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Volume 43 Issues 1-8

ISSN 0024-2535
© 1994 MCB University Press Limited

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Bradford
West Yorkshire
England BD8 9BY
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Printed by Nuffield Press Ltd, Hollow Way,
Cowley, Oxford OX4 2PH

LIBRARY REVIEW

ISSN 0024-2535

Volume 43
Number 8
1994

CONTENTS

Editor
Stuart James

Abstracts and Keywords 2

Editorial 3

Correspondence 7

Why Library History?
K.C. Harrison 9

Issues of Religious Censorship
Stuart Hannabuss and Mary Allard 14

Problems in the Management and Operation
of Academic Libraries in Poland during the
Transition Period
Artur Jazdon and Tomasz Olszewski 31

Self-development of Public Libraries in China:
The Current Situation and some Problems
Jingli Chu 40

Collection Development as Performance
Measurement
Gundu Shibanda 44

Reviews
Professional Reading 49

Index to Volume 43 65

- Pulling, P. and Cawthon, K., *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?*, Word (UK), Milton Keynes, 1990.
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Problems in the Management and Operation of Academic Libraries in Poland during the Transition Period

Artur Jazdon and Tomasz Olszewski
Poznan University Library, Poland

Problems in
Management and
Operation

31

This article attempts to provide an overview of the current situation in the transition period of the main Polish academic libraries and the problems they struggle with in their everyday routine work. It also tries to identify more clearly the priority areas for improvement. When we say main academic libraries we mean those collecting about 70 per cent of the scientific output gathered in Poland. The overview has been worked out with background information drawn up from common and characteristic examples to be found at the University Library in Poznan, which is the parent institution for both of the authors, although the examples provided in the article will include those from other libraries as well. It needs no explanation here that the present situation in Poznan University Library is in very many instances similar or even identical to that of other libraries in Poland. But we would like to stress that the problems outlined here are to show the hard work the library has to concentrate on and which, in fact, we do, and not to show that we are baffled and perplexed by them.

Developments in University Teaching

The characteristic feature of the Polish educational system in the 1990s is a large increase in the number of students involved. If, in 1990, there were 77,000 students, three years later, in 1993 the number was more than doubled and reached 177,000. New universities have appeared and existing ones have opened new faculties or colleges and have also developed new specializations in their educational systems. The number of university staff has also considerably increased. All this, unfortunately, has not been followed by a matching development of academic libraries, especially in terms of book storage developments and the number of seats in reading rooms, nor in the professional development of staff members of libraries and the increase in budget allowances provided for those libraries (especially for book acquisition).

With that in mind we can see that as far as Poznan University Library is concerned, the number of students has almost doubled while the number of

This article is based on a paper presented at the European Library Forum in Prague on 12 May 1994.

Library Review, Vol. 43 No. 8,
1994, pp. 31-39. © MCB University
Press, 0024-2535

library staff workers has been at the same time reduced. In 1991, there were 173 staff members and 12,000 students; in 1994, 138 people have to deal with 22,000 students. Similarly, acquisitions expenditures were in 1991 about \$460,000, and in 1993 only \$342,000.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structures of academic libraries in Poland were introduced in the early 1960s and were created according to Soviet librarianship standards. Since then, regardless of the conditions of their functioning, they have not been altered, being modified at the most, which meant appointment of groups for special assignments or the addition of new posts in specific areas of need. This resulted in a superfluity (overgrowth) of organizational structures. In the case of Poznan University Library, the organizational structure of this type was ironically dubbed a "Baroque structure". In 1991, out of the 173 staff members, there were 46 senior posts of different supervisors controlling various departments, sections, study-rooms, and so on. This dispersion of library tasks was a considerable setback in proper management, dissemination of scientific information and performance of special tasks; and it finally caused the dispersion of professional competence and authority and hampered the monitoring of task performance.

Even many years ago it became quite clear that a major change in library structure, namely to one of a smaller number of divisions and sections but larger in terms of staffing and more flexible in fulfilling library tasks, was highly desirable. The first step in this direction in Poland was made at the University of Poznan Library which reduced the number of its divisions to eight. Additionally, two of these are likely to merge with the rest once the library has been automated. Today, in terms of changes in library reorganizations, Torun University Library has gone even further, retaining only six main divisions of the library.

It is our opinion that this kind of change in other Polish libraries is imminent, not only because of its organizational merits but also because of its financial advantages. One of the main questions arising here, on the eve of dynamic developments in library automation, is a serious dilemma we are confronted with – should one reorganize a library before the introduction of automation or is it better to wait and see how the computerization of the library will force organizational changes of its own?

