addition to these cases, as I am one of the veteran managers of higher education, most of the universities know me well. I believe the chance I have been given to act as the president of RLST for a long time has had a positive role on RLST's success. Moreover, home and regional branches of RLST and its website have also played an important role in introducing its services.

Now, most of scientific societies in Iran know RLST quite well and everyday new persons and organizations, even outside the domain of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology are added to our users club. For example, recently Mayor of Isfahan asked us to establish RLST's branch there. This request can be considered as the first request for establishing RLST's branch in an institute not affiliated to the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.

Holding of bibliographic and internet training workshops by my colleagues at RLST is another instrument we use to publicize our services. Familiarity of the scientific society with our services encourages them to increase their cooperation with us. As an example, some universities prefer their own books to be catalogued at RLST, so they carried their books to RLST and returned them back after cataloging was completed. Therefore, RLST makes relationships with its users in different ways; i.e. knowledge organization, workshops, establishing branches and providing access to its homepage.

Question 15: How much budget was appropriated to RLST during the first years of establishment?

As it was mentioned before, during the first years of RLST's establishment, Prof. Mo'in appropriated a total sum of 100 million Rials from the public aids of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to RLST. Prof. Mo'in increased RLST's budget from 100 to 200 million Rials in 1992, the second year of RLST's establishment. This amount of money was also appropriated from the public aids of the Ministry. This budget, though suitable for carrying out preliminary programing, was not enough to enable us to start our real activity regarding information purchase and provision.

ENDNOTES

1. Regional Library of Science and Technology.
2. Director of Library and Information Science Department, Shahed University.
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(to be continued)