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Building a Europe of readers

EBLIDA/NAPLE Conference 2015
National Library of Latvia, Riga, 8th May

An Leabharlann
24-2
October 2015



National Library of Latvia,
'The Castle of Light'



Some 92 delegates from 27 countries attended the conference which was based on the key priorities of the Latvian EU Presidency: involvement, growth and sustainability.

A video of the plenary sessions is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLodeDt40MJHlvHmlk5ALEPDWJEj_HKhh0

From the opening speakers (Latvian) some key facts emerged:

- Latvia has 2000 libraries, 800 of which are public
- Each Latvian can access a library within 20 minutes.
- National Library of Latvia is known as the Castle of Light, and is a symbol of knowledge and freedom. This corresponds to the political agenda of the EU ministers of culture – freedom of expression, quality and trustworthiness of content, and safeguarding cultural values and heritage.
- National Library of Latvia is a central focal point for all cultural events.
- 30% of Latvians are library users, compared to EU average of 20-30%.

More general comments were made by other speakers:

- Libraries are a great asset to the social and economic fabric of a country

- Insufficient recognition of the positive impact that libraries have on the economy
- Measurable chain of causality which is often overlooked by policy makers.¹⁵
- Strong arguments need to be developed
- Case studies need to be heard
- Libraries are centres for local communities, and serve as a cornerstone of European culture.

Session 1

Andris Vilks (Director, National Library of Latvia) noted that Libraries are part of a wide network of social services including education, employment and welfare, and should work with other providers. The mission of libraries is to make people's lives better by making them smarter.

The three main themes from the remainder of the opening session and panel discussion included Reading, Changing role of public libraries and Illiteracy.

Kristine Pabērza (President, Library Association of Latvia) noted that reading is a fundamental skill and literacy for all is connected with strong economic growth. Literacy is a pre-requisite for smart growth as identified in the EU2020 strategy, and libraries can help achieve this goal. The world is dominated by the written word and the ability to evaluate information critically is crucial to ensure skills remain

¹⁵ Recent study showed that there was a €9 million direct financial benefit from libraries.

relevant to the current economy. The ability to read, understand and be understood is becoming more important than ever. Libraries in Latvia and all over Europe are and will serve as the gateway to the future by providing lifelong access to resources, knowledge and tools, which will benefit families, communities and society as a whole. Libraries feature in the Digital Agenda for Europe, which aims to make cultural heritage collections accessible and preserve them for future generations.

Jan Braeckman, (Chair, NAPLE Forum) suggested that while Public libraries were originally intended as a form of social integration they have evolved into institutions focusing on reading as an end to itself. Reading as a means to an end should be promoted—as a way to educate ourselves in our developing society. There is a need to change from a service/product to a platform serving the community and empowering people. Building a readership involves engaging people to help themselves by forming partnerships with lifelong learning organisations, cultural organisations and media should offer a broad social experience and co-operate with educational and learning organisations.

Sylvie Guillaume, Vice-President of the European Parliament (video message) and Prof Inese Vaidere, MEP highlighted the evolving nature of libraries and that they are becoming cultural centres and places for building democracy. They are the key to the EU2020 strategy and should be better supported.

Klaus-Peter Böttger (outgoing EBLIDA President) reported that 75 million people in Europe are illiterate and lack basic language/literacy and digital skills. Literacy is a core competency needed to play an active role in society and is a key issue at the European level. It is not acceptable to have one in five Europeans experiencing difficulty in reading. Citizens are part of the economy and should be able to contribute to their future. For a knowledge-based Europe we need educated people and libraries are helping support people in learning. 60% of young people's activities revolve around digital media. Libraries can make their voices heard on the EU digital agenda by demanding cross-border solutions and a digital single market strategy.

Prof. Divina Frau-Meigs (Sorbonne University) outlined her research findings on media usage by young people, which indicate that young people read a lot, are ambitious in their reading, and the practice is not patrimonial. The book as a long narrative form is under threat and there is a move towards convergence of content and comment. New digital skills such as programming and curating are emerging and libraries are catalysts for sustainable digital development. Digital tools enable young people to produce their own collections and provide the means of stocking them.

