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## **The Current Role of Librarians and Future Challenges for Academic Libraries in Romania**

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### **Abstract**

The wave of changes triggered by the evolving technology has determined a major transformation for libraries in terms of their role in society and the community of users and the role of the librarian began to be reconsidered, recording an expansion into areas once reserved for specialists from other fields. Both the institutional learning ability and the employees' individual learning ability is essential at this moment in the world of informational structures. In this context, the article provides the results of a study conducted at the level of directors of academic libraries in Romania regarding the role that they believe academic librarians should play currently, their training needs, the skills needed in the digital environment, the future directions of library and information science as well as the challenges that academic libraries in Romania will have to face during the following period.

**Keywords:** *academic libraries, academic librarians, training needs, skills, library directors, Romania*

### **Introduction**

The fast evolution of information and communication technologies has caused major changes in the activity of informational structures, the most visible and argued being those regarding the types of documents that form their collections and the services for users. In fact, all activities in libraries and other types of info-documentary structures

have seen significant changes in recent years, as well as the role of the institution and its professionals. Changes are required quite frequently in this digital age, therefore organizations and people must always be willing and able to learn and adapt.

In case of librarians, the skills for the creation, management and use of digital information resources and services are absolutely necessary, but given that technology, various applications and tools featured on the information market are constantly improved or replaced by others completely new, these skills must be continuously updated. And to remain acquainted with these tools that facilitate communication, learning, as well as the storage and access to vast amounts of information, Tennant highlights that the ability to learn "constantly and quickly" (1) is essential.

Starting from an exploratory study carried out during the early 2000s with the aim of identifying the employers' requirements in the library area in the US, Marion achieved results which indicated "the possession of excellent interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills, the ability to perform independent creative work; and the ability to work effectively as part of a team" (2) as the main requirements.

The evolution of specialists from libraries and the information services area implied the up growth from librarians to cybrarians or virtual librarians and then to information and knowledge managers, webmasters and infopreneurs. (3) For example, e-learning is considered by Dey one of the opportunities which can led to the development of a librarian into a cybrarian. (4)

The role of the librarian in Romania has also undergone changes and should be reconsidered, Volovici et al. expecting further challenges for librarian, who will be required "to play a major role in encouraging reading and the spirit of enquiry, focusing on digital resources and expanding the use of virtual channels to deliver these resources." (5)

### **Context of the Study**

In recent years, academic libraries in Romania have been the subject of research conducted either at the level of the services they provide, of the modernization of these services, or at the level of users or of librarians.

Within the framework of an extensive research started in 2013 for these structures, on the subject of their transformation into learning organizations and of their cooperation relations, an interview based study carried out with the directors of such institutions, but also with the heads of branches of such libraries also included a set of questions which covered the role of academic librarians, the future directions of library and information science, and the opportunities brought by the digital environment for these information transfer organizations.

### **Methods and Objectives**

Fifteen directors and heads of branches of academic libraries were invited to take part in this study. They were selected so that, to the extent possible, the study could cover the full range of academic libraries in Romania, large, medium and small libraries, both in terms of their collection size, but also in terms of the number of employees and number of users. These libraries pertained to different university centers: Bucharest, Iasi,

Timisoara, Craiova, Sibiu, Galati and others. Of the fifteen directors and heads of branches invited, eleven responded positively to our invitation.

The objectives aimed to identify:

- the future directions of library and information science and the challenges that academic libraries will have to face during the following period;
- the training needs and skills required, as well as the role of the academic librarian;
- the perspective of the academic library directors in terms of the opportunities brought about by the digital environment and which academic libraries could benefit from.

The study is based on the analysis of the answers provided by the participants.

## **Results and Discussions**

We analyzed the responses of survey participants and we will briefly showcase the outcomes in the following.

A first aspect of the study refers to the future directions of library and information science in Romania.

Regardless of their form of expression, the answers can be classified into two categories. The ones that really express the opinions of the participants on these future directions in the field in Romania, covering various aspects, from documentary resources and human resources to technologies and applications, and those which have more to do with the wishes of the participants on the future of the field in Romania. Our assessment continues.

Most directors of academic libraries who participated in the study acknowledge that the ever increasing level of digitization, transformation of libraries into electronic libraries, and the increased use of technologies constitute the main direction of academic libraries, given that such are required to adapt to the changes in society and to exhibit a greater involvement in community life, but also an interdependence with other areas. Moreover, the increasing use of electronic resources available online, as well as the diversification of documents and data storage media as well as of dissemination technologies and consequently their implementation within the library work were also mentioned. Overall, the most frequently used words were digitization and diversification.

