South European undergraduate and continuing professional development program reconceptualization for the New Information Professional: a synergistic innovation perspective

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Abstract:

Purpose – As, under the new educational, communicational and technological paradigms, Library and Information Science curricula reconceptualization is gaining momentum, this opinion paper should be seen as a theoretical contribution to current thinking around South European formal education and Continuing Professional Development potential to effectively addressing the New Academic Library challenges.

Design/methodology/findings - Building on context-specific case studies and previous international research focusing the investigation of the necessity to reshape official undergraduate programs and academic librarian career-long learning opportunities, our paper discusses whether and how an open flexible synergistic approach could be an ideal solution to current scenario pain points. Besides offering a brief but comprehensive review of the topic, it further proposes a set of future research studies that may result foundational to change within the librarian community by helping unpack the complexities of an ecosystem still in search of its identity.

Index Terms — LIS education; Academic Libraries; South Europe; Continuing Professional Development; Library consortia; synergistic innovation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Before embarking on the exploration of potential solutions to refreshing Information Professionals (IPs) qualifications, it will be absolutely necessary to begin with a brief introduction to challenges facing academic librarians in an era where accountability, return-on-investment, creativity and flexibility have turned from buzzwords into norms [1]. New Information Professionals in their attempt to keep their transforming organizations abreast with the pressing demands of a constantly expanding field of action, especially under the Open Science and Learning Analytics scope, need to strengthen the multidisciplinarity [2] of a sector still in search of its identity [3], by means of adding to the Learning Resources and Research Center's (LRRC) toolbox a new set of elements (measures, activities, applications) and by amplifying and systematizing library use data collection so as to effectively showcase their contribution to student success and retention.

As recent developments in the area of educational technology, research dissemination and andragogy have started to call into question several of the LRRC processes and operations, the academic librarian is being required to reconsider:

- the collection and capitalization practices of explicit/ implicit knowledge produced inside the library walls in line with the North American approach of considering in-library student activity a valuable intellectual capital,
- his/her contribution to different research lifecycle stages,
- his/her active involvement in the educational process through program evaluation, the development of Open Educational Resources and the design and implementation of High Impact Practices [4].

As it was very vividly stressed in the most recent MIT Future of Libraries Institute-wide Task Force Preliminary Report "the future of libraries is more complicated and interesting than a simple transition from a predominantly print world to a digital one" [5], a future that necessitates update on an ongoing basis and adaptation to evolving research and learning scenarios, facilitated by visionary and innovator human resources eager to create and support efficient and effective services that add value to the parent organization.

It has been repeatedly argued during the last decade that

reshaping the diverse workforce qualifications charter can be considerably helped by taking a technology-facilitated, flexible and dynamic holistic approach. In this sense, versatile interventions spanning the entire formal education/Continuing Professional Development (CPD) chain and coordinately supported by interinstitutional joint resources and experience, could provide the necessary adaptability in response to budgetary cuts, roles and jurisdiction fluidity, and eventually the absolutely necessary dissociation from the Van House & Sutton "Habitus" [6,7] which forged by libraries and the public sector, might sooner or later put librarians on the spot.

Taking these new realities into account, emerging tech capabilities providing a plethora of new learning formats and minimizing geographical and financial barriers to participation in learning on one hand and the need to reconsider the entire environment in which the profession practices on the other, IFLA's Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section (CPDWL) have decided in 2015 to revise its 2006 guidelines in an effort to inform administrators and stakeholders about professional norms, provide models, and raise expectations [8].

II. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Despite the remarkable infrastructural, service and library staff development progress achieved thanks to a series of activity intensive projects during the last decade, South European academic library community - not having yet fully recovered to a normal and stable economy - is already confronted with the challenging necessity of renewing its workforce competences. In the face of informational landscape groundbreaking changes, the Library and Information Science (LIS) community is puzzled today by a series of critical questions, among which:

- whether existing CPD and formal undergraduate LIS curricula can adequately support New Information Professional (NIP) against the upcoming tectonic shifts in the global LIS job market,
- which types of CPD the current Higher Education framework permits or promotes and
- whether CPD activities that, according to recent research, follow rather than precede developments, are exploited to the fullest extent possible.

