

DEVELOPING NEW MASTERS PROGRAM ON LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE
FOR THE LIS FACULTIES OF ARMENIA, GEORGIA AND UZBEKISTAN:
'European Union – Eastern Neighbouring Area – Central Asia' cooperation triangle in action

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Abstract: Starting from January 2009 six organizations from Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan in partnership with the European Union universities are participating in a three year multi-national joint European project "Developing New Masters Programme in Library and Information Science", funded and managed by the European Union "Tempus-Tacis" programme. LIS education in these three republics needs root-and-branch modernization, as the existing curricula are in their form, content and teaching approaches still based on the 1960s practices. The lectures are heavily overloaded with the Soviet library management traditions, which are already outdated. The curricula to be developed will be based on accepted best practice in European partner Universities' LIS faculties, and it is anticipated that the subjects will meet the requirements of the Bologna and related agreements. Lifelong learning component and advanced skills courses will also be introduced. In the European Union, many library schools also teach archival studies. The discipline is increasingly sharing modules with library and information science in the electronic age so this has also been included in the project. Implementation of the new curricula will directly affect assist in building 'Knowledge Societies' in these three former Soviet republics.

1. Background

After a difficult period in the 1990's (the collapse of Soviet Union, economic and social problems, due to transition to a market economy), Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan faced the challenges posed by independence. During the past 15 years many improvements have happened in the educational systems of these countries. The majority of universities face the problem of reforming the scientific, educational and management systems, to harmonize them with the Bologna Process, to adopt existing curricula to the

challenges posed by the "Knowledge Society", to undertake fundamental modernization of the libraries and archives, as key elements in learning and teaching. UNESCO's Member States, at the 34th session of the General Conference in 2007, adopted five overarching objectives for the Medium-Term Strategy 2008-2013. By including the objective of "Attaining quality education for all and lifelong learning" (Overarching Objective 1), UNESCO clearly recognized that "Education for all is at the heart of sustainable human development and is a key means to achieve the Millennium Development Goals" /1/. To be successful in the realization of this objective it is necessary to provide access to information networks, libraries, archives and community information centers, where the world's information and knowledge resources are preserved. Beside mere physical access, however, end-users need to acquire new skills, including digital literacy, media literacy and information literacy, to be able to derive the benefits from access to information and knowledge for sustainable development.

2. The project

Having in mind fulfillment of the mission "to help Governments to develop and implement national information policies and knowledge strategies in a world increasingly driven by digital technologies" and planning to assist education systems in the republics in fostering information literate societies, the International Scientific Education Centre, the Fundamental Scientific Library of the National Academy of Sciences

(Armenia), Ilia Chavchavadze State University, the Georgian Library Association (Georgia), Tashkent University of Information Technology, Tashkent Institute of Culture (Uzbekistan) are participating in a joint endeavour to become leaders in their countries in the creation, development and provision of higher education degrees in the subjects of Librarianship, Information Science and Archival Studies through the adoption of an appropriate European education model. To assist these organizations in this ambitious attempt, a multi-national consortium including the six above mentioned institutions from Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan and 5 European Union universities: Middlesex University (London), the Robert Gordon University (Aberdeen), the University of Parma (Italy), the University of Barcelona (Spain) and the Rezekne Higher Education Institution (Latvia) was established. The consortium has been awarded a 3 year grant 145021-TEMPUS-2008-UK-JPCR from the EU "Tempus-Tacis" program /3/. The disciplines to be developed will be based on accepted best practice in partner European Universities Library and Information Science (LIS) faculties, and it is anticipated that the curricula will meet the requirements of the Bologna and related agreements, and will also be in line with the requirements of the local ministries of education.

