

University of West Hungary
Faculty of Economics

**A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARY SERVICES WITH
THE EXAMPLE OF THE CENTRAL LIBRARY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF WEST HUNGARY**

Theses of PhD Dissertation

Danuta Stanisława KISS

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PhD School: István Széchenyi PhD School of Management and Organisation
Sciences

Director: Prof. Dr. Csaba Székely DSc

PhD Programme: Social Business

Programme Chair: Dr. habil. Zsolt Gilányi PhD

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. László Kulcsár CSc

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Signature of Supervisor

I. PRELIMINARIES, OBJECTIVES

When we refer to modern-day society with the term *information society*, what we mean is the spread of information and communication technology and the consequent access to information and knowledge, the improvement of information- and knowledge-based goods and the emergence of a knowledge society. Several organizations have been monitoring social progress and keeping track of the key indicators in culture and education. At the same time both Hungarian literature on the topic of social and economic change and even studies related to informational inclusion seem to neglect the role of libraries which contribute to the utilisation of information and the creation of knowledge. The research described in this dissertation intends to fill this void.

The aim of the present study is to examine libraries and their role in enhancing the chances of individuals to become economically successful and in promoting the advancement of the society towards a knowledge society. Knowledge, a limitless and renewable resource, can become accessible through education. The research and innovation driving the economy of a knowledge-based society are best assisted by the activities of universities. The author of this dissertation considers the most significant function of universities to be the development of independent knowledge and learning skills to a level which enables students to participate in academic activities and pursue life-long learning. The dissertation is based on the idea that economically active individuals are also library users who utilize library services in order to gain information and knowledge. This is especially true in the case of university students who form (or are going to form) the most educated group in a society. For that reason, the questionnaire survey described in the dissertation focuses on students, who constitute the largest group of university library users. The study aims at answering the following questions: what is the present situation of information services in the university library? How does the library currently contribute to the acquisition of information literacy of users? What influences and trends will affect this role of the library in the future?

II. CONTENTS, METHODS AND RATIONALE

The author of this dissertation claims that libraries support the work of the university and the development of the society primarily by recording and transferring knowledge as well as by helping the acquisition of information literacy. The current study examines these activities based on the assumption that economically active individuals are also library users who utilize library services in order to gain information and knowledge. Theoretical research is carried out with reference to recent Hungarian and international publications dealing with economic and social change – primarily in the fields of economics, sociology and library science. The dissertation places the information services provided by libraries in the wider context of socio-economic change and assigns them a role in information society. It maps the conceptual web of information, knowledge and information literacy and determines the significance of information literacy with respect to social progress.

The empirical part of the study deals with information service activities at the Central Library of the University of West Hungary and analyses the situation of the library at the time of the research. It outlines the process through which information is retrieved, described, codified and provided for users, who appear in this process as information seekers. The process of information search is explored with the help of user-focused and cognitively based diagrams pointing out the complexity and value-generating nature of the process.

The spread of information and communication technology accompanied by the growth in the amount of recorded and codified knowledge means that information seekers and users need a key, in other words a kind of modern literacy, to access accumulated knowledge. This is what literature refers to as information literacy. The dissertation pays special attention to this concept claiming that its acquisition is an essential prerequisite of information use and life-long-learning and it is closely connected to the increase in competency-based employment value. By looking at the example of the Central Library at the University of West Hungary, the study examines how information and teaching activities carried out at university libraries support the overall goals of their governing institutions and enable users to gain better access to information on all levels.