Even if the participants insisted on the increasing use of electronic resources and the online access thereto, the responses received did not overlook the physical space of the library which should be modern, comfortable for users, with various usage possibilities, individual or group usage, unrestricted shelf access, with all the facilities and equipment needed at the beginning of the 21st century.

At a national level, it is essential to create a strategy on the status and role of libraries, a matter which was only mentioned by two participants. Such a strategy, built from a careful foresight, we think would provide a clearer vision and would draw some broad general directions that could be taken into account in the development policies of libraries and information services. Participants noted that on a national scale, incomplete and ineffective legislation fails to provide any support in the matter and this is an area that should be addressed very seriously. In the opinion of one of the directors

participating in the study, shared acquisition of electronic resources is one of the areas on which libraries should focus their attention in the future.

Users must now represent the cornerstone for libraries, their needs and expectations must be taken into account in all activities and actions of academic libraries. Increased focus on users is emphasized in our study by the participants, but the direction noticed has more to do with the availability of e-learning applications and more "reading course" content, as one respondent notes.

The responses also approached an issue regarding the improvement of storage, organization and knowledge availability processes. The staff issue is perceived as underlying the future success of libraries, namely a rigorous selection of employees done by the managers which should take into account the specific organizational culture and the necessary changes thereof. The fact that the decisions affecting the field as a whole in many institutions are taken by an administration without specialists and that the field elites are underrepresented in management and decisional positions represents a negative aspect, with long-term repercussions. Creativity, one of the most desired attributes now in all areas and all types of organizations may only occur in Romanian academic libraries after infusions of the field with "open minded and innovative people," according to the answer provided by one participant.

Another aspect of the study regarded the training needs of academic librarians in the opinion of library directors. Most responses referred to the training of librarians in the tech area, namely the absolutely necessary training in the use of new technologies. Most directors of academic libraries in Romania emphasize the need to create a system of continuing education in Romania in the field of library and information science, but also of regulations on continuous education in the info documentary professions. Courses on new aspects on public acquisition, cataloging and classification, and retrieval of information and in general courses to date with international developments and any new topics in the profession were also deemed as necessary, e.g. semantic web. Specialized higher education, knowledge of foreign languages are still mentioned by some participants, although, since 1990 specializing in library and information science was restored and is available in Romania, many library employees still lack specialized training, which justifies the mention made by some respondents. The directors consider that specialized curricula in Romania could be greatly improved if more attention was directed towards the practical skills needed for library work. Emphasis should be placed on the training of future specialists in the area of electronic information resources and of the communication process. Specialized practice is deemed as extremely important, but participants consider that this should be applied to a more diverse range of structures.

Although certain negative aspects were also indicated regarding the curriculum content, the amount of resources used and the forms of practice proposed to students, most participants stressed the giant leap brought in the activity of libraries in Romania by the existence of such higher education programs in library and information science, offered by various universities in the country through the graduates who were employed and currently work in these institutions. However, there were suggestions for a better promotion of these programs so as to attract more young people to choose a career in the field of library and information science.

Well trained specialists will be able to deal with the challenges that the field will generate during the next period. The analysis of responses provided by the participants in our study indicate that changes in the digital environment, including the development of new information technologies, modernization of technological infrastructure, as well as the virtual library and related matters, such as the exponential growth in the volume of information and access to information resources in electronic format, the digitization of traditional resources of information are considered key challenges in the near future for libraries in Romania.

The quality improvement in the relationship with users and the proper satisfaction of their information needs under the increased demands of users, as well as an increasing degree of difficulty in the selection of resources to be acquired due to an increase of supply of the editorial production are also mentioned.

Overcoming "professional stagnation" in some institutions, mentioned by one participant, is possible in his opinion through an "opening of the professional borders" and is seen as another challenge for the academic libraries in Romania.

Unfortunately, a number of negative aspects present in the Romanian society made the participants indicate important elements dependent on the "insufficient" or "extremely low" financial resources, such as for maintaining adequate quality standards of the collections, for trained and sufficient human resources, as well as for the overall operation of the library, as future challenges that Romanian academic libraries will have to overcome by finding appropriate solutions.

The range of roles which the librarian is expected to play in these conditions is much larger and exemplified and justified in a broader manner by the participants. Based on the responses received, the academic librarian fill the role of trainer, mediator, information broker, innovator, designer, web page administrator, intermediary, information and documentation specialist, resource universe orientation guide, information literacy expert, personal advisor for users, "guide in the ocean of information", teaching staff partner.

