

Higher Education and the Academic Library: Perspectives for Slovakia

The link between education and libraries is well defined and logically rooted in the fact that both educational institutions and libraries work with knowledge. The former spread knowledge, values, and beliefs through a system of schools, whereas the latter provide individuals with access to information resources in publicly accessible archives of knowledge. Today in Europe and Slovakia—as elsewhere in the world—both are undergoing transformative change.

Higher Education

European integration and the global opening up of individual, national systems of higher education not only are allowing but also are requiring Slovak students to spend at least part of their university studies abroad. At the same time, the cooperation of academic institutions in the creation and provision of study programs is intended to bring about a synergetic effect to help improve studies at all European universities.

In line with these recent trends of internationalization, Slovak universities are integrating into the ongoing European Bologna process, which is defined by the following action lines:

- The adoption of a *common framework of readable and comparable degrees*
- The introduction of *undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries*
- *ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) compatible credit systems* also covering lifelong learning activities
- *A European dimension in quality assurance*, with comparable criteria and methods
- The *elimination of obstacles to the free mobility* of students and teachers

These principles were later updated and amended with the issues of *lifelong learning*, *support of attractiveness of EHEA* (European Higher Education Area), and *education on the 3rd level (Ph.D.)*, based on the thesis of synergy between the would-be EHEA and the ERA (European Research Area).

Probably the most prominent (or visible) feature of all of these is the introduction of a credit system. But current discussions are also very frequently about the internationalization of education based on the principles of creating joint degrees and joint diplomas, in which several European universities join their forces to prepare and teach a study program that will bring new quality into the European higher education landscape.

As noted, the Bologna process is on its way forward in Slovakia, although its application is not without problems. Previously, Slovakia had a system of compact, five-year, “magister” studies. Today, the passage toward bachelor’s and master’s levels is generally perceived as bringing twice as much work (e.g., double entrance procedures, theses, final exams) for a decreasing number of university teachers—all without any real sense of increasing the quality of the “output.”

Another aspect of “Europeanization” in the Slovak system of higher education is the Ministry of Education’s attempt to increase the number of young people with university qualifications. Some ten to fifteen years ago, this policy led to a wave of new universities being established throughout the country in an attempt to bring higher education closer to the wider population. The result today is more than twenty public universities in Slovakia, a country with a population of 5 million.

Since 2000, the financing of universities has been based on the performance factor, which is principally centered on the number of students. To survive and to get their share of the higher education budget, most universities started to enroll enormous numbers of students. All and all, most university faculty think that this policy leads to a lowering of the overall knowledge level of students. In addition, this predominantly quantitative approach to financing higher education institutions risks causing a decrease in the quality of academic research.

Meanwhile, the process of “complex accreditation” is moving forward. In this process, all higher education institutions in Slovakia will be judged and sorted into two categories: universities and “non-universities.” The first group comprises those institutions that are more scholarly and research-oriented in their nature and that specialize in providing graduate and postgraduate levels of education; the second group concentrates less on research and more on undergraduate studies. In this context, however, the principles of performance, especially in its quantitative expression, play a tricky role. The same ministry that several years ago pushed forward the number of students as one of the principal factors of financing now declares that having too many students is not useful for the scientific and scholarly level of the institution and that those establishments that are over a certain ratio of students to teachers cannot be considered to be serious research universities.

The Academic Library

The academic library is also changing. In recent years, numerous research activi-

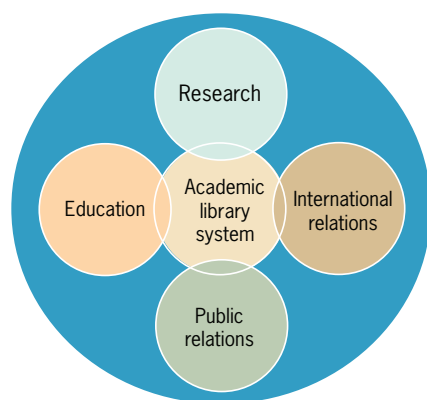
ties have focused on finding qualitative and quantitative measures of the use of information services at academic libraries. Research carried out by the Research Information Network and the Consortium of Research Libraries in April 2007, for example, revealed a decrease in the number of researchers regularly visiting their institution's library. Also, as users of digital information, researchers placed a high value on electronic journals but a much lower value on other kinds of digital resources.¹

