Library Science Education

New (and Old) Problems of Library Science Education and of Libraries

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Abstract

For over 20 years, the Romanian education system has had to deal with the same problems: underfunding, lack of motivation, bureaucracy, the instability of the legal system, a decline in the youth's interest in higher education. Libraries also face the same problems. In addition to this, there are other issues, as well, such as the lack of professional managers, poor knowledge of management and marketing methods and techniques, failure to comply with the principles of efficient work organization, lack of work norms and of certain methodologies to be used in recruiting, selecting, promoting and evaluating staff performance and so on.

Keywords: library science education, libraries, management of libraries, librarianship, Romania

We are currently facing a paradoxical situation, in spite of the information boom we have been experiencing for many years now; we are less informed, uninformed or misinformed. Overwhelmed by this ocean of information, we are permanently besieged by data and information, but most

consists of news or commercials which try to manipulate us, which irritate us, bore us, which are vulgar or violent. Thanks to technology information is, indeed, fast and easily accessible, though superficial.

The internet does not solve the problem of information; it is a wonderful instrument for communication, for keeping up date with every day events, for finding out the weather forecast and the currency exchange rate, but not for scientific information, this kind of information being available in libraries and in books, in course books, in treaties and encyclopaedias, not in *Wikipedia* We shall find this information in the libraries, as they are expensive commercial products and the publishers cannot afford to offer them for free, online. On the other hand, the Internet is the 'ideal' tool for intellectual theft.

We must clearly state, from the beginning, that we cannot talk about an efficient education system in a poor country. The best education systems can be found in developed countries, with high living standards, such as the USA, and the countries in Northern Europe. Many try to find all sorts of causes and arguments in order to explain the current crisis, but the truth is that only a rich country can have a successful education system. The relation between economy, education and culture is very clear.

Specialists state that the best education system in the world is in Finland. There, education is 100% funded by the government, including postgraduate studies. It is true that in the last years the taxes have risen very much. A young teacher earns a salary of Eur 1900, while in Romania, the same teacher earns Eur 200. In the 1980's, the Finnish education system was going through a crisis but, by raising taxes, the government managed to assign more than 6% of the country's GDP to education. (1) For us, 6% is a dream, as at present we can only afford to give 3% of the GDP. But here lies the proof that others have succeed, with the help of good funding and by implementing successful strategies. Unfortunately, in Romania, every new government brings about a different education strategy, only for it to be abandoned and replaced once another government takes over. This is not the way to evolve, instead leaving us in a permanent state of transition and a perpetual crisis.

In a top of the best universities in the word, the most important Romanian institutions (Bucharest, Iași, Cluj și Timișoara) rank somewhere between the 700th and 800th place , while the first 9, 10 positions are held by American universities. (2)

However, the evaluation criteria are subjective and the financial component is obvious.

- Academic research has become a highly costly activity, the best universities being also those with the most funding, having the highest number of Nobel Prize winners. Disseminating the results of such research in magazines cited in ISI is not a guarantee for their value. Magazines addressing humanist studies, or mathematics do not have high number of articles, thus, not being cited very often. As a consequence, faculties and professors in such fields find themselves in disadvantage.
- The quality of teaching is also influenced by the degree of motivation and technology.
- Integrating graduates on the labour market. Implementing strategies for creating new jobs is one of the tasks of the government. At present, there are no jobs available jobs in the field of education and culture (the government having blocked all access to such jobs).
- Internationalization (attending international conferences, congresses, seminars, student or professor exchange programs). Many Romanian university professors cannot even afford to pay the participation fees for these conferences or transport fares.
  The problems of the Romanian high education system are general:
- Underfunding. The 3% of GDP is insufficient and represents half of the 6% stipulated by law;
- Lack of motivation. While we are striving to reach the performance level of Western universities, the salaries of Romanian professors are 6 or 7 times lower. It is true, there are people with a calling, devoted to their profession, who work with great pleasure, but they, too, deserve to be financially motivated, in order to satisfy their basic needs;
- Bureaucracy;
- The instability of the legal system;
- A decrease of interest among the young generation for higher education. Unfortunately, lack of competition leads to lack of performance.

