

The Educational Role of the Academic Library

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Abstract

The dynamic flow of information and rapidly developing technologies have a significant impact on today's knowledge society. Following the trends in technology and user behavior, libraries as part of this community are also changing. They are transforming the way they gather information, their architectural environment, and the services they offer. Thus, from guardians of knowledge, they are becoming centers of learning. Their passivity remains in the past and they are on the path of active communication with readers, combined with digitization. The subject of the article is the academic library of the University of Economics - Varna, and the topic of research is the direction of transition as a result of the changing environment. The aim is to trace the opportunities and services that the institution provides to its readers and the prospects for development.

Keywords: Academic library, Education, Library Services, Information Flow, Centers of Learning

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Introduction

The classical library is based on the model of imported and provided knowledge for use. This was in times of information scarcity and high costs associated with its acquisition. Our environment is changing, and today we live in an era of information abundance that reaches us through the network. At the same time, institutions are generating new forms of data - research data, educational materials, preprints, videos, profiles, etc., which need to be managed and protected. This poses new questions for libraries: How to adapt to the changing research, educational, and information work processes of readers. How to become more engaged with them? How to effectively respond to changes? How to maximize assistance to readers? The answers to these and other questions lie in the changing role of libraries and the organization of work within them.

The concepts of the 'post-industrial society' (Bell, 1999) and the 'knowledge economy' (Drucker, 1969) emerging in the second half of the 20th century, emphasize science, information, and knowledge as determinants of the potential and development of the economy in any society. There is an increasing recognition of the need for a new type of labor, the assimilation of diverse knowledge and skills to use and harness the expanding access to diverse sources of information. It includes the acquisition and display of qualities such as creativity and adaptability, high digital culture, and the ability to interact with automated sources of labor.

The aim of the current article is to present and analyze the educational activities offered by the academic library to its users, addressing their informational needs as well as fulfilling their cultural, social, and emotional requirements. The focus of the material is the library of the University of Economics - Varna, while the subject of study is the evolving environment and readers' adaptation to it.

The publication is an attempt to present a quality study of events in the academic working context. The feature combines and applies the following research methods:

- retrospective analysis, a chronological approach, and a systematic review of the academic calendar of the University of Economics - Varna, to define the educational role of the library;
- analysis and synthesis to discover and trace the interconnected processes, events, constraints, and initiatives undertaken.

1. The University Library as a Driver of Scientific Activities

Information has been a true force for societies from the past to the present days. In this current era, it stands as one of the primary mechanisms propelling life forward. The concept of the 'information society' has left its imprint and underscores the intangible labor of people. It's accepted that the term was initially formulated (used) by Fritz Machlup in his research related to the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Crawford, 1983). Machlup observed that the globalization of modern electronic communications would transform the world into something different, or that electronic communication devices, based on audio-visual technologies, would lead to changes in knowledge and social organization (McLuhan, 1962). The newly formed environment, also known as the 'virtual'¹ or 'cybernetic space,' is the source of fundamental features of contemporary society – dematerialization of key social and economic products and the creation of a unified global information space. Hence, it can be assumed that the most essential infrastructure of the information society is shaped by, and owes its existence to modern technologies (Dineva, 2015).

The change in the information society and the development of technologies profoundly affect libraries as centers for information provision. They are no longer just places that safeguard and organize informational resources. The focus is on the effective utilization of information to meet the users' requests in the best possible manner.

Academic libraries are informational hubs established to support the mission of their founding institutions, namely the information generation. And people, with the help of this knowledge, serve society and improve the welfare of humanity. Librarians play a central role in developing processes and policies that utilize organizations' knowledge bases (Rajarm, 2012). In the digital era, academic libraries face serious challenges. Society is becoming more digitized, and people's habits are changing in this direction. The emergence and establishment of this new model of easier and faster communication enable people to realize the enormous benefits of access to knowledge.

The expansive penetration of the internet into our homes allows billions of people to connect daily for one reason or another. This global connectivity fosters easy and rapid collaboration among participants worldwide. Social networks, platforms, and websites enable libraries to enhance their access to educational materials and resources. Innovations allow collections to be stored and retrieved online, redefining researchers' access. Embracing these new applications enables institutions to unite beyond international boundaries and work towards common goals. This means that the growing focus on the accessibility of digital resources undoubtedly affects the role of library specialists.

Being a librarian today is much different than just a generation ago. While the work still involves connecting stakeholders with information, the ways in which materials are stored, preserved, shared, and consumed undergo constant transformation. Social media and digital tools have a tremendous impact on our public discourse. Librarians follow trends and engage in acquiring new skills to apply new technologies for learning, research, and information for their readers. This leads to an increased focus on learning and development within libraries, a change in what is taught in information science courses, and necessitates librarians to continually enhance their knowledge and skills.