In 2008, Comenius University, in Bratislava, conducted a survey of students of the Faculty of Philosophy concerning usage of electronic resources. The academic library offers online access to electronic journals and books via several internationally known providers and services such as ISI Web of Knowledge, Scopus, ebrary Academic Complete, Blackwell, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest 5000 International. Though this was simply a pilot study with sixty respondents (approximately 2 percent of the students), the results showed that most of the students considered themselves to be experts in using the Internet and speaking foreign languages (with English representing around 90 percent). Yet only around 10 percent of them accessed electronic resources via the library site, and only 56 percent of the students knew about this service. Most of the students thought that the service was not sufficiently promoted, although the library makes regular presentations to newly admitted students and offers special one-off courses to individual departments at the beginning of each academic year.

Key questions arise about the future of the academic library in Slovakia: Are members of the academic community content with what they obtain from the library? Are there any new possible crossroads of interest for the academic library and the higher education institution?

Currently, two visionary paths seem to have high priority in the development of the academic library. One of the promising new directions being not only examined but put into practice is the involvement of the academic library in the trend of *institutional publishing*, creating open-access electronic repositories of the intellectual output of university teach-

Information System of Academic Activities



Source: Adapted from Rešetová, "Model informačného manažmentu akademickej knižnice."

ers and researchers. This trend involves both institutional self-publishing and self-display (promotion) at the same time. Academic libraries quite naturally are the units that frequently take the responsibility for conceiving, building, and maintaining these repositories.

The second promising direction may be more profound: an attempt to change the perspective of the *place of the library in the structure of the university*. Traditionally in Slovakia, a university has several scholarly units—called "departments" or "institutes"—that are devoted to various academic disciplines. Then there are three or four organizational administrative units—for example, the department of study affairs, the department of research, the department of international affairs, and the department of personal/economic agenda—that take care of the university's functions. Each of these usually has its own information system, which is more or less computerized and more or less interconnected with the other systems. The level of cooperation among these scholarly and administrative units and the academic library could and should be higher. In fact, the internationalization of higher education in Slovakia and the new requirements regarding the quality and amount of data that the top hierarchies of higher education management need to produce are commanding a totally new scale of integration—one that could lead, for example, to a direct connection between the library catalogue

and descriptions of individual courses or preparation of accreditation materials.

A model of such aggregation can be based on the principles of integrated knowledge management in the environment of the higher education institution.² In this model, a central academic library is surrounded by the three or four administrative units and collects, integrates, and processes information for the purposes of institutional management. This solution might seem ambitious, but considering the experience of the information professionals in the library and the absence of other units able to take over the role of managing a complex system of academic information, this approach could be justifiable. A key question is whether academic libraries and institutions can find, and appropriately pay, staff who are educated and devoted enough to carry out this quite demanding agenda.

Conclusion

Changes in higher education in Slovakia are intersecting with the changing role of the academic library in providing digital solutions and electronic services. One proposed approach is a new model of closer integration of the academic library into the system of higher education management. Indeed, in the current era of tight financial budgets and cuts in public spending, more closely aligning the academic library with the rest of the institutional units could help to create a more efficient management structure, one able to provide university and faculty leaders with accurate and real-time information to support not only their short-term needs but also their strategic decisions for the future.

Notes

1. "Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries and Their Services: A Report Commissioned by the Research Information Network and the Consortium of Research Libraries," April 2007, <<http://www.rin.ac.uk/files/libraries-report-2007.pdf>>.
2. Kvetoslava Rešetová, "Model informačného manažmentu akademickej knižnice" [Model of academic library information management] (doctoral thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University, Bratislava, 2007).

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