Attempts to forward a new CPD paradigm are frequently obstructed by the problematic nature of a system generally beset by the diversified approaches that pervade both innovation and formal and informal staff development [9, 10, 11]. Also, the inability to timely address international dynamics, the perpetuation of a culture undermining transformation and innovation efforts, and the somewhat disconnected, seldom, low intensity and short duration CPD are only a few among the numerous system dysfunctions that could be summarized as follows:

- the underrepresentation of New Critical Skills (NCS) in undergraduate curricula that do not exceed 19% of the

entirety of Spanish and Greek official LIS programs as recorded in a research conducted early 2017, a lagging behind that may be worthwhile further investigating [12]:

- the lack of library associations' involvement in professional accreditation,
- the incapacity of early adopting systematic changes before it becomes absolutely necessary [13],
- the strong mimetic forces that stemming from professional networks and formal education create a grid of common organizational structures and re-utilization practices that hinder the influx of new knowledge and therefore innovation [14,15,7],
- the establishment of the CPD agenda more on the basis of traditional library core operations and less on contextual factors,
- the lack of infrastructural capacity to systematically disseminate new field-related knowledge
- the confinement of the important intellectual capital that is educational material within university walls and finally
- the universal paradox of developing tools before skills [16] which could be interesting to further investigate for the South European university library-specific context.

III. INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In their attempt to overcome these intractable issues generated by the inevitable fluidity of today's informational scenario, and further exacerbated by the controversy surrounding the current interpretation of CPD scope and content, oscillating between "a realization, a commitment, a plan, an activity and a process" [16], several associations have been launching dynamic professional development projects invigorating NIP's flexibility and adaptability to change.

In particular, the need to adopt commonly accepted open pluralistic policies [18,19] in support of academic and professional associations' involvement in a co-regulated LIS educational reconfiguration [20,21,22] with added value to all stakeholders, is the assumption underpinning:

- the formation of training consortia, inter alia, CPD 25 Staff Development and Training Program by London and South East England Consortium (M25), The Library School (in collaboration with Open University of The Netherlands), and Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (Ireland) or
- the extension of existing professional associations' scope of activities as in the case of Swiss Academic Library Consortium, North West of England Academic Libraries Consortium (NoWAL), Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Consortium (PALS), Beijing Academic Library Consortium, Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), and Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI).

In the face of shrinking budgets and the advent of new paradigms [3, 23] and despite challenges associated with

recording the usage of non-traditional instructor-led training, and with defining the amount of CPD necessary to maintaining professional competence [8], these initiatives seem more relevant than ever, constituting, thanks to their excellent responsiveness to the market and their open structures, an ideal test field for program innovation [24].

IV.   TOWARDS A SYNERGISTIC APPROACH

A. Conceptualization outline

The more libraries advance on their evolution continuum, the more researchers become immersed in the investigation of (1) LIS education's response to current job market requirements [25], (2) librarian training preferences [26], (3) the significance of informal learning opportunities [27], (4) the necessity of solid and well-structured CPD programs [28] and finally (5) the importance of implementing a national skills development strategy that would ensure public funding and serious commitment on behalf of academic library administrations [29]. Most of their findings agree upon the pressing need for systematic enhancement and enrichment of existing structures and content, a necessity repeatedly emphasized since the Ranganathan era (1931), and the importance of involving LIS educators and degree programs as researchers, advocates, consultants, and participants in continuing education provision [8, 30, 31, 2, 32]. An essential component of this redefinition could very well be the creation of an open synergistic educational platform responding to sector requirements and open education international trends based on the four different learning scenarios proposed by Castaño Muñoz et al. in Open Education 2030 Report (2013) [33].