3. LIS teaching today

Raising economic relevance of study programmes, matching their scope and content with current demand and the needs of the global labour market and knowledge based economy, and employability of the University graduates is becoming a critical issue for Armenian, Georgian and Uzbekistan higher education institutions. The outcome of educational reforms greatly depends on the curricula being taught in the Universities, which is still precarious for "Library and Information Science" studies in the three republics. This subject in its form, content and teaching approach is still embedded in the prac-

tices of the 1960's. This subject is not in high demand amongst secondary school graduates of these countries, and those who do undertake the course are not satisfied with the level of teaching and the knowledge obtained. Most of the graduates are potential candidates to become 'intellectually jobless' specialists. The level of awareness in European languages amongst the students is very limited. During job interviews library administrators are giving preference to the graduates of the faculties of philology, history, sociology, on the grounds that they are much more advanced in their intellectual development. To illustrate the current situation in Armenian libraries here is some statistical data. The total number of librarians working in public libraries is 2104. Of this only 11.5% are the University graduates with a relevant university degree and only 35.5% have a professional college diploma. In all public libraries from the rural areas only 79 staff members are having higher education, and only 48 of these have relevant university degree; 828 are college graduates from which 349 are having professional college education.

As a result library and information work in these three countries is making no significant progress. Another important problem which is facing the library community in these countries is the absence of any lifelong learning programmes and advanced skills courses for the librarians who require thorough professional retraining. It is important to introduce new institutional structures for lifelong learners in LIS, based totally on the models in EU Universities.

According to the observations of the authors, there are several considerable problems in teaching library, information and archives courses that are common to the three countries:

- a. after the collapse of the Soviet Union, faced with economic problems and the transition to a market economy, librarianship was not a priority of the governments;
- b. courses are based on Soviet library science practices and programmes for LIS and are

focused on techniques and technical processes, undervaluing the need for the wider knowledge of social processes, science, technology, required to enable library, archive and information services to respond to contemporary demands;

c. courses have not yet fully incorporated the new areas of the disciplines that are common in Western countries;

d. there is a shortage of modern LIS and archive teaching materials (electronic resources, sample PC applications);

e. pedagogical skills of the LIS and archive teachers and trainers tend to be didactic;

f. familiarity with quality standards is low;

g. these factors contribute to low levels of interest in potential students;

h. competence of students in the English language is not high, even though English is the dominant language in the discipline globally;

i. there is a shortage of relevant materials in the national languages;

j. no programs offer lifelong learning or support career advancement for the existing large LIS workforce.

4. The task of the project

It is obvious that introduction of the new curricula covering Library, Information and Archives Studies totally oriented to the Western experience is the only solution to make this profession prestigious and to attract talented and motivated students. This project intends to help to meet the above stated rationale through a variety of approaches and effective change management processes and these includes:

1. Providing training and development needs analyses in order to ensure an adequate human capacity development for LIS education and training.

2. Development of innovative pedagogy and a diverse range of instructional materials and facilitation methods to suit a variety of learning contexts and learning development needs.

3. Creation of human capacity and enhancement of skills sets to support the growing educa-

tional needs of the partner countries' universities in terms of curriculum development, the adoption and engagement with innovative teaching and facilitation methods and the production of relevant teaching and learning resources, improving and maintaining standards of education and training, the development of academic staff in aspects of the pedagogy of teaching, learning and assessments methods and practices, and to gain an accredited higher education teacher status via the Postgraduate Certificate Higher Education and Learning course.

4. Establishment of the relevant ICT clusters in the 3 university faculties for organizing effective teaching and learning.

5. Introduction of a quality assurance and enhancement system to help ensure maintenance and improvement of the quality and standards of provision commensurate with current practices in the European Union.

There is clearly a need to fill the knowledge gap of the students and teachers of the LIS faculties in these three republics, which can be achieved by solving the problem of "the 3C's". Thus the international team will work together in order to develop activities in 3 directions:

CONNECTIVITY. One of the project outcomes is to revive and modernize the LIS faculty networks at the universities, bringing them up to internationally recognized standards. The development and use of communication and information technologies, notably the Internet, have stimulated huge changes in the organization of the daily study work in Universities all over the world. Lifelong learning models have also undergone tremendous changes. The presence of a stable, fast and reliable network infrastructure is extremely important. It is expected that the European consortium members will help in preparing the detailed analysis of needs, making decisions about purchasing of necessary hardware, software and means of telecommunication. Contribution from the EU partners to develop adequate computational and telecommunication

capacities will assist on solving the problem of the ‘Competency’ in the 3 universities.