Starting from the primary mission of the academic libraries in Romania, namely to support teaching and research activities taking place in universities by providing a documentation basis and quick information for users, the academic librarian is clearly perceived as an intermediary between the universe of information resources and the user community and must mediate the access to information quickly and efficiently in the context of new digital tools of information.

The librarian must be a trainer in terms of using databases, and electronic information resources in general and the library software, but also in the sense of actually taking part in the students training process. Participants emphasize that the academic librarian should be treated as a real partner of the teaching staff in the mission of training students, which happens declaratively, but is a principle not always applied in practice.

With regards to the question on specialized education, the participants' answers were not very detailed, while the question regarding the skills currently required from academic librarians, the responses of the library directors indicate that expectations are high.

There is a unanimous opinion regarding the need for librarians to possess the skills for the use of new technologies, databases, equipment currently existing in libraries

and for the retrieval of information in digital format. In particular, a participant mentions skills related to the use of *discovery and delivery* products and *bX* (recommendation service), and e-learning applications.

Communication skills rank second if we were to compile a classification. They are absolutely essential in the relationship with users, but also for the efficient internal operation of the library, as well as for a better collaboration with colleagues and other partners in various activities of the library.

Basic specialty education, which confers the skills to provide the classical library activities and services and more, but also skills in disseminating information stored on various media, taken from various backgrounds, is also mentioned by several participants, as well as knowledge of foreign languages, preferably English or French, according to a participant response.

Managerial, planning, organization, coordination skills are also mentioned, as well as editing skills, research and pedagogical skills, given that the academic librarian is expected to have an active involvement in user training and guiding. Here one should also mention the fact that the academic librarian is expected to provide training and to transfer a certain critical attitude in the research process and in the study of documentary resources to student users. We understand its relation to a need to teach the users how to filter the information and how to use it in a creative and ethical manner.

A number of attributes necessary to the librarian and which are specific for the digital interconnected society in a continuous change were mentioned: flexibility, which would help them to adapt quickly to organizational changes, creativity, teamwork skills, collaboration skills. The following were also mentioned: the ability to synthesize, intellectual curiosity, a significant cultural experience and, not least, academic librarians are expected to be able to promote the library image within the university and throughout the educational environment.

We also wanted to find out what the perception of academic library directors was on the opportunities brought about by the digital environment in general and on the entrepreneurial opportunities which the library could take advantage of, the answers could be a good indicator on the directions of future action of these institutions in a global and increasingly competitive educational and information environment.

Unfortunately, the answers were not very consistent, which indicates that concern for this area is not very high, but also that the maneuverability of those who lead such institutions is limited by various types of constraints, either financial, administrative or institutional and maybe the fact that entrepreneurship, initiative, proactive attitude are not counted among the strengths of directors of academic libraries in Romania.

Virtual working environments, distance e-learning, the possibility of making information available in a fast and effective way, free access to scientific information, open source or shareware applications, digitization of documents and in this way of some unique rare collections, and creation of open access repositories, e.g. for gray literature, for doctoral theses or serials are the main opportunities noticed by the survey participants.

Regarding entrepreneurial opportunities, five participants responded that there were no such opportunities, three participants did not provide an answer and only three other participants had a positive response, indicating a potential laboratory for digitization, an attractive offer of information products, paid access to valuable

documents translated into digital format, the electronic transmission of scanned documents or texting notifications to users on various issues.

## Conclusions

According to the participants, the digitization of collections and diversification of information resources and media, as well as the use of various applications for the communication, access and dissemination of information represent the main future directions of library and information science.

To keep up with any news and occurrences in the field on an international level, the directors of academic libraries argue the need for the creation in Romania of a system for continuing education in the field of library and information science. But the future focus should be on IT skills, communication skills, some managerial skills, as well as on pedagogical and editing skills. A series of personal traits such as flexibility and creativity are desirable to academic librarians who are seen in the role of trainers, information literacy experts, personal advisers to users, resource universe orientation guides and, most importantly, partners of the teaching staff.

Regarding the challenges that academic libraries will face during the following period, most mentions in our study provided the digitization of collections and the upgrade of technological infrastructure. The responses of participants on the opportunities brought about by the digital environment demonstrate that academic libraries in Romania are still a little "numb", not fully prepared to face the new information "order" and still stagnating at a stage where they view their role on the information market and in the life of the academic and research community within the limits of classical traditional borders, without exhibiting a proactive attitude. At this point, Romanian librarians do not seem to fit the category of "infopreneurs".

However, Romanian academic libraries and Romanian librarians reveal an open attitude towards the changes brought about by the digital age and the responses of the participants in the study show that there is readiness to adapt to any future challenge, but also that there is a clear understanding of the role they will have to play for the academic and research community.

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