**Rostislav Hladky**
*Palacky University Olomouc, Information Centre*
*www.upol.cz*

# The University in Transition – The Library and its role within the University Information system



Imagine a medieval Benedictine monastery – we are in 1327 A.D. – the monastery contains the greatest library of Christianity. The monks live „by books and for books", however, librarian and his assistant are the only persons allowed to enter the stacks in the labyrinth of the library. The reason is that there are thousands of books by pagan, Jewish, Arab authors, and the librarian has the sovereign power to decide whose mind is mature enough to view these „heresies". These special privileges of the librarians – their free access to all the books and their power to grant or deny any monk's request for books – gives them special power and demonstrates the abbot's lack of trust in a monk's ability to discern between truth and falsehood: „…not all truths are for all ears, not all falsehoods can be recognized as such by a pious soul…" You certainly identify the story of „The Name of the Rose" by Umberto Eco. However, we often could feel the spirit of a medieval monastery library in some Central European academic libraries at the beginning of the nineties. Modernization of such academic institutions is closely connected with defining and achieving the missions of the University, focused on policies for libraries and information technology. The above mentioned are taken from an article I published in the University Journal in 1992 to emphasize the need for a change of habit at the University.

Palacky University in Olomouc, Moravia (the Czech Republic), is currently undergoing its second „rebirth" as it is preparing for the European Union. Established in 1573, the University almost disappeared when the founding Jesuits were expelled from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century. Reborn in 1946 as a public university, Palacky University emerged quickly as one of the newly liberated Czechoslovakia's great centres of learning, only to fall under Communist control a few years later and undergo almost a half-century of totalitarian domination. Academic freedom, even freedom of speech, became difficult to maintain. In 1989 Palacky University arose again, once more a centre

of free learning. Now it faces the challenge of a new century, not simply in transition from one age to another, but a University in transition from totalitarian control to an open democratic society, from the "Eastern Bloc" to European Union.

No single change would symbolise that transition more effectively or be of greater assistance than that which took place in the Information Centre and central University Library, the heart of any university in any age, but especially when the free exchange of ideas is paramount and communication instantaneous and world-wide.

There were institutional and historical reasons for separating the library, fragmenting information services and maintaining clear boundaries between library and information services. However, at the beginning of the nineties, we argued the need for a University-wide vision on the role of information and communication technologies in defining and achieving the mission of the University. The structure of the University information centre was formed as a unity of equal and co-operating parts that had different roles according to the amount and character of the service provided. The core of the centre became formerly isolated places as