¹ The term 'virtual space' or 'virtual reality' is used to denote an environment that does not physically exist but is a reality thanks to information technologies.

Ultimately, libraries not only grant access to information but also play an active and crucial role in supporting the educational process by fostering learning, research, and the development of students' skills. The directions of their impact can be summarized as follows:

Access to information: They provide broad access to various types of information, including educational materials, scientific research, abstracts, books, journals, and other resources essential for learning and education.

Supporting the learning process: Libraries offer resources and services necessary for academic success by assisting students in finding and utilizing the correct information for their projects, research, and educational needs.

Cultivating research and critical thinking skills: Libraries promote the development of skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation of information, and critical thinking, which are crucial for learning and success in both school and life.

Providing aid and consultations: Librarians are experts in navigating and using information sources. They are available to assist students in finding the necessary information and providing the required help.

Supporting educational programs: Libraries strive to meet the needs of educational institutions by offering specialized resources and services that are valuable for the educational process.

Encouraging socialization: Spaces provide opportunities for meetings, group projects, exchange of thoughts and ideas, and organize events for people with shared interests.

2. Information Resources as a Foundation for Student Provision

The main function of the Library of the University of Economics - Varna is, while preserving its academic traditions, to support the education and academic growth of its readers. The services and possibilities offered to the readers are numerous and diverse. The starting point consists of a wide range of information resources provided in the form of electronic databases. Full-text informational resources in the form of digital books, journal articles, and scientific collections cover the global information flow primarily in economics. By mastering strategies for seeking scientific information, users acquire expertise to navigate and work with electronic resources that contribute to the process of creative writing.

Thanks to a series of training sessions conducted by librarians on working with the library's **electronic catalogue** and **external databases**, readers gain knowledge and skills in handling various types of documents (monographs, articles, textbooks, educational materials, conference reports, bibliographies, etc.). Later on they can apply them.

Another primary resource for information provision is the **digitized archive** of publications by the university's faculty from its inception to the present day. Currently, it comprises about 8,500 volumes of educational and scientific literature, including periodicals. It is exceptionally useful for students who can access the full texts of the books through the library's electronic catalogue. The initial digitization of the archival library collection was carried out in 2015-2016 as part of a project for the "Digitization and Preservation of the Documentary History of UE - Varna as part of the cultural-historical heritage of the academic community in Bulgaria". The collection grows by approximately 80 volumes annually.

The Library of the University of Economics - Varna is an integral part of the university structure and as such is a constantly changing living system of library-information resources, methods, and tools for working with them. Traditionally, it offers various educational forms so that its users can navigate through the rapidly growing information flow. New methods and technologies for knowledge delivery are emerging because the academic library not only stores and provides scientific information but also serves as an educational center. Skills for working with scientific documents are formed and developed throughout life. Hence, in response to growing needs and

changing reader behaviours, the library becomes a knowledge hub and a place for communication with users.

The abilities to work with scientific documents (primary and secondary) are fundamental for the further development of students and PhD candidates. Understanding the laws of information dissemination (Bradford, 1934), information interaction in society (Bush, 1945), and the development of the citation index based (Garfield, 1955) on these foundations during the sixties of the 20th century, librarians and scientists interact, educating students and young researchers. The Bradford Law (Bradford, 1934) is extremely useful in bibliographic and scientific work, guiding which publications in different fields of knowledge carry essential (core) information, while others represent so-called information noise. In practice, the educational role of the library as an information intermediary between the knowledge contained in its information resources and the users, is to organize their behaviour in such a way that they master strategies for seeking key, fundamental information and build upon it. This is achieved by acquiring the ability to quickly navigate a continuously changing information environment without getting lost in it.

According to the mode of access, library-information resources can be divided into two categories - internal and external:

- **Internal resources** are those created, maintained, continuously enriched, developed, and provided to its users by the library. Processing the information flow it receives, the Library of the University of Economics - Varna creates its information product - an Electronic Catalogue that consolidates various types of library-information sources:

- a/ books - textbooks, research, monographs, collections of articles, reports, etc.;

- b/ library-information fund of periodicals and continuing editions;

- c/ articles from journals and other periodicals;

- d/ normative documents and standards;

- e/ unpublished documents - a limited number of dissertations, their abstracts, and scientific developments;

- f/ scientific reviews, analyses, and forecasts;

- g/ archive fund - a database with publications by teachers and employees who have worked or are working at the university.

- **External resources** are those which users access through:

- a/ the library's subscription to specific international databases and other platforms;

- b/ useful links to scientific databases, portals with access to electronic catalogues and other catalogues with local and international significance;

- c/ electronic library platforms;

- d/ global scientific search engines;

- e/ Internet portals and directories with a distinct economic profile.

