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**Bridging the digital divide:
libraries providing access for all?**

The role of libraries in lifelong learning: the case of public libraries in Istria

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to show the quality of lifelong learning programs for public library users in Istria.

Public libraries were founded and continue to serve as premier institutions for lifelong learning. According to the European Commission, lifelong learning "promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future." Lifelong learning is defined as "the whole cycle of learning from childhood learning, formal education at all levels through to independent learning throughout adult life, including distance learning, whether or not credits, certificates or diplomas are involved". Lifelong learning is necessary to meet the demands of today's fast-paces, ever-changing workplace requiring an increasing amount of knowledge, and public libraries serve as nodes that connect the local learning setting with the global resource of information and knowledge, so that they play a role of fundamental importance in the development of future systems of lifelong learning.

Methods like questionnaire and interviews will be used in the research.

This paper should for the first time give a comprehensive insight into the lifelong learning programs for public library users in Istria. The results should point how lifelong learning programs may develop in the future, according to the needs of the society and labour market and what role public libraries will have in it.

Keywords: *lifelong learning, information literacy, public library*

Introduction

The new millennium has brought changes in many domains including the field of librarianship. From the first libraries-archives whose main task was storing library materials a new concept of libraries without walls has been created where library services are available to everybody regardless of their age, sex, nationality, etc. but under condition that they can use the information technology, that is, that they are information literate. It is precisely this combination of skills and knowledge that is necessary for locating, evaluating and using the obtained information that has become the foundation of lifelong learning which implies any form of learning – from formal education at all levels through to independent learning throughout adult life including distance learning, whether or not certificates or diplomas are involved. Public libraries are ever more becoming the most visited centres of non-formal

education and lifelong learning, because they offer contents and a professional and competent person – information expert – librarian in one place.

Public libraries once and today

According to UNESCO's Manifest for public libraries, public library is "a local information centre which provides its users with basic conditions for learning throughout their whole life (...), and its services are based on equal access to everybody regardless of their age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status." Its basic tasks, among others, are developing literacy, supporting formal education and lifelong learning, and the like. Education as foundation capital of a contemporary society has become a key factor of economic development. Formal education in educational institutions such as schools, colleges and faculties guaranteed employment until recently, but today it does not guarantee a work-place one can be certain of, and besides, ever more attention is paid to informal forms of education through additional courses, seminars and different programmes, and to education an individual receives owing to one's work, communication, reading, development of skills, experience and knowledge. All stated forms of education can be covered by the term lifelong learning. In the last decade lifelong learning has been much discussed as a fundamental foothold for entering a society of knowledge all countries, including Croatia, aim for; hence, documents are issued for the purpose of changing the approach to education. Public libraries have always organized different courses and workshops within their scope of activity with the aim of providing upgrade of professional competencies for individuals, and offered support to other institutions providing literature and foundation for lifelong learning.

Many middle-aged people not rarely face the fact that people with far less work experience but with some new skills which they use to carry out given tasks faster and with more efficiency apply for their positions. In order to keep their jobs, be promoted or survive at the job market that now offers younger personnel with some new skills many people at an already advanced age decide to attend different programmes which offer them not only a possibility of improving their skills and keeping their job, but also a possibility of finding better employment and being financially independent. It is also true that a demographic picture of Croatia is increasingly older, that life expectancy is becoming longer and longer and that we will have to work longer until retirement, so that possessing new skills and knowledge has become essential for the ever present struggle for survival at the job market.

These factors alone indicate the importance public libraries have to recognize in the society today, and it is beyond any shadow of doubt that new services will have to be used in approaching the user who has less and less need for the standard services of public libraries such as taking out fiction and actually visiting a library, but who, on the contrary, ever more expresses a need for new services libraries offer such as online catalogues, online booking, online magazine reading, access to databases, etc.

The role of the libraries today, at the threshold of the European Union, is unquestionable, since every individual's information literacy is a necessary condition for creating foundations of an information literate society.

