



THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

EBLIDA is an independent non-governmental and non-commercial umbrella organisation of national library, information, documentation and archive associations in Europe. The major objectives of EBLIDA are to act as a lobby organisation promoting the interests of the library and information community, to provide members with up-to-date information on European developments of interest to the library and cultural heritage community and to strengthen co-operation between members throughout Europe.

EBLIDA agrees with the conclusion of the Lisbon European Council that the successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society must be accompanied by a move towards lifelong learning and welcomes the fact that lifelong learning has been placed high on the political agenda.

Libraries in the knowledge society

Libraries in the knowledge society are much more than book repositories. Libraries are not just performing traditional tasks in a new environment, such as preserving our cultural heritage, but provide greatly extended services to millions of students, researchers and members of the public, as well as access to a huge range of high quality, current content. Libraries are fast becoming treasure-houses of digital content, as well as creators of unique digital content themselves.

Implicit within the lifelong learning agenda is the breaking down of the traditional definitions of where learning takes place. Libraries therefore have a key role to play in underpinning learning in its broadest sense, both as a formal activity in an institution and informally within the community. Libraries, especially public libraries, can be a focal point for the local community, stimulating learning within the community at all levels.

Role of libraries in lifelong learning

EBLIDA strongly believes that libraries have a fundamental role to play in the development of strategies for lifelong learning. EBLIDA is disappointed to note that libraries are mentioned just once in the European Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning^[1], along with shopping malls and bus stations. This overlooks the key function of libraries, which is not just as a service *place*, but as **an active partner offering access, professional guidance and training to global resources in a local setting**.

Children are actively encouraged to use and evaluate information for themselves, including the search and retrieval of information in all media. The notion of lifelong learning implies the ability to search for information and acquire knowledge actively and independently. The classroom and the traditional textbook must therefore be supplemented by archives, libraries and museums; institutions offering a broad choice of different media and professional guidance in information search techniques.

Global resources in a local setting

There are around 224.000 library service points in Europe with about 139 million registered users^[2]. Library visits were estimated at 3.468 million and loan transactions at 3.543 during 1998. Libraries are centred at the heart of local communities and in everyday locations such as high streets and community centres. Special services are provided for targeted groups, such as ethnic minorities and learners with disabilities. Mobile library services provide access to rural areas and to special groups, such as the elderly.

Lifelong learning in the networked environment

There are three pillars to information provision in the networked environment. The first is access. Libraries provide **access** to a vast range of global resources, using both traditional and electronic media. Libraries pool the demand and share resources. Publishers can make their products available to a wide audience.

The second pillar is **retrieval**, often requiring new skills. Learners with knowledge of how to retrieve information from traditional resources e.g. books or journals, may not be familiar with how to use a computer or how to navigate around the dozens of different interfaces to databases, encyclopaedias, newspapers, etc. The librarian can act as a mediator between the learner and the provider of the learning resource.

Professional advice, guidance tools and interfaces in the local language can overcome real barriers to searching and retrieval.

The third pillar is to identify quality information. This requires new skills of critical **evaluation** and interpretation. Direct access to resources on the Internet provides access to a huge range of information, but without the traditional benchmarks of quality, authenticity or permanence. Information professionals provide expert guidance in identifying and evaluating quality resources, enabling users to maximise their use of the new global networks.

Good practice

Libraries all over Europe are collaborating in imaginative ways to support learners in their communities. These include study support and homework clubs, open learning services, reading development and literacy programmes. Libraries are creating virtual learning centres and are delivering services to distance learners. Libraries are providing training in the networked environment and are co-operating to develop technical standards for content development in the digital environment.

A selection of initiatives:**Oton Župančič Public Library, Slovenia[3]**

The *Reading Exchange Centre* develops reading programmes for children and adults to develop better functional literacy;
 The *Learning Exchange* is a service that matches those who are seeking information with those who are offering their expertise on anything from foreign languages to playing a musical instrument;
 The *Centre for Independent Learning* provides multi-media resources, facilities and guidance for self-study;
 The *Employment Information Service* provides information and counselling on further education opportunities and employment;
 The *Debate Centre* is a resource centre in the field of debating, public speaking and ethics.

Norfolk Lifelong Learning Group, UK[4]

Joined-up thinking, creation of additional communities of interest networks and specific projects have been proposed and developed by a corporate group with representatives from social services, trading standards, cultural services (libraries, museums, arts, records), education (adult education, LEA, youth service), planning and transportation, economic development, personnel and strategy, finance and information departments. To date, this group has agreed the corporate role within lifelong learning in Norfolk, identified priority areas for development, and helped to map and track the current corporate contribution towards the learning agenda across their departmental services. The corporate group is also acting as a quality check and consultation group for the local authority Lifelong Learning Development Plan and the Strategic Partnership Plan. Once the group is clear about the current and potential contribution of the county council in encouraging lifelong learning, external representatives will be asked to join the group to explain their work and to look collectively at how Norfolk can create a learning society.

Joint training

Joint working necessitates all partners having a clear idea of their own contribution and the collective contribution of their own services and other services towards the learning agenda. Norfolk County Council is planning a joint training event for adult education providers, youth services, librarians, museums staff, and arts and records staff who are working at grass-roots level. The purpose of the training is to understand lifelong learning, to champion the staff's role in developing learning communities, and to see the big picture and apply it to local areas. Area cross-service networks and possible joint events are to be developed for continuation beyond the training day.

Shropshire Access to Information for Learning[5]

SAIL - Shropshire Access to Information for Learning - is the lifelong learning sub-group of SHAIR (Shropshire Access to Information Resources) a cross-sectoral planning partnership. Organisations committed to promoting and encouraging access to their information and learning resources include: all public, university, FE, sixth-form and other college libraries; Ironbridge Gorge Museum; archives; careers services; chamber of commerce.

Partnership funding will support a SAIL web site - a lifelong learning gateway to information and learning resources in Shropshire, with links to individual members' own web sites. Publicity for the scheme will include: a series of leaflets to be made available in community libraries, mobile libraries, and community information points in village halls and shops and mailed to households together with information on Individual Learning Accounts; local press and radio advertisements; membership/access cards.

Many adults may be reluctant to enter a university or college library, being unused to academic institutions. To overcome this, lifelong learners will be encouraged to join SAIL and receive a membership card assuring them that they are entitled to use the resources and will be made welcome. There will be notices with the SAIL logo at entrances to college and university libraries and resource centres, as a further way of breaking down barriers and promoting the 'open to all' policy.

SAIL audit

This involves an audit of access for each organisation in SAIL - Shropshire Access to Information for Learning. The aim is to make the libraries and resource centres of colleges and other institutions open to everyone who may wish to use them for whatever course of study or lifelong learning need they may have. The audit involves seeking agreement from the parent body for formal access arrangements and finding out details of charges, restrictions, loans, access to electronic resources for external users and so on. The overriding aim is to provide clear guidelines and to promote a policy of openness and encouragement to lifelong learners from every sector of the community.

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The Hague, June 2001

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[2] Library Economics in Europe Millenium Study. www.libecon2000.org.

[3] <http://www.lj-oz.sik.si/>

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[5] *ibid*