COMPETENCY. Reforms in higher education cannot be successful if academic staff are not able to rise to the challenges posed by the labour market. The presence of an infrastructure to facilitate the necessary knowledge flow and human capacity development in the universities is becoming urgent. University LIS faculty staff and students need professional retraining. Academics must become familiar with modern distance learning systems, and be able to use them in their everyday teaching. Knowledge of university staff, students, and librarians in English language must be improved by facilitating proficiency in the use of English through the International English Language Testing Services’ (IELTS) standard. This will ensure that the curricula that will be developed can be delivered in practice. Solving the ‘Competency’ problem is a major task, since there is currently not a readily available supply of academics or practitioners with the appropriate range of knowledge, skills sets and competencies in Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan to deliver suitable LIS programs. This factor relates both to knowledge of universal theory and practice in LIS subjects, and the ability to encourage learning using European-based approaches such as case-based learning, interactive lectures and self-guided learning. Preparation of competent teachers will be achieved by a series of training and development programs, study visits and experience exchange, including 15 academic staff undergoing a Master’s degree at EU partner universities. Additionally there will be implemented quality and management systems to ensure that the project and its outcomes are fully met. The presence of specialists **competent** in modern trends in librarianship, archival work, information science and education will have a cascading effect for the solving of the next problem, the “Content” component.

CONTENT. As a consequence of the rapid growth in digital technologies, there has been a

corresponding explosion in digital information. Although today’s “Knowledge Society” challenges students, educators, lifelong learners, librarians and archivists with overabundant information, often with dubious quality, higher education has recognized that the solution cannot be limited to improving only technology instruction. Instead, there is an increasingly urgent need to produce high quality information resources. Organization of the modern educational process requires the presence of high quality electronic course materials, availability of various databases from leading international producers of the scientific content, supporting the development of open courseware as well as free and open source software for extending and disseminating knowledge in different educational settings, and production of online courses in the local languages. Through its new electronic services, which will be implemented with the help of European partners, participant universities will be able to choose the best electronic databases and journals for use. As experienced experts for online distance learning, the help of the EU partners in planning and implementing distance education courses and lifelong learning models in LIS faculties will be extremely important. The new LIS curricula will allow the graduates to have stronger information literacy skills – to be able to recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.

5. The objectives summarised

As a conclusion we can state that the main outcomes of this project will be:

- the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate portfolio of LIS curricula;
- developing, recruiting and training academic and managerial staff of the participating Universities;
- ensuring effective long-term development and delivery of new and innovative lifelong learning programs;

- setting up well equipped ICT centers in the faculties including improved access to a wider range of learning materials; and

- introducing quality assurance measures which will ensure sustainable development of the library and archival work in the three countries

The activities presented in this article and project further developments can be tracked via the web site at <http://www.flib.sci.am/Tempus>. As far as Armenia is concerned, the authors firmly believe that “the next few years will be a busy time for the Armenian library community, a period in which libraries with the help of digital technologies must become active contributors to the management of change in Armenian society, must approve the new image of a ‘digitally competent’ librarian and attract young and motivated persons to join the library community of Armenia. This will help to keep librarianship in the mainstream of progress, and the challenges of the ‘Knowledge Society’ will not sweep out Armenian librarians from developments in the future” /6/. The authors are also confident, that this project will lead to an increased number of new programmes being offered within the respective LIS faculties in the partner countries. The benefits of this project will enhance the knowledge base of the library and archival workers in Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan. And lastly, the successful realization of this multi-country project will allow staff at all universities to develop high standards of teaching, learning and assessment skills; to produce LIS related curriculum; and to introduce quality assurance practices that will lead towards building knowledge societies in the partner countries.

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