

LIS AND THE CREATION OF A EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL SPACE – LECTURE LISBON SEPTEMBER 30, 2005

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Bologna – a tool for improving the quality of European LIS-educations

In my country, Norway, the main features of the Bologna system were implemented from the academic year 2003-2004. The reforms implemented were baptized “The quality reform” by the political authorities. Many critics maintain that this is an expression of Orwellian Newspeak, and that what we are witnessing in reality is a quality reducing reform driven by considerations of managerial and economic efficiency at the expense of academic quality. I believe the critics point at important problems and weaknesses related to the reform process. For our field, however, I believe that the Bologna-process will open up for real and substantial quality improvements.

The so-called Bologna process aims at creating one European educational space. What does that mean to LIS-education? Which challenges are the educational institutions within the field facing if European transparency is to be promoted? Is it possible to develop a European core curriculum within LIS and its different subfields? What about accreditation and certification of LIS-schools and LIS-professionals on a European scale?

These are questions which the LIS community have to deal with if the field is to play the role it deserves and which society needs in a knowledge-based Europe.

EUCLID has taken up the challenge. In cooperation with the RSLIS in Copenhagen a project has been undertaken aiming at identifying the challenges and possible roads towards European transparency in the field. The RSLIS applied for and succeeded in achieving European funding for the project. 12 virtual working groups covering different subfields of LIS have been in activity since last winter, trying to elaborate the challenges and possibilities for European curriculum development. The groups have been composed so as to cover different parts of Europe – Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, the Nordic countries and the UK. In August the core members from these groups, all in all 50 LIS-professionals from all over Europe, met in Copenhagen for a workshop discussing the possibilities of a European curriculum development in LIS and elaborating concrete texts and proposals within each of the subfields. (<http://www.db.dk/LIS-EU/>). The result of the work, which probably will be accessible on the web in November or December; it will be presented and discussed at a EUCLID-meeting in connection with BOBCATSSS 2006 in Tallinn, Estonia as one initiative to anchor this process broadly within the LIS-community. I really do hope that also Portuguese LIS-professionals as well as students will be present at that conference. (<http://www2.db.dk/bobcatsss/>)

LIS between vocation, an academic profession and an academic discipline

The task is not easy. European LIS-education as it stands forth today represents a varied and complex patchwork. The sheer fact that the curriculum development work is organized into 12 groups, each representing one subfield of LIS, serves to document the complexity.

Although LIS as an academic and educational undertaking has common historical roots related to the need of producing qualified staff for work in libraries, research and education has developed in different directions. If you today meet a person who call herself/himself an educated librarian, i.e. educated from a college or a university, you do not now if the person in question holds an academic degree and, if yes, at which level (bachelor or master) or if he has a vocational diploma not integrated into the system of academic degrees. And if he or she has for example an MA/MSc, you do not know if the person in question has studied LIS for 1 or 2 years, building the MA/MSc upon a bachelor in another subject, or for 5 years, building the MA/MSc upon a bachelor in LIS.

Some of the major dividing lines are:

- From being vocational education, LIS has gradually established itself as a research-based academic undertaking. There are, however, relatively big differences with respect to how far and how fast different schools and countries have moved on the road towards Academia. Some are firmly established within the university system and system of academic degrees, e.g. Finland, the UK and Denmark, whereas others have a more vocational anchoring.
- We can distinguish between the discipline-oriented approach and the profession-oriented approach. For some, becoming an academic field implies developing an academic discipline like sociology or history or chemistry. Such disciplines are not linked to any specific and institutionalized field of practice. Hence LIS becomes a generalized information science studying the phenomenon and practice of information in general without any links to a specific professional field. Hence references to librarianship tend to be omitted. Others have developed a profession-oriented perspective and aim at developing an academic and research-based profession like medicine and law. A profession is here defined as a field where practice is based upon a body of scientific knowledge, and where a degree in this field of academic knowledge of study from an accredited university or college is that which certify a person to perform as a practitioner and defines him or her as a member of the field. It is obvious that which of these two strategies one chooses will affect the relationship to the field of practice. Taking the Nordic countries as an example, I believe it is fair to say that the three Finnish LIS-departments very successfully have developed LIS as an academic discipline, whereas The Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark and also the LIS-programme at Oslo University College in Norway have a profession-oriented perspective at the bottom of their educational programs.
- The extent to which LIS-educations are integrated into the academic system of degrees from bachelor via master to the doctoral level also varies. In some countries, e.g. UK, Finland and Spain, educational programs are firmly embedded in the university structure. Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden have traditionally anchored their educations in vocational colleges. Although the Danish school has become a full fledged university with all the rights and privileges of a university and although the Swedish and Norwegian educations now are integrated in the system of academic degrees, these traditions probably still have effects on the educational programs.
- In some countries a master degree in LIS typically builds upon a BA in another subject, whereas other countries have developed programs where a master in LIS builds upon a BA in the same field and a PhD as a rule presupposes an MA in the field.