Lifelong learning

Although there are many definitions, lifelong learning can be defined as "a total activity of learning throughout life with the purpose of broadening knowledge and skills, and developing competences within personal and civic as well as social perspective and/or perspective of employment"¹. It includes learning at all stages of life (from early childhood to old age) and in all its modes: *formal* (organized, i.e., purposeful activity of the authorized institutions

¹ Commission of the European Communities, 2001, Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality

proscribed by conditions and curricula based on which different users acquire competences and are given public documents), *non-formal* (organized and purposeful acquiring of competences for personal and social needs, without public documents) and *informal* (acquiring skills and knowledge from everyday experience and different influences from the community that need not be conscious). In this matter, learning is understood as a continuous process in which an individual's results and motivation for learning in a certain period of life depend on the knowledge, habits and experiences of learning, acquired at a young age. There are four basic interrelated goals connected with lifelong learning: individual's personal satisfaction and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability².

The concept of lifelong learning is often being mistaken for the concept of lifelong education, but these two are not synonymous. Lifelong education includes only organized learning, while lifelong learning is a wider concept that also includes unintentional, unorganized and spontaneous acquisition of knowledge.

The European Union has recognized the importance of the lifelong learning concept manifesting it in many documents, and especially in achieving the strategic goal determined by the Lisbon Declaration in 2000 according to which the European Union "should become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth, higher employment rate and greater social cohesion by 2010". Therefore, the concept has been emphasized in a range of key strategic documents of the European Union such as *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000*, a Communication of the European Committee on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality, 2001*, and many others.

Another goal set by the European Union is to include 12.5% of adults aged between 24 and 64 in lifelong learning programmes by 2010, which is somewhat more than 2% of thus far included in the countries of the EU. Data from October 2006 indicate that in Croatia, this number is far smaller and is only 2.1%, so that different programmes attempt to motivate and educate the citizens on the necessity of lifelong learning... The Republic of Croatia is not lagging behind in this respect, and the inclusion of lifelong learning in all key strategic documents in the field of education (for example, *White Paper on Croatian Education* from 2001, *Declaration on Knowledge* by the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU, 2002), *Education Sector Development Plan for the period 2005-2010* from 2005 and *Strategy for Adult Education* from 2004, has become one of the basic principles of the development of the Croatian education system.

Libraries and lifelong learning

In 2003 IFLA, as an umbrella organization in the field of librarianship, published a report on the project *The Role of Libraries in Lifelong Learning* where it clearly emphasizes the need for strengthening of the educational role of libraries and the principles based on UNESCO's *Manifest* according to which a library should become a place of learning and provide minimum conditions for lifelong learning. Three years later IFLA's Section on Information Literacy issued *Guidelines for Information Literacy for Lifelong Learning* in which it emphasizes that information literacy, i.e. possibility of access, search, use and evaluation of information, is a necessary pre-condition and a key factor for lifelong learning in a society today.

Public library is an educational institution whose users are people of different cultural, social, religious, material and other background and needs to whom librarians try to offer services depending on their wishes and needs. Thus, the unemployed need data on new possibilities of employment; the young need encouraging meeting points; children need more advanced programmes based on skills they learn at school; the retired need a place to read the

newspapers they can not afford any more; people with special needs need an institution in which they will be treated with dignity and which will be adjusted to their handicaps. These are the reasons why public library is regarded as one of the best places for the implementation of the lifelong learning programme through different lectures, workshops, online-courses, different sources of information, individual counselling and organized courses for different groups of users. At public libraries, there are many different potential users who are eager to widen their horizons gathered at one place.

These new roles are not exactly new if we take into account that libraries have always cultivated their educational role, but the fact remains that in today's information milieu the need for the traditional role of libraries such as taking out books is declining while the need for new services is growing.

As previously mentioned, Croatia is not lagging behind Europe in reference to issuing strategic documents in the field of lifelong learning. Shortly after their neighbouring European counties Croatian libraries recognized their role in providing minimum conditions for the implementation of lifelong learning programmes. The research we conducted refers to one of Croatian regions, Istria, and the results will be presented in the text that follows.

Research

The research was done on eight Istrian public libraries which all completed the sent questionnaire. The Matija Vlačić Ilirik Public Library in Rovinj is being extended, reconstructed and adapted at the moment and is not included in the research as it can not work with the users.

The aim of the research was to find out how Croatian public libraries understood the importance of participating in lifelong learning programmes, what programmes they offer to their users, who they are for, who the programme takers are, who runs the programmes, whether they are satisfied with the current situation in libraries, etc.