The other important task is to connect the main library with its departmental libraries to make, as far as resources permit, the library's direct contribution to their work more valuable. Because of the tendency of giving the faculties of the University the independence they claim (including financial) we witness the more and more distinct separation of sectional and departmental libraries from the main library, which become subdued by relevant faculties, institutes or chairs. This is unfortunately followed by the process of hampering sensible stock acquisition, strengthening staff establishment or maintaining a

uniform policy in wage scales. As a result, we have a too elaborate and erratic development of branch libraries with every institute or chair.

Finances

The main problems of academic libraries in Poland (not unlike many others) derive not only from the inadequacy of library budgets but also from the faulty system of library funding. The major obstacle here is that the budget is announced in March-April of the budgetary year. It is also then that we learn about the actual size of the budget and the size of all the remaining sources of the library funding.

Low and inadequate budgets do not allow staff development, although obviously there are certain reserves that can be brought up through increase in working capacity, improvement of performance, changes in staff structure and in redeployment of existing posts. There are no financial possibilities, however, to raise wages within the same staff levels and create a situation in which the introduction of performance-related bonuses promoting greater effectiveness, job satisfaction and higher morale among library staff, would be possible. The inadequacies of library acquisition budgets are especially visible, just as they are in the modernization of library processes and library accommodation.

What really impedes sensible resource deployment is the fact that, as a rule, the library has to operate with a very modest interim budget for the first half of a year and only in the months that follow, when money comes, are we able to balance it.

Another factor hampering a sensible financial policy is the fact that, separate from budget grants, libraries receive special (centrally-planned) grants for periodicals subscriptions, CD-ROM databases and computer software purchases and even for special tasks. These additional grants are sure to come every year but their amount and timing is highly unpredictable. Another source of financial support is the parent institution where libraries can turn to seek help in finding funds for their statutory activity or their own research activities. Beneficial as they are, they still, however, make any planned financial policy virtually impossible.

On the other hand, however, there are certain facilities that help libraries to improve their financial situation in their own way. External income comes either from selling information and providing various services or from rental contracts. We also obtain income from fines for overdue books but, still, all this is only a small fraction (not exceeding 3 per cent) of the whole budget. Lack of experience and, above all, present legal regulations are the major obstacle here.

Staffing

For many years there were no problems in staffing policy in academic libraries: a well-reasoned application to the University authorities for a new post for every new 10,000 volumes in a library's holdings was usually accepted. This has radically changed in the past three years when many universities and their libraries have made a large number of their staff redundant (usually 20 per cent

but also up to 30 per cent). The figure for Poznan University Library was 26 per cent: almost one third of the staff has been made redundant. Meanwhile, new tasks are put before libraries – automation, free access to books, new reading rooms, etc. All this has caused a new situation for Polish libraries, in which lack of professional staff for new assignments is particularly painful.

Until quite recently the selection of library staff was based on negative selection – jobs were given only to those who had not been able to get work anywhere else. They usually left the library and librarianship once they had found more interesting or better paid jobs. Staff fluctuation reached about 25 per cent, there was no stabilizing of staff, or any real attachment to the job, no real willingness for professional development, and library management always had vacant posts to offer.

This situation has partly changed since the introduction to our post-communist society of the notion, and actual occurrence, of unemployment. Now we face the problem of staff shortages. Staff fluctuation has decreased to 8 per cent but at the same time present staff members have clung to the library and are reluctant to go. As a result, one cannot replace them with those who really want to enter the profession and make it their career, or with people better prepared for the job (with knowledge of foreign languages, computer handling, etc). To tell the truth, however, it is very hard to attract them while the average monthly wage packet at the University of Poznan Library for 1993 was 2.8 million zł (\$135), whereas the average national monthly payment was about \$250. This situation and also the lack of sufficient and appropriate equipment at the librarian's disposal in many libraries; a lack of wide international contacts; no performance-related bonuses; no chance for internal promotion (or to better institutions) for financial improvement; and, last but not least, the very low prestige of the profession and the institution itself, not only in the eyes of the average man in the street but also among the scientific community at large, are not encouraging well-educated people to enter or become really engaged in the profession.

On the other hand, the efficiency of work in Polish libraries is much to be improved. Here, head librarians should not only aim to change, if possible, the present legal regulations – nowadays there are no standards applied for determining needs (e.g. expenditure per student or numbers of books per student in each subject field) – but also to change the mentality of their subordinates, because the widespread and powerful impact of long-standing bad habits is terrifying.

For many reasons the structure and the level of professional education among staff members of the Library is also unsatisfactory. At Poznan University Library half of the personnel are university graduates (in others: M. Curie University – 35 per cent, Jagiellonian University – 35 per cent, Lodz University of Technology – 60 per cent, Gdansk University of Technology – 55 per cent). More often than not they are well educated and the fact that their duties are sometimes very simple and uncomplicated produces frustration among them and, in consequence, makes the management and the organization

of work more difficult. It simply impedes the forming of an "élite" – in the favourable meaning of the word.