- LIS is a multidisciplinary undertaking. Educational program can choose theoretical and methodological perspectives from different sources, varying from mathematics and computer science via the social sciences to the literary sciences.

So one obvious question is: Which of these traditions should we build upon in the process towards Europeanization? The answer will have consequences for how professional competencies are assessed on a European basis and, thus, the problem of professional certification is solved. If LIS is treated as a vocation that is staffed either by persons going through a process of vocational or academics from other disciplines – history, literature, language, physics – also going through a vocational-like post-graduate training, then individual certification processes like CERTIDOC might be needed. But if the professional perspective prevails, then assessment and certification is more efficient if it is based upon a degree from an accredited professional education, just as the competencies of a dentist, a physician, an architect or a civil engineer are based upon such degrees. A librarian or an LIS-professional is a person with minimum a BA, or maybe preferably a person with an MA in library and information science.

In spite of the variations, it is my impression that as for the formal structure, the 3+2+3 model, where a BA in LIS qualifies for an MA which in turn opens up for a PhD will become the standard model in *most* European countries. Such a model opens up for programs combining breadth and a common platform with in-depth studies and specialization. It is exactly by integrating LIS-programmes throughout Europe in the structure of academic degrees from BA to PhD and by promoting discussions and projects on European curriculum development and cooperation, thereby increased transparency that the Bologna-process according to my opinion will result in increased quality in European LIS. But simultaneously pluralism and variety will prevail. The dividing line referred to above between a discipline oriented and a profession oriented perspective will prevail, and as for scientific and professional perspectives, I believe that the pluralism which now characterizes the field is an asset that future developments should be built upon.

My ideal: the integration of different perspectives

All information systems, libraries included, are simultaneously technical systems for organizing and retrieving information, arenas for human behaviour and communication and texts. In order to develop information systems, then, one needs a profound understanding of knowledge organization and retrieval, utilising theories and methods from for example mathematics and computer science, one needs a profound understanding of how people communicate, seek and use information in different everyday and professional contexts and one needs a profound understanding of how people understand and read the information system as a text as well as the documents mediated via that system. We need, then, both the technical and natural science perspectives, the social science perspective and perspectives stemming from the human sciences. In my ideal research project and my ideal educational programmes, however, these perspectives are integrated. Mature professional fields such as for example medicine are characterized by such integration. We, however, still have a way to go. LIS is probably more characterized by multidisciplinary than by interdisciplinarity. (Multidisciplinary means that different scientific perspectives co-exist side by side, e.g. humanist and social science perspectives, whereas interdisciplinarity means an integration between perspectives where something new is created. A recently published book by Peter Ingwersen and Kalervi Järvelin – *The Turn - integrating information retrieval and*

information seeking might be a promising sign that such a process towards interdisciplinarity is about taking off.

What should an LIS-curriculum consist of?

In 2004 The National Agency for Higher Education in Sweden appointed a committee to oversee and evaluate its ALM-educations. The sub-committee focusing upon LIS-educations consisted of three professionals from Norway, Denmark and Sweden respectively in addition to four Swedish students on a master's and PhD-level. When embarking upon that work, the group naturally had to reach an agreement as to what to look for – what is LIS and which elements should an LIS-education consist of?

The group agreed upon four elements which should be a part of any LIS-education:

- Any candidate graduating from an LIS-school should have a thorough understanding of knowledge organization and retrieval and the principles and theories lying behind systems for knowledge organization and retrieval.
- In addition a librarian need to have a knowledge of the content to be acquired, organized and mediated, i.e. they need to have cultural and literary knowledge. A librarian who only knows form and nothing about content cannot function adequately as a mediator.
- All systems of knowledge organization build upon epistemological presuppositions. Here, if anywhere, are we dealing with a reality which is socially constructed. In order to develop the students' reflective and critical capabilities, they should be taught epistemology and theory of knowledge in order to be able to critically analyse the epistemological presuppositions of different system.
- One should also develop the students' capabilities to understand and analyse LIS-institutions and LIS-practice in a broader social context. How is LIS formed by its social environment? How does LIS form its environment? What is the social role of the profession and how is that role affected by social changes.