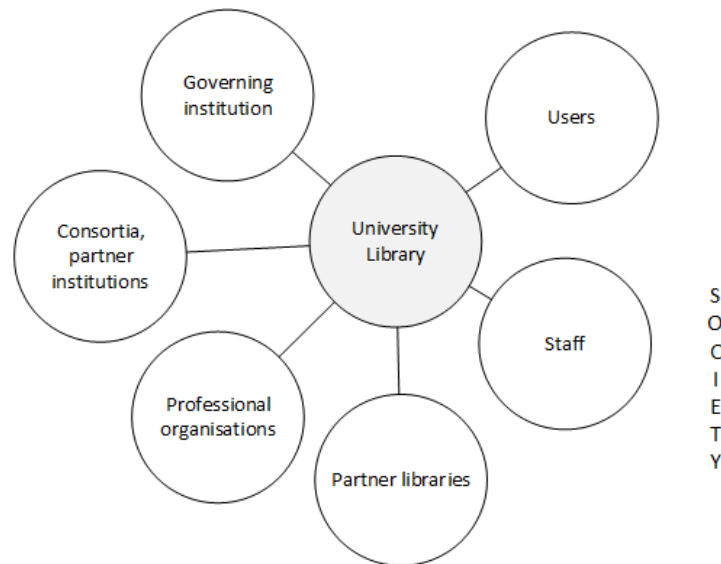


Figure 1: Stakeholders of a university library

(Source: Author)

One of the characteristics of university libraries is that their closest stakeholders, including the governing institution itself, are also users of the library. The connection between stakeholders and libraries is illustrated in Figure 1. In reality, we can speak about a network of connections and a narrower and wider interpretation of common interests in the society.

Besides examining the teaching activities of the library, the study also looks into the information behaviour of the library's main group of users, that is, students. The survey aimed at exploring the information search practices of university students and determining the level of competencies necessary for independent learning based on their use of electronic information sources. This empirical survey was conducted with the help of a multiple-choice self-completion questionnaire designed by the author of this dissertation. Using a questionnaire with the same content made it possible to track the differences notable among various groups of users. The four-year-long questionnaire survey was administered to three groups of students: first-year students, active students (in the middle of their studies) and last-year students. Apart from a small number of exceptions, all the 538 informants were students of the Faculty of Forestry at the University of West Hungary from the academic year 2010/11 to the academic year 2013/14. According to statistical data from March each year, the Faculty of Forestry had altogether 3 197 students during the course of these four academic years, which means that the survey covered 16 % of them. It can be assumed that some of the students completed the questionnaire more than

once (maximum three times) in different phases of their studies. Besides determining the information behavioural characteristics of the different groups, the research also made an attempt at revealing the information differences among them.

Information behaviour was examined in three thematic question groups:

1. Preferred sources of information
2. Internet usage habits
3. Information searching habits – finding the source, search methods, evaluating search results.

Based on the answers in the last group and using a self-designed method, the author of this dissertation attempted to determine the level of information literacy of students. The results illustrated in Figure 2 prove that only few students meet the requirements defined as necessary. Most students possess varying amounts of knowledge in different fields of information literacy. The three groups in the survey are not homogeneous either. There are some rare examples for first year students using specialised library databases or final year students preferring fast and simple Google searches; nevertheless, the majority of students possess adequate levels of skills in some areas and lack competencies in others.