A key issue for libraries is access and the library plays a crucial role in serving as a “porous” space, in enhancing mobility between school and life beyond, and in transferring abilities to different information cultures. The profile of a librarian

has changed in recent decades and new competencies are needed. Libraries should support transliteracy, which involves reading, writing and interacting across a range of platforms, tools and media. Librarians are pedagogical mediators, not just curators or teachers, and need to focus on hybrid practices. Libraries are shifting from the logic of equipment to the logic of users, and they are moving towards digital humanities, online public services, new literacies and reorganisation of knowledge around information. Library associations need to fight for access, equity and the right to global information commons.

Session 2

There were two topics that ran in parallel for this session and I attended the second one:

1. Building Literacy Advocacy: the Role of Libraries and Library Associations¹⁶
2. Skilled By My Library: Connecting Policy and Practice in the EU¹⁷

A national reading campaign in Denmark called Denmark's Reading was described. This involved creative writing workshops, pop-up libraries and the distribution of 100,000 books on World Book Day last year. The campaign involved collaboration

16 Organised by EBLIDA, Library Association of Latvia and ELINET. Chair: Divina Frau-Meigs

17 Organised by NAPLE and the Reading and Writing Foundation. Chair: Gina Ebner, Secretary General, European Association for the Education of Adults

between the Ministry of Culture, public libraries, bookshops and publishers, and the manifesto was to reach people where they are, remind them of the benefits of reading, and provide inspiration for more reading. Events were held in shops and libraries, and advertised via TV, radio, and print sources. Evaluation methods included self-assessment, anthropological field studies and research by Aarhus University. Survey results indicated that 51% of people had heard of the campaign, 85% of whom had a high opinion of it.

Annette Kelly (Libraries Development, LGMA) considered Libraries as Non-Formal Educational Institutions: Opportunities and Barriers. She discussed how libraries can support children and adults in literacy and life skills. From an Irish perspective services include high quality library collections, skilled staff supporting users, reader development activities and programmes, access to formal and informal learning, and the library as a space for research and study. The Right to Read campaign is in its early stages. The traditional role of the library as a university of the people is changing to a focus on active intervention, community engagement, delivering national agendas, and forming partnerships with educational institutions and government organisations. Initiatives include collaboration between libraries and universities to provide FETAC- accredited business entrepreneurial courses, and co-operation with the Department of Social Protection on internet support for job seekers. Barriers include reduced

funding at national and local level, a skills gap in the leadership and workforce, resistance from staff to move from traditional roles, reduced capacity to respond to new demands, lack of engagement with national and local strategies and stakeholders, and inconsistency across and within library services. There has also been some resistance from educational institutions to libraries taking on a literacy support role. Library staff support users in educational activities, but are not literacy tutors.

Martina Ni Cheallaigh (European Commission) (video message) introduced the European Agenda for Adult Learning which provides a framework for European co-operation in adult education policies for the period 2012–2020. The strategy began in 1996, the European Year of Lifelong Learning. The emphasis is on non-formal and informal learning as well as formal learning. Only half of EU Member States have a comprehensive strategy in place, and many are still struggling with the adult learning component. There is a national co-ordinator for each country to implement the agenda at national level – the co-ordinator for Ireland is Majella O’Dea (Department of Education and Skills). Libraries are not mentioned specifically in the policy documents.

Session 3: What’s next?

Kate Russell (freelance journalist and author) chaired this session. She noted that librarians are becoming custodians of content in an ever-increasing forest of information, both in the form of

atoms and bits. The old fashioned view of a librarian needs to be wiped out, and librarians need to be given enough training and support to enable them to keep up with technological change and to become guides across multiple platforms, disciplines and trans-literacies.

Conclusion and next steps

In summing up Jukka Relander (incoming EBLIDA President) stated that libraries represent a good return on investment to the community. He highlighted the key issues for EBLIDA in future - literacy, e-books and copyright.

The conference ended with a tour of the National Library of Latvia

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