In a dynamically changing educational and scientific-informational environment, the Library of UE - Varna seeks new scholarly and training forms, according to the needs of Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2009) and previous generations. Digitization offers many new possibilities for accessing textual and video information: in the form of electronic databases². Full-text scientific publications in the form of digital books, articles from journals, and collections cover the global information flow with an economic focus and serve as a primary means for mastering material in specialized fields.

Thematic coverage, depth of topics covered, and the opportunity to acquire basic knowledge in scientific bibliographic referencing and correct citation are differentiated for students, doctoral candidates, and lecturers. Practice shows that virtual training-presentations involve teachers who find interest in current standards for bibliography in scientific works and standards for citing

² full-text, scientometric, information used for scientific analyses and forecasts, primarily in social sciences and particularly in economics

information resources. Knowledge of current norms for bibliographic description of books, periodicals and continuing editions, articles, reports, and excerpts from books is valuable and is conducted within each semester. The academic library offers various electronically-based initiatives in accordance with the needs of learners.

The electronic training of students includes a series of presentations introducing the provided information resources (catalogues - electronic and traditional, books, periodicals, standards, etc.), as well as electronic ones from external platforms with databases. Some of these include EBSCO host, Emerald, JSTOR, elibrary.ru, Science Direct, Scopus, Clarivate Analytics (Web of Science), Springer Link, and many others. Writing of student scientific papers³ can be fully supported by these resources. Online student education provides real-time literature search capabilities and mastery of strategies for finding the most relevant information. After each selection of used sources, users are trained in how to compile a bibliography for their scientific work. They become familiar with the rules for bibliographic referencing of cited sources and the methodology for composing and organizing scientific bibliography according to current standards. Practice shows that current standards for bibliographic referencing and citation of information resources are not widely known among students, PhD candidates, and researchers.

The university library operates as a research institute through its information provisioning. Its future begins to depend on access to platforms with electronic books and full-text journals, an electronic archive of publications by lecturers from the University of Economics - Varna, and publications by authors citing university scholars. It is important to note that amidst numerous "challenges in higher education in Bulgaria", particularly concerning the "commercialization of scientific products" (Stanimirov, 2020), the creation of proprietary full-text databases proves exceptionally beneficial. This occurs when we add not just web addresses, which often have a variable and impermanent nature, but the actual full texts of respective books, articles, conference reports, dissertations, etc., to the bibliographic descriptions. This transforms the database into a knowledge source and renders it highly valuable to its target users. The scholarly output at the university becomes visible to students, academic, and administrative staff. This contributes to raising the educational level of its students.

3. Initiatives and services in a changing environment

Traditionally, the university library has always been an initiator of various reader engagement initiatives, but in recent years, it has persistently fought more actively for the attention of its visitors. The aim is to ensure that everyone who enters the institution returns. Responsible management and keeping up with technological progress are engines for success, as libraries are places that sustain the scholarly life of the community, bring people together, and stimulate the creative potential of their institutions.

In the constantly evolving landscape, adapting initiatives and services becomes imperative for every institution, especially in the fields of education and information provision. Within this context, several key directions stand out in which the library of the University of Economics - Varna operates:

- Adaptive training programs: Adapting educational programs to the evolving needs of students and educators is crucial. Offering adaptive learning platforms, courses, and materials that adjust to individual learning paces and styles enhances engagement and retention of knowledge, as extensively discussed in Section 2.
- Digital transformation: Embracing digital platforms for access, storage, and dissemination of information is of paramount importance. This involves transitioning libraries and educational materials to digital formats, providing electronic books, online journals, and databases accessible from anywhere. Sections 2 have focused on the archival and digital resources.

³ academic essays, research reports, coursework, dissertations, master's theses, etc.

- Continuous training and support: Providing ongoing training sessions on the use of digital resources effectively ensures maximum benefit. Support systems for troubleshooting and guidance through electronic platforms are equally crucial.
- Diversification of resources and services with remote access: Offering a diverse range of resources, including multimedia content, virtual libraries, and interactive learning tools, caters to different learning styles and preferences. Providing seamless access to scholarly resources from remote locations enables continuous learning and research.
- Virtual collaboration spaces: Creating online forums, discussion boards, and collaboration platforms facilitates interaction and group work, fostering a sense of community among students and faculty despite physical separation.
- Information literacy programs: Implementing programs that teach students and educators how to critically evaluate and ethically utilize information resources is important.
- Engagement through social media: Utilizing social media channels for disseminating information, engaging with the community, and providing updates on resources and services.
- User-oriented approaches: Constantly seeking feedback and employing user-centered design to enhance and adapt services based on user needs and experiences.