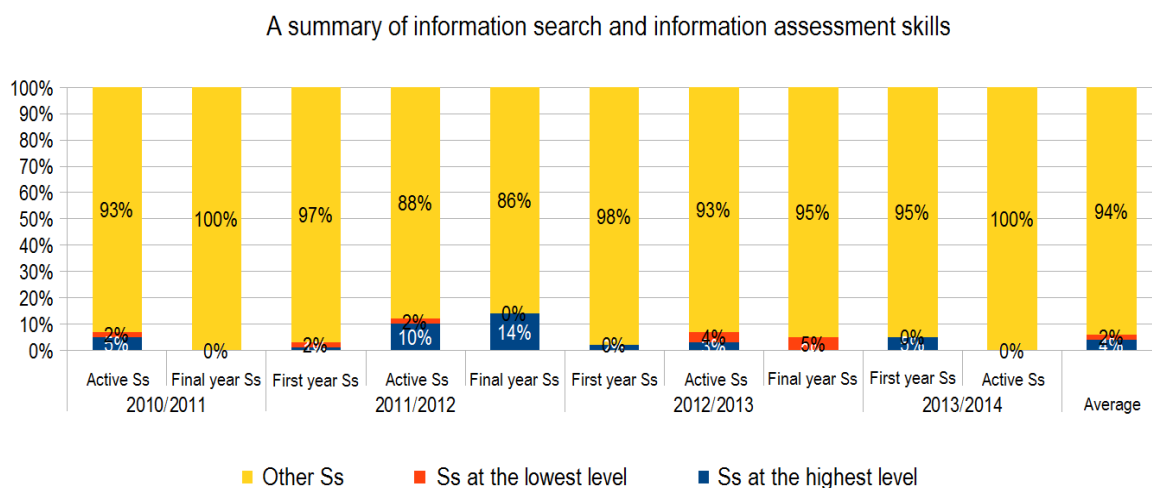


Figure 2: A summary of three factors indicating information literacy

(Source: Author)

Another outcome of this survey is the evaluation of the method itself with respect to its usability. The questionnaire study was complemented by the the analysis of essays written as the final assignment in the courses titled “Use of Academic Sources” and “Searching for and Reporting Information”. Out of the altogether 560 essays handed in over a course of 11 academic years (2003/2004 - 2013/2014), 311 deal with the issue of information behaviour. These essays do not only illustrate the information search and reporting skills of students but often also shed light on personal attitudes to the problem to be solved and, as such, they are valuable sources of information for the librarians running the courses.

III. NEW AND INNOVATIVE FINDINGS

Testing the hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H1)

It is mistaken to think that the usage of modern information communication technology to find information renders libraries redundant.

1. Present-day library information services adopt and integrate all information search options offered by both library-based and non-library-based systems and also freely accessible information sources. The role of information experts is to filter and organize the heterogeneous and unstructured mass of information found in the information market.
2. According to literature on the topic, the tendency is to make library information sources freely accessible on the internet. At the same time it is true that verified and credible scientific information can only be retrieved from expensive and professional databases which require the user to visit a library. By disregarding the option of using libraries, information seekers deprive themselves of credible information sources and the help of information experts.
3. The results of the author's own survey on library use also support the claim put forward in the relevant literature according to which representatives of the "digital generation" do not possess the competencies necessary for information literacy or overestimate the level of these competencies. Without the information services provided by libraries, users do not get access to contents (e.g. the "invisible web") that can only be retrieved with the help of special search methods.
4. Libraries are information spaces where trained and dedicated professionals help users to find their way in the increasingly confusing world of information. Library use contributes to the development of information literacy skills which, in their turn, enable users to cope on their own and acquire the ability of independent learning.

5. Owing to the digitalization projects of public collections, more and more library collections are becoming accessible in an electronic form as well. At the same time, there are, and there will probably always be, publications that do not get uploaded on the web for different reasons e.g. royalty issues, publishing embargo or rarity / novelty of a book.
6. University libraries play a unique role in the organisation of academic communication. A recent example of this activity has been the creation of the MTMT-database (Database of Hungarian Scientific Works) and the construction of university repositories which are essential to teaching and research.

Hypothesis 1 is verified.

Hypothesis 2 (H2)

Although information services in university libraries are meant to produce new information and knowledge, this function is threatened by the fast and easy access to the internet.

1. In order to be able to retrieve information from modern-day, technologically advanced electronic library databases, users are required to possess special knowledge and skills.
2. Both the analysis of the literature and primary research prove the spread of fast and easy information seeking practices. Speed is an important factor in library information services as well but the main focus is on credibility and accuracy.
3. Primary research on library users' habits revealed the same tendencies as the relevant literature and other statistical studies: the virtual use of libraries is increasing and personal use is decreasing.
4. Popular internet search engines lure users into the illusion that they offer information in a fast and simple way while failing to mention the question of credibility and relevance of search results.

5. The analysis of information search models shows that this complicated process is made up of a sequence of thoughts, feelings and actions and involves the interaction of the information seekers with an organically, socially and culturally contextualized information system.
6. According to both literature and empirical results, communication based on direct contact with an information expert is more effective since it creates and strengthens trust between the library and the user and promotes the acquisition of right, though implicit, information attitudes and behaviour.