This problem will certainly not be solved in the near future.

The Profiles of Collections

If our library wants to maintain and develop its position as the University's principal information provider in support of teaching and research, the programme for its renewal should take account of the need to emphasize information delivery rather than materials sharing, as well as network services and co-operation in resource sharing.

It is a fault not only of university research libraries, but also of all academic libraries, that their acquisition policy has not been targeted to this end, thus being too comprehensive, too wide and not strictly designed to support research and didactic processes in the selected areas represented at the institution and, at the last, made by chance (sometimes without proper market research or survey of users' needs and demands). For too many years it was quantity that counted, according to the motto: the higher the statistics the better.

We should realize that this stage is now well over and behind us. This, however, does not mean that improvement is imminent. For instance, the national project of central resources, based on central research libraries and a network of other libraries in co-operative arrangements, which was initiated in the 1970s, has only been functioning on a very limited scale. The adjustments so far cover only areas of major expenditure, like periodical subscriptions, and consist of the reduction to the indispensable minimum of the number of subscriptions to the same, highly technical, titles of foreign periodicals on a large national scale and, first of all, on a much smaller local scale.

In Poznan, for instance, there has been an agreement in force since 1993, signed by the University, the Academy of Agriculture, the Medical Academy and the University of Technology (all the four educational institutions of higher education in the town) for mutual (and obligatory) exchange of material irrelevant to their collection profiles. It is especially important in the case of the University Library which holds the special status of a depository library (legal deposit). This provides that nearly all Polish magazines and periodicals are obtained by our collection. The titles that are not in line with our library's collection are then transferred to the other libraries in question. This applies to nearly 300 titles and, in consequence of this co-operation, these libraries do not have to purchase them and the University Library is not burdened with unnecessary storage of material irrelevant to the library's holdings and may focus on collecting material particularly designed to support research and didactic processes in the selected areas of science and arts represented at the faculties of the University.

Incidentally, the status of a depository library poses a serious problem. There are nine out of 11 university libraries in Poland that are in the same position. Theoretically they should form a good base for the acquisition of all

Polish literature. However only 50 per cent of Polish books in print finally get to the recipient libraries. What is more, we never know whether a given title reaches our collection or not. This, in consequence, creates a situation in which we either do not have a given publication at all or we have duplicate copies of it when we have decided to buy it. All this requires a change in the law governing higher education – we should either be deprived of the troublesome status or the publishers should really observe their duty and obligation to send their publications to the aforementioned libraries. Perhaps this obligation should be backed up by some sanctions put on them in cases where they do not comply (today's legal regulations lack this provision). Either of the solutions would be better than what we have now.

For many years when the Polish currency, the zloty, was not exchangeable into any Western hard currency, the library had no financial resources to buy foreign publications. Thus, the exchange of library material formed a significant source of book and periodical accession, and gifts of any sort were also welcomed. Now, when we realize that acquisition must be more targeted, reorganization of this work seems to be necessary. This applies primarily to certain restrictions on exchange of publications (savings in staff work allocations and in the book exchange expenditure allocations). The savings may be redeployed in targeted book stock purchases.

The financial resources that libraries may distribute for acquisition are comparatively lower than those of a few years ago. At the same time, however, we have been given an opportunity to exercise free control over them in the library's purchases, both at home and abroad. This is surely a step in the right direction.

Another thing that is not present any more, which is quite obvious in the present political situation, is censorship which for many years had a detrimental effect, especially on the acquisition of materials from Polish cultural centres abroad.

The very organization of book acquisition and methods of material selection unfortunately still pose a problem in many Polish libraries. Poznan University Library was a good example here. For many years a special section which employed a team of workers consisting of a Polish philology graduate, a Russian philology graduate and an archaeology graduate, had to decide on the books to be purchased, be it in the field of space flight or oriental languages. It was only in the case of larger or very important purchases that the matter was discussed with specialists. Today this unit provides only an ancillary and purely technical service, while decisions concerning book selection have been left to 23 subject consultants. Torun University Library has introduced the same scheme as well. In many libraries a more active role in advisory matters is expected from academic circles of the parent institution, but unfortunately they are not very interested in joining librarians in this work. Nevertheless, the widening of decision making in material selection seems to be unavoidable.

A different problem is access to bibliographical information and information about books in print and forthcoming publications. Strangely enough, it is easier to get to bibliographical information on foreign literature which is

provided by CD-ROM services, than information on Polish literature. However, certain hopes have been raised by the Polish Book Chamber (Polska Izba Ksiazki), the National Library and private publishers and their endeavours to undertake a task of publishing a comprehensive annual catalogue of books in print which is supposed to be published in printed form and on floppy diskettes. What has already been noticed by Polish libraries is the fact that, quite frequently, quick, expert and relevant information about a publication, its existence and the ways to reach it, is more important than actual possession of the item: information delivery rather than material collection. That is why the retrieval of information, CD-ROM databases, on line searches through Internet, remote access, etc. are so much praised and required.