The young seem to no longer have dreams, ideals, desires, projects, perspectives, they do not have role models, they are disoriented, jaded, disgusted and leave their country, rightly so, as the country does not have much to offer them. On the other hand, Romania is a tired, battered country, a country taken out of history, as a great historian said.

In what library science and education in the field are concerned, we are far behind developed countries: there are 48 schools of library science in the USA, whilst in Romania there is not even one department, only a team within the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest, and a few courses taught within other departments throughout the country.

This profession is highly regarded in developed countries especially in the USA and in Northern countries, but unfortunately, there are almost no such schools in Romania, or if there are, they are marginalized, and building libraries is not a priority. While other countries build new libraries, such as the Library of Birmingham, in the UK, recently opened, and considered the biggest library in Europe, or China (where more than 3000 public libraries have opened in the past years), more and more libraries are closing down, in Romania.

It is difficult to say why being a librarian is not an attractive job, perhaps we have not succeeded in changing the image of this profession, or the status of the librarian, perhaps it is the low salaries. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the library has changed a great deal lately, and that it no longer means traditional books, but also virtual documents, databases and Internet; it no longer has a mere custodial function but, most of all, it provides information, having at the same time an education, research and aesthetic function.

Once again, it is a paradox that while information has become a fundamental resource for all types of structures, the very institutions which provide such information are at risk. Nowadays, information is a commodity, a special type of merchandize, a very expensive one, but with many economic problems:
- Participation. Users are directly involved in creating information;
- Time. Information is volatile, ephemeral, its value decreases in time;
- Space. The notion of space is erased;
- Virtuality or intangibility. Information is no longer recorded on hardcopy, it is now abstract in form;
- Heterogeneity. The quantity of information increases and diversifies;
- Lack of property. People use more and more information, but without necessarily owning such information.

In fact, this is the only commodity whose quantity increases through consumption, this being yet another paradox of information: its multiplication out of nothing.

All these characteristics make information difficult to sell, sometimes being an expensive product. There is no tradition in paying for information. This is the reason which has led to the phenomenon of piracy with millions of people illegally trafficking movies, music or computer software. In less developed countries, including Romania, this is a rather worrying phenomenon.

The fact that people do not read anymore has become cliché; however, this might be a fake problem, perhaps it would be better to say that people read less, although the offer of libraries and publishing houses is higher by the day.

A recent study has shown that Romania ranks among the last in a top of the number of books read by the population. Over half of adults have not read a single book in the last year. In developed countries, 80-90% of adults read at least a book a year, while 20 -30% read at least a book a month. (3)

Youngsters do not read much either, as they have other hobbies, they have alternatives; there are so many temptations and distractions such as, for some, computer games. This has become a serious problem because it has led to computer addiction, with serious consequences on heath, especially on the eyes, muscles and bone structure. In turn, technology has led to behavioural changes, young people being more and more isolated, lonely, withdrawn, only communicating via e-mail, socialising on Facebook. They no longer go out, do physical exercise, or practice sports.

 According to some analysts, we are witnessing the demise of the library. Computers, the Internet, economic crises, cost cutting and closing down libraries have brought forth discussions about the end of the library as a social institution. Nonetheless, there are more and more libraries being built around the world. ALA (The American Library Association) has recently published a book entitled *Planning Our Future Libraries: Blueprints for 2025*, a forecast which ensures that at least for the next decade libraries will still be here. (4)

Lately, social phenomena, such as school drop-out, illiteracy, decreasing interest for reading, poor general knowledge, have reached worrying levels. What will happen if libraries disappear?

The problems of Romanian libraries are the problems of the entire society. It would be naïve to believe that we will have high level education, culture or successful libraries without a healthy economy.

Unfortunately, in the last 20 years, almost all indexes pertaining to libraries have decreased: the number of libraries, the number of readers, the number of books borrowed, the only increase being in number of books

purchased, which is a rather natural trend, taking into account the large offer at hand.