Hypothesis 2 is verified.

Hypothesis 3 (H3)

One of the tasks of university libraries is to educate users in information literacy. The successful completion of this task is beneficial to a wider group than just libraries.

1. Information services in university libraries are in close connection with the teaching and research activities carried out by universities. Their main target group consists of the teaching and research staff of the governing institution as well as the students enrolled there.
2. Courses run by university libraries support the success of teaching and research activities going on at the university itself. Based on the study of information literacy models it can be claimed that the acquisition of competencies in the scope of information literacy promote the development of independent learning skills and enable active student participation in the full cycle of academic communication.
3. Library staff at university libraries do not simply possess the competencies required to carry out the tasks of processing and providing information but are also experts in the fields that university courses specialise in, which has a positive effect on the application of information knowledge in a given academic field.

4. Improving the information knowledge of library users is an essential component in guaranteeing the future of libraries. According to both the student essays in the primary research and previous sources in the literature, awareness of library use increases users' trust towards library services and contributes to a realistic appreciation of their value.
5. Information literacy, that is the acquisition of adequate forms of information behaviour, affects all information orientation activities in the workplace and everyday life as well. This statement is also supported by Christine Susan Bruce's model discussed in this dissertation in the chapter *Information literacy and its competencies*.
6. The analysis of information literature competencies has revealed that individuals with a high level of information literacy also possess the skills necessary to use up-to-date communication technology and to pursue independent learning. Both of these skills are considered to play a key role in the labour market; therefore, it can be assumed that individuals mastering these skills have a better chance to succeed in economic life and adapt to changes so typical of the modern world.

Hypothesis 3 is verified.

Hypothesis 4 (H4)

The value of library information services is determined by the intangible and unmeasurable added value generated in information processes.

1. This claim, widely accepted in the literature dealing with the processes involved in library information activities, is based on the processing of data and information in a way that meets the demands of actual and potential users.
2. The value-generating activities of libraries include all activities and sub-processes that contribute to the creation of information services: collecting information, constructing information and knowledge representations as well as organizing them

into systems. All these activities, together with their network connections, create new information value.

3. Another part of the value-generating process is transfer, that is, services provided with the help of librarians. Library users consider the value-generating process to be an organic part of library services; therefore, the evaluation of library activities should take into consideration the extra information and knowledge obtained by users as a result of library information services.
4. The input of communication processes related to library information search is made up of the user's current level of knowledge and the consequent demand for information; the output is a complex product with intellectual and social value. A component of this product is an enhanced level of knowledge which fits the cognitive structure of the user and meets his or her information demands while promoting the development of the necessary information skills. The other component is the librarian's knowledge about providing information, which also grows in the active process of cooperation in a shared information space.
5. The librarian providing the service also gains extra knowledge and skills, which contribute to raising the level of the service in the future. Due to their education and experience, the library staff possess special information and tools and acquire new or modified knowledge about providing information during the course of the interaction.

Based on the results of the research, it can be claimed that the assessment of the value of library information services should be extended to cover not only the value-generating activity included in the information value model but also the measurement of knowledge and information competency gained through library use.

Hypothesis 4 can partly be verified.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

The conclusions and proposals arising from the findings described above are the following:

- 1. Libraries are the only institutions that organise and clarify the varied and overflowing supply of information in the market, provide access to information sources and help to find information.**

Access to information is often understood exclusively as online access to information sources. This approach ignores access on the information-communicational and intellectual levels; in other words, it does not take the significance of information literacy into consideration. Fast and simple online search engines offer attractive alternatives and, by doing that, they discourage potential users at the lowest level of information literacy from using libraries. At the same time only enlightened and informationally literate users can truly benefit from the increasingly wide range of information on offer. As a student in the course “Academic literature” wrote: “if we cannot manage on our own, it is important to ask the library staff to help because we might ignore important publications. Internet search is more complicated, since there is no-one to help and the amount of information available is infinite” (a first year student in the academic year 2006/2007). Information search is full of possible pitfalls, while “librarians, especially those providing information, possess a currently unique “hardware” and “software” typical of only the human species, more specifically, of trained professionals. What do library staff know? They carry out background tasks delegated to them by users. They help to specify users’ questions or the nature of their knowledge gap. They grasp the topic of the question or the information demand. They employ tools to find the information. They know where and how information can be accessed and how it can be found.” (Koltay 2004:21).