In the words of Andreia Inamorato dos Santos (Information Society Unit, European Commission) in her keynote speech at D-Transform Event (Open University of Catalunya, November 2016), experts insist on seen Open Education, as the perfect meeting point of formal/informal professional development that guarantees thanks to its fluidity and flexibility a timely response to change. In this context, the envisioned open training and development online space, a content-rich collaborative, supportive and supported online learning environment [34], through the incorporation of both theoretic and authentic hands-on-practice scenarios, could:

- significantly help draw the exact LIS ecosystem coordinates,
- contribute to NIP knowledge update from both internal and external information sources [35],
- capitalize on online professional development tools' potential to creating sustainable learning communities [36],
- urge participants, active and future academic library professionals, to critically consider their own learning, as CPD attendance doesn't per se make a professional competent [37] and
- constitute a genuine forum on most current LIS research lines based on Jenkins [38] connected

learning principles.

B. Success factors

For the proposed synergistic initiative to be successfully implemented, a set of specific objective and subjective preconditions ought to be first met: (1) co-creation principles comprising common targets, mutual interest, strong leadership, enthusiasm and determination [39], (2) LIS curricula evaluation, (3) the development of a scientific framework that will help forward a commonly accepted terminology, structure and identity, (4) mutual recognition and accreditation agreements independent of institutional and geographic affiliations [40], (5) a SWOT analysis of local academic library network so that the resulting entity would have combined forces and no overlapping weaknesses [23], followed by (6) the integration of a standardized quality control system that includes among other things the formation of an advisory committee and continuous feedback from all stakeholders [41].

Last but not least, developing a marketing strategy should also be taken into serious consideration during the design phase as it would help project the network's uncontested value and promote South European libraries among movers and shakers of a global initiative.

V.   CONCLUSIONS

A. Key takeaways

Library's improvement and sustainable development like for all living and constantly evolving organisms [42] demands a continuous re-adaptation that without LIS education reform within the coordinates of an attitude change, that according to Musman [43] constitutes the most important innovation of the information profession, will not be possible.

South European state university libraries share a lot in common in terms of technological, financial, administrative and functional affordances and LIS undergraduate program and CPD system weaknesses to addressing today's challenges. Seen these similarities through the prism of existing consortia positive training experiences, the longevity of which is a per se guaranty of their success, and European Higher Education new funding opportunities, like the EU Renewed agenda for HE, could open new promising avenues for the development of the proposed synergistic online intervention.

As a closing comment in the face of the unique opportunity presented for a dynamic response to the academic library heterogeneous workforce's training requirements and in line with EC directives, IFLA CPD principles and LIBER strategic planning for the next decade [8,44,45], we would like to reiterate, based on concrete literature-derived evidence, the need for development of an online cooperative platform as the natural next step toward both reconfiguring NIP skills development mechanisms and expanding Southern European Libraries Link members' collaboration that could position them in the avant-garde

scene of a new paradigm.

B. Future research lines

As academic librarians become critical contributors to the co-development of the HE agenda, recording and analysing their CPD related choices and considerations is of determining effect to unpacking the complexities of an ecosystem still in search of its identity. Therefore, among further research actions enquiring potential issues on the way to developing a context-specific synergistic online CPD platform, we would propose:

- running a mixed methods exploratory study consisting of an inventory of south European academic librarian CPD types and frequencies further supported by the collection through in-depth interviews of detailed reflections on their knowledge acquisition choices rationale and their respective correlations with library transformation and innovation levels, a study that may result foundational to change within the academic library community,
- engaging in a country-level LIS curricula profile and content analysis with a mindset toward New Critical Skills (NCS), followed by a qualitative research component focusing the exploration of dysfunctions' cause-effect related stakeholders' perceptions and
- further investigating the "tool before skills development" paradox for the south European specific context.

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