Others would maybe have included other elements. A committee on library and information science education appointed by the Norwegian library association focused upon the following four topics: Organization and retrieval of knowledge, the use and mediation of knowledge and culture, the social and political role of library and information institutions and, finally, the library as a learning arena. But the central point here is that the committee tried to identify the knowledge and competencies needed for a scientifically based professional practice and it drew up a picture of a *reflective* practitioner, who not only is being taught to repeat established practices, but, based on a scientific understanding, is able to go behind them, criticize them, refine and develop them and discard them if necessary. Needless to say: LIS-education today unfolds itself within the context of two profound changes: Digitazition and the growth of the multicultural society. These two changes must pervade every aspect of LIS-education. Profound ICT-competency and a profound understanding of the librarians role in a multicultural context is the sine qua non of every educational program in LIS today.

One eternal discussion is this: what is the core of LIS – the core that constitutes the field and which research and education should focus upon. I am tempted to conclude that this is a futile discussion. The competencies of a professional cannot be reduced to a kernel or to one core subject. That is probably valid for any profession. The competency of a doctor of

medicine cannot be reduced to biology although it probably cannot exist without biological knowledge and understanding. When we are going to a medical doctor, we are not going to a biologist, although he or she would be a poor doctor of medicine without a deep knowledge of biology. Neither are we going to a psychologist, although he or she would be a poor doctor of medicine without a profound understanding of psychology and the interplay between mental and physical health. We expect from a practitioner in the field of medicine that he or she in a concrete situation is capable of activating, in an integrated form, knowledge from scientific fields ranging from biology via physiology to for example psychology and social medicine. It is the same with LIS and the librarian as a professional practitioner. The competency cannot be reduced to knowledge organization, although it cannot exist without it. That is why discussions on the core-subjects of the field are so futile – a characteristic common for most discussions on the meaning of life. LIS is that blend (or maybe those blends) of different subjects which together makes up the professional field. In that blend, knowledge organization and retrieval represent an inevitable element in the same way as biology represents an inevitable element in the blend making up the scientifically based field of medicine.

Another question is related to accreditation and certification of educational programs and library and information science professionals. A project called CERTIDOC financed by the European Union (<http://www.certidoc.net/en/all.php>) has tried to specify competencies for information specialists for European-wide certification. The project seems to be anchored in France, Belgium and Germany, but it also has partners from other countries such as the UK (Aslib) and Spain. Relying on accredited educational programs seems this author to represent both a cheaper and more reliable road to follow than trying to generate specific lists of competencies against which individuals can testify their competency. If a person has a BA, an MA or a PhD in LIS from an accredited academic institution, with a diploma specifying which subjects he has studied at which level and the number of ECTS, that gives far more information as for the content of a person's competence and it is a far better guarantee for the level of that competence than a test result according to a system like CERTIDOC. We should, therefore, invest our resources in making European LIS-educations transparent. Another argument for relying on formal education at university level is the constantly increasing educational level of our users. The librarian as a knowledge mediator should, in order to have credibility, have an educational level equalling or being higher than that of his or her average user. The minimum requirement for being a librarian should be a bachelor's degree. I do, however, foresee a situation where more and librarians have a master's degree. Maybe the Finnish library law could be an example.

Then the question is: Should we aim for a European accreditation of educational programs, in the same way as CERTIDOC aims at European certification? I am sceptical to such a strategy. One thing is that as the Bologna process develops, more and more countries are establishing national accreditation bodies. Accreditation will probably, as a rule, take place at a national level. Aiming at a European accreditation of LIS-educations is probably not realistic. But even more important is the complexity of European LIS-education referred to above. Initiating European-wide professional processes is probably a better strategy for reaching transparency than to implement bureaucratic procedures. The Copenhagen workshop will hopefully trigger off such processes. Europeanizing national evaluations and accreditation processes by building a pool of European experts which the national accreditation bodies can draw from when undertaking national evaluations is another possible measure. By Europeanizing national evaluations, we can look into each

others cards and learn from each other. Creating cross national master programs and PhD programs are other measures that can trigger off professional processes on a European scale. As for cross-national PhD-programs, the Nordic-Baltic PhD-school where Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia participate is a good example of European cooperation. (<http://www.norslis.net/>).

Through such measures and initiatives dynamic professional processes and transparency can be stimulated and the European LIS-community can influence national evaluations and the development of European LIS-education. That is why the workshop in Copenhagen might represent the start of an important process in European LIS.