For over 20 years, libraries have been dealing with the same problems:
- Insufficient funding;
- Low salaries for the staff;
- Frequent change in the legislation;
- Drop of interest for reading, especially amount young people.

In addition to this, there are other issues, as well, such as the lack of professional managers, poor knowledge of management and marketing methods and techniques, failure to comply with the principles of efficient work organization, lack of work norms and of certain methodologies to be used in recruiting, selecting, promoting and evaluating staff performance and so on.

There are problems related to all the work processes taking place in a library.

The main problem of extending library collections is the lack of financial resources needed to purchase books, databases, e-books or magazine subscriptions.

Unfortunately the budgets necessary for this process have not kept up with the information boom, nor with the offer from the publishing houses; quite the opposite, they have been reduced year in, year out. Small school libraries or county libraries are in a dramatic situation, being years since they received any new books.

Still, there are solutions to this: using other ways to extend collection – donations, sponsorships, negotiating with publishing houses in order to receive discounts, a better selection of documents or paying certain services; all must be done with great care, as we cannot lose our readers.

The current situation is, in part, the result of the fact that one of the most important functions of the manager, planning, is neglected, leading to a certain lack of perspective and a state of chaos in library activities. Libraries have no vision, have no plans for the future, no projects, programs or strategies.

The ever changing conditions of the contemporary world, the huge increase in quantity and diversity of research materials, the spike in prices, the introduction of new technologies, the modifications of research structure and organizational structure of institutions, as well as limited financial resources make planning a vital and actual requirement. Planning needs to be at the core of any management activity.

Despite all this, planning continues to be neglected in libraries, just as in many other organizations. There are several reasons why this happens. Somehow, there is this idea that planning is a process useful only for economic structures, not for cultural ones. Most library managers avoid making adequate planning, arguing that it is a difficult, time-consuming process. Others simply do not know how to do it.

Statements such as 'in this time of perpetual transformation, planning is a hasty action' or 'we do not have time for planning because we are too busy doing our jobs' are uttered quite often in the world of library managers.

In most cases, managers rely on intuition when making decisions. Unfortunately, experience, intuition, presence of mind, intellectual qualities are no long enough, the world is too complex, and results are influenced by to many variables.

There are problems in the area of motivation. Library staff have the lowest salaries in the culture and education field. This leads to lack of motivation, stress, fatigue and the permanent preoccupation with finding a better paid job.

Another big problem is the fact that jobs are no jobs available, even the biggest libraries conducting their activity with only a quarter or a third of the staff they would normally need. The National Library of Romania is the most important example. The situation for small libraries is even worse. There are part-time jobs, or school libraries without librarians.

Except for big libraries, which have implemented integrated systems used to organise all their activities, for most libraries such a system is a mere dream, as this kind of equipment and software are more and more expensive. Libraries in developed countries are currently focusing on diversifying and automating services. Their main goals include:
- Open access to publications;
- E-documents;
- E-learning platforms;
- Repositories

In what these issues are concerned, we are far behind developed countries, and even less developed ones. One look in OpenDOAR, a register of repositories, shows that there are 170 repositories in Germany, 10 in Kenya, and only one in Romania. (5)

E-books present a lot of problems, especially regarding licenses and borrowing.

Although the advantages of e-books are obvious:
- Reduced storage space – practically there is no physical space required
- Diversity of reading tools;
- Portability;
- High storage capacity, one device can store thousands of e-books;
- Adaptability and functionality – searching capacity is complex (words, expressions, topics), and adding content can be done very fast;
- Added value through multimedia information.
  There are also disadvantages:
- Reading on screen tires the eyes;
- Short life of batteries and dependency on chargers;
- Security and copyright issues
- Licence issues and the problem of 'borrowing' such books
- High cost of e-book readers

We need to return to books, to reading, to culture, to art, to spirituality, otherwise we will become, if we haven't already, a colony of the developed countries of the West. We may not catch up with them economically, but culturally it is possible.

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