Finally, there is the problem of stock weeding, that is, the practice of discarding stock, especially retrospective weeding. In every library there is always a large number of books and other materials that are candidates for discarding because of irrelevance or outdatedness. For many years this kind of selection did not exist in Poland and, as a result, estimates for Poznan University Library and Warsaw University Library indicate that about 10 per cent of the whole of the library stock (i.e. about 200,000 volumes in each) are good candidates for discarding. In Poznan, owing to staff shortages, we are unable to increase the numbers of this discarded stock beyond about 10,000 volumes.

Storage Situation and Circulation

Retrospective selection is also beneficial in terms of the storage situation and material accommodation, which in Poland is particularly bad (in Bydgoszcz and Poznan until 1993 and in Warszawa, Krakow and Wroclaw, i.e. in the leading academic libraries in the country, it is still very bad).

Libraries' closed stack collections and the tradition of building separate stacks for library holdings make open access virtually impossible. However, this is very much expected by our users. In fact, only Torun University Library is in a position to offer its stock partly on open access.

Circulation of the library stock can be achieved either by books on loan or by open access for reference use. The latter should be preferred owing to the possibilities it affords for protection of the stock (at Poznan University Library there are about 2,000 book losses a year!) and owing to the possibility of limiting the number of textbooks in heavy demand and the possible easing of the space problem. Within this context it is worth noting, though, that in Poland for one reading place the average number of users is 24 (e.g. 81 at Poznan University of Technology, 40 at Krakow University of Technology and at Poznan University Library, nearly a hundred!).

New reading places in the library, for students and staff, better shelving and display arrangements seem to be a necessity. More reading places mean less time spent in waiting for a publication on loan. For some research and academic libraries a new problem arises, namely that of determining access to the library's holdings for users from outside the university or institute. The law

governing higher education provides that all Polish university libraries serve as public libraries allowing for public use without any fee. Now, it is very hard to persuade the general public at large to turn to public libraries in their search for books of, say, fiction.

In this context it is worth mentioning microforms, which allow us to preserve rare or vulnerable material (such as nineteenth century publications) and, again, ease the space problem. It is sad, however, that all research university libraries, except the National Library and the university libraries in Wrocław and Warsaw, lack a well-equipped microform study room. This situation may change once the Bosch-funded project has been launched. To avoid duplication, however, microform projects should be monitored by some central institution, which is unfortunately not the case in Poland. There have not been any large-scale projects on a co-operative basis either. To make things even worse, all this combined with the currently substandard quality of the equipment at the library's disposal impedes library service in this matter. One should not forget either about users' aversion to using microforms when a library has the original material in its holdings.

Automation

The automation of library procedures is a problem in itself, major enough to be dealt with in a separate article. The automation of Polish libraries, despite the fact that it has already been introduced in many, is still in its initial phase.

The fact that no uniform, standardized, automation project has been widely adopted, and no central and co-ordinating centre to tackle the problem has been established, is sometimes attributed to the general inability of the Polish National Library to form and maintain the position of a co-ordinator.

As a result, some academic libraries, with the help of their rather meagre resources or financial support from other sources – the Mellon Foundation, for example – have already embarked on their own automation projects. Some of them work on a co-operative basis, with a unified and joint approach to the problem, trying to introduce the VTLS integrated computer system, following the pattern that has been established spontaneously by the Mellon Foundation with the first few grant recipients in the library automation area. Others work on their own and prepare computerized retrieval systems with the help of hardware and software produced locally.

It was only quite recently that the National Library, forced or prompted by these actions, reached a decision to select a format for their catalogue description, thus establishing a pattern for other Polish libraries.

It seems that a plan for library automation that is worked out together by several local institutions and that results in a single project, prepared together by all the participating libraries, gradually becomes a standard in Poland through the piecemeal implementation of library automation by individual institutions. A plan to automate jointly has already been adopted in Krakow, Lublin, Łódź and Poznań.

Our own databases and the access to them – especially through the Internet system – will be realized in the near future.

Summary

This overview of the problems in organization and functioning of research libraries in Poland proves that old organizational structures, procedures and habits should all go or be changed. To accelerate this change, changes in legal regulations and library legislation are necessary, and an increase in resources allocated to science and education unavoidable. Our ultimate goal is to maintain and develop the Library's position as the University's principal information provider in support of teaching and research and to enhance its standing as one of the leading academic research libraries in Poland. But, what is also very important, librarians themselves, especially senior staff and managerial staff in Polish libraries, should realize the new function of libraries and be aware of the expectations of their users and of the ways to meet them.

These factors, combined with inevitable automation of library procedures, should result in the years to come in a complete change in the appearance of Polish libraries.