Libraries, educational institutions and the media should increase their awareness of the significance of information literacy in all fields of life including the search for credible information related to everyday life, work-related tasks, learning or research activities. They should inform people about the value of library information services, which provide reliable guidance in the world of information.

- 2. Online access to library information, library services and digital content plays an important role in promoting their use; at the same time, these options have a negative effect on the popularity of interaction-based, real-space library use. The virtual use of libraries cannot replace personal use in the information space provided by libraries.**

During the course of personal use, users become part of the library information space and, together with the information objects, other users and the library staff, contribute to shaping the service in a shared context.

Librarians should strive to improve digital services in a way that also makes physical library use attractive. There is a need for novel solutions, user-friendly information space and the application of information search methods that preserve traditional values but also offer an inviting alternative to potential library users and thereby help to halt the decline in personal library use. In order to achieve this goal, governing institutions should support libraries and acknowledge their evitable role in the transfer and acquisition of knowledge.

- 3. The acquisition of competencies related to information literacy is an essential component in the successful completion of studies, helps the university to fulfil its educational functions and increases the chances of the individual to become effective economically.**

The benefits of information literacy go beyond university studies; it can be used in the professional life as well as in everyday situations. Courses run by Hungarian university libraries help users to develop their information literacy and thereby assist the formation of adequate information behaviour, influence culture and promote participation in social life.

Currently, the University of West Hungary offers the elective course “Searching for and Reporting Information” to students at the Faculty of Forestry only. The course is taught by members of the library staff in cooperation with university lecturers.

Library courses on information literacy should be extended to involve all university students and the level of these courses should be set in a way that corresponds to the actual level of students’ information knowledge. The assessment of the appropriate level could be done using the refined version of the method described in this dissertation (pp. 118-126). In university education, more emphasis should be put on methods based on independent learning and acquisition of knowledge; libraries, on their part, should be more actively involved in marketing and promotion to raise awareness of the importance of information literacy.

4. University libraries possess large knowledge potential which can only be unlocked if these institutions are supported and developed further.

Based on the SWOT analysis of the Central Library at the University of West Hungary it can be claimed that university resources need to be improved if information services and educational tasks are to be strengthened.

An example of how to utilize the knowledge and expertise represented by university libraries is the creation of the MTMT-database (“Database of Hungarian Scientific Works”) and the construction of university repositories.

Cooperation with other libraries, researchers and authors of academic publications should continue (in the form of consortia, joint use of databases or dedicated networks) in order to guarantee the widest possible access to sources by e.g. listing gray literature and preprint publications.

The knowledge management of universities should be more in line with libraries and should utilize library resources to a greater extent.

The positive effect of university libraries can become stronger if their social prestige grows and if the support coming from the governing institutions is steady. Such cooperation would make it possible for libraries, with their deep historic roots, to participate in the achievement of university goals to a greater extent.

On a national level there is a need for a library strategy¹ that answers the challenges modern-day university libraries face. Strategic objectives should include the teaching of information literacy in line with international standards or standards designed by library experts. This future strategy should also contain reference to the greater integration of library information services into the achievement of educational goals.

5. The value and benefits of library information services can best be seen in the organisation and provision of information inasmuch as they influence the knowledge and information behaviour of users. Based on the study of the methods regarding the assessment of library value, it can be claimed that determining the added value of information is inseparably linked to the competencies created as consequences of library services.