As part of community centers, the library diligently works towards fostering socialization. It creates opportunities for idea exchange and learning through discussions, workgroups, and seminars. Many use the library as a meeting place with friends or colleagues for communication and idea exchange, which supports social connections and brings together people with shared interests. It offers materials and events reflecting the diversity of cultures, languages, and community interests. We'll focus on some of the events that have taken place in the last three years.

"Ask the Librarian" – These are weekly sessions held during semesters. The idea behind this initiative is not to deliver lectures but to assist in resolving specific cases that arise during the process of gathering materials and writing coursework or theses. During the pandemic period, the event takes place online in a virtual room, but later it transitions to the library's reading room. This endeavor is focused on researchers.

"Return Overdue Books Without Fees" – At certain periods, typically at the beginning of semesters, readers who are late in returning their borrowed books can do so without incurring administrative fees.

Training in an Electronic Environment via Google Meet – During remote learning, all seminars organized by the library are held online. Subsequently, this format remains preferable for some researchers, such as PhD candidates and professors.

Virtual Tours Uploaded to YouTube – Showcasing the institution through videos in Bulgarian and English uploaded to online platforms is always a great idea. These visual informational materials are illustrative and highly engaging for the audience.

"Human Library" - For the first time, the university organized a "Human Library." The university's version of it aims to inspire students, break established boundaries, and learn new things in an informal meetings with inspiring personalities. Life's journey is outlined not only by the choice of profession and work but also by a person's attitude toward their surroundings and how they handle difficulties. The event takes the form of a "question and answer" session with an expert from a specific field. This type of presentation goes beyond the traditional framework, providing participants with a different perspective. These events are more entertaining, personal, and engaging. The university's specialties cover many areas, each with its own professionals.

Book Presentations – The library organizes meetings with authors, allowing readers to delve into the book writing process. The interaction between the audience and a first-person narrative is intriguing. Success stories from accomplished individuals are always inspiring for young students and beyond.

Exhibitions – During special celebrations, the academic library organizes exhibitions in collaboration with various departments under different themes⁴. These exhibitions are showcased in the reading room. The library possesses a very rich book collection, which is a source of pride. To enhance interest in the exhibitions, video materials are also prepared. Through virtual tours, interested individuals can familiarize themselves remotely with normative documents from different stages of the country's development and national legislation, as well as valuable theoretical features in various fields.

Donation Campaigns – These initiatives aim to enrich the library's collection and are associated with significant events⁵. Current and former teachers who are dedicated to advancing educational causes and overall cultural enrichment, as well as alumni of the university, can participate in these actions.

Book Exchange Corner – Within the lending service, there is a designated space where students can leave study materials and books without registering them in the library's collection. The goal is to provide an opportunity for readers, in the style of BookCrossing, to share literature without time constraints.

These initiatives help the academic library become a place not only for accessing information but also for communication, collaboration, and the development of an active and engaged community. Over the years, the institution has found more and more like-minded individuals among faculty, students, and alumni.

Conclusion

The contemporary knowledge society undergoes irreversible transformational processes linked with digitization, cloud services, and artificial intelligence. In this context, library and information specialists are part of a societal responsibility upon which these processes rely for proper execution. They must facilitate a transition to a different model of public relationships — one based on "equal partnership and interaction" (Rafailova, 2021)

Knowledge has always been the driving force behind the civilization process, and libraries are tasked to embrace the challenges of modern times. They are expected to:

- ✓ Provide the latest and most modern scientific and educational content;
- ✓ Respond to emerging information technologies and the digital environment;
- ✓ Seek new approaches to serve readers' informational needs.

If Vannevar Bush in the renowned essay "As We May Think" (Bush, 1945) introduced the idea of a machine browsing documents, applied today as a web of hyperlinks in the Internet web, then library specialists in Bulgaria can be helpful. They can integrate into the knowledge society as a living network of access points, thin conductors of natural intelligence and scientific thinking, because even the smartest "search engine" won't teach us to think and create independently. This is the great mission of the university and its library.

In a rapidly changing environment, many initiatives and services not only facilitate education and scientific research but also foster adaptability, innovation, and lifelong learning among students, educators, and the academic community as a whole.

The academic library at University of Economics - Varna strives to find optimal solutions in library services and information management after analyzing the current conditions both within and outside the organization. Responsible management and keeping pace with technological progress will drive success as the establishment sustains the scientific life of the community, unites people, and stimulates the creative potential of the institution it serves.

⁴ "Golden Pages - regulatory acts and legal literature from the library of the University of Economics – Varna" (2023), "Administrative Law and Process - events, cases, and pages" (2022)

⁵ For example, within the Week of Law, the donation event is titled "Small Legal Library"

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