The fact that six out of seven (except for the libraries in Buje and Buzet) libraries are open at least ten to twelve hours every day, attempting to attract the users when it suits them best, be it during the workday or after their working time, is pleasing. The libraries, most of all in larger towns as Poreč, Umag, Novigrad and Pazin, are well equipped with computers for the users (4 to 7 computers). There are 37 computers at the Public Library in Pula, which is not surprising because Pula is the most populated town in Istria, and the library covers an area of almost 3000 square meters thus fulfilling all conditions for obtaining a status of a very well equipped public library.

As for programmes, the most common forms offered by the libraries are lectures, workshops and book promotions. Some libraries, as the ones in Novigrad, Pula and Poreč, started organizing foreign language and informatics courses as for the young so too for the retired and adults, who will have better preconditions for finding better workplace once they possess these skills. Only the Pula Public Library issues certificates on attending the course, and soon the Poreč Library will follow its footsteps.

The answer to the question who guides these activities is almost the same in all libraries. They stated that specialized courses such as language and informatics classes, lectures on healthy nutrition and health, courses on high quality parenting and the like are held by the qualified external associates, while the workshops at the children section, such as moulding fimo clay into ornaments, reading or social games workshops and the like are held with the assistance of librarians who do not need much professional foreknowledge for leading such activities.

Depending on programmes offered, library users are people of all age groups, but somehow it can be seen from the questionnaire that the libraries are turning to the young, especially preschool and school children, which is commendable, because the culture of

visiting the library and the culture of reading must be nurtured from the early age. It is important to mention the cooperation with kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers with whom the public library employees often work out programmes. At The Poreč Town Library, for example, the children workshop leaders are people with completed formal education (teachers in primary schools) who are librarians at the same time. The group of older users finds music evenings and topics in the field of agriculture, health, meteorology and plants interesting.

We have seen from the questionnaire that the programmes librarians at Istrian public libraries offer to their users are very heterogeneous and rich. At the end of this paper, we will mention some of the most interesting ones: English, French, Spanish and Russian language workshops, digital photography, feng-shui and Internet business workshops (The Poreč Town Library), etiquette for preschoolers, Medicaments, Yes or No? course, high quality parenting course, folklore and classical music evenings at the library (The Novigrad Town Library), Let's Meet our Heritage course, interior decoration and aromatherapy workshops, lectures on astronomy and mythology (The Buzet Public Library), programmes for the persons with special needs, Music Listening Room, programmes for the blind and partially sighted, psychological help workshops (The Pula Town Library).

The last question we were interested in was a way of promoting the library in recognizing its role of a cultural and educational institution for the citizens. The graph shows that all libraries use printed notices (posters and fliers) to inform their users and the wider public and, naturally, in the information age, sms or e-mail. That is, of course, suitable for the groups of young users who use new technology. The other groups of users are most often informed by invitation cards sent to their home address. Only four libraries use web sites for announcements (Umag, Poreč, Buzet, Pula), although all public libraries have their internet address, but the sites need to be maintained and updated regularly, so that, due to modest financial means, their sites show only general data on working time, conditions of taking books out, number of books and the like.

These are only the results of the research on lifelong learning and the role of public libraries in its promotion conducted on a small sample in one county in our country, and they are as expected. Only the programmes of some public libraries are mentioned here, but the fact remains that other public libraries also contributed in working out programmes and holding different events in their premises. Many of them point out a pressing problem of limited and inadequate space, outdated equipment, lack of staff and financial resources needed for carrying out the programmes they planned. We believe that in the coming years there will be more understanding for the programmes libraries offer mostly free of charge in their premises. We also hold a belief that libraries will know how to secure larger resources from their founders, which are towns and municipalities, and that they will get the support from the authorities that finance them together with adequate space and a sufficient number of qualified employees for the benefit of all their users and all this with the aim of creating information literate citizens.

Conclusion

Public libraries must offer new and innovative services and activities that will support the citizens in their efforts to attend lifelong learning programmes. These could be people who wish to improve the knowledge already gained and upgrade skills already possessed or those who would like to learn something new and acquire skills they did not develop before. Lifelong learning and possessing different skills is a key element found in all important Croatian documents and those of the European Union, which Croatia is approaching more and more, and thus, is attempting to provide minimum conditions for building foundations of the modern information literate society.

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