¹ National Library Strategy 2008-2013 <http://ki.oszk.hu/3k/tag/orszagos-konyvtari-strategia-2008-2013/>

Information service is a complex and multi-phased process happening with the cooperation of the library user and the librarian in a real or virtual information space. This intertwined service is shaped by the users themselves and they are the ones whose consciousness the output of the service is aimed at. The output is an intellectual product with social value the production of which, similarly to any other tangible products, is a value-generating process. Vitányi emphasises that Marx “considered the production of material goods, social relations and the mind to be part of the same process, that is, social production.” (Vitányi 1981:188). Library information service as a process is production and consumption at the same time and it creates a reproducible and improvable intellectual product which manifests itself as added knowledge and can be measured in competencies. By combining a value chain model of libraries (yet to be designed) with the methods available for measuring competencies, the efficiency and value of library activities could be determined in a way that would be fitting to the purpose of libraries. Both the design of such a value chain model and the development of a method suitable for measuring the information competencies of users require active cooperation on the part of information experts.

Similarly, broad cooperation is needed to reconsider and refine the method devised by the author of this dissertation with the aim of assessing the level of users’ information literacy.

6. By supporting the improvement of library information services, we can contribute to the development of knowledge culture which, in turn, is an essential component in the value system of a society.

Parallel to the opening of universities and colleges towards the society and economy, libraries have also been following the trend of extending their services to social groups which had previously lain outside their scope.

The recent increase in the interest towards academic activity has also been strengthened by developments in the information communication technology. Information acquisition practices are changing; new and informal ways of online learning are emerging. “Civil science”, which can be considered the democratised form of traditional science, is spreading due to the growing number of students in higher education. At the same time open science is possible only if a large group of people possess adequate information literacy skills and the possibility to access and share scientific information is available to many. Researchers of the topic (e.g. Fábri 2006) point out that the emergence of this new science, which is based on the acquisition of knowledge at non-fixed times and in non-

fixed locations, calls for new methods of science management and new forms of communication – skills that can be learnt at university libraries.

As a conclusion it can be stated that university libraries form an organic part of their governing institutions, support the teaching and research activities there and, being open cultural institutions, they are also dedicated towards providing a wide range of information, increasing the level of knowledge of individuals and promoting social progress. Finally, they shape information behaviour, which is a natural human attitude and which serves the goal of learning and unlocking the potential in human knowledge.

“Like staghounds in the forest, human beings try to find their way in the universe with enthusiasm, curiosity and pleasure. Getting to know the world as well as possible is vital to survival but, beyond that, it brings excitement, fun, joy – and some dangers to life. It is the driving force behind the emergence of human civilisations.” (Hankiss 2012: 256)

V. PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR RELEVANT TO THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION (from MTMT)

2014.

Danuta Kiss: Węgierska Baza Dorobku Naukowego (MTMT). Doświadczenia, tendencje, osiągnięcia. [Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára (MTMT). Tapasztalatok, trendek, sikerek] 171-182. p. In: Dudziak, Danuta – Ziólek, Mirosław (eds.): *IV Wrocławskie Spotkania Bibliotekarzy*. Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej (Z Problemów Bibliotek Naukowych Wrocławia; 11.).

2013.

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Kiss Danuta Stanislawa, Tompa Mónika: Az egyetemi könyvtár szolgáltatásai. *Erdészeti Lapok*, 146 (12) 384. p.

Kiss Danuta Stanislawa: A társadalmi fejlődés, az információs műveltség és a könyvtár kapcsolata. *Gazdaság és Társadalom különszám*, 2011 193-214. p.

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Kiss Danuta: Student użytkownikiem informacji. Działalność dydaktyczna Biblioteki Centralnej Uniwersytetu Zachodnio-Węgierskiego: Students as information's users. Teaching activity in Central Library of University of West Hungary. In: & (szerk.) *Wrocławskie Spotkania Bibliotekarzy Polonijnych: EBIB Materiały konferencyjne nr 17*. Konferencia helye, ideje: Wrocław, Lengyelország, 2007.07.04-2007.07.06. Wrocław: Politechnika Wroclawska, 2007. pp. 1-6. (ISBN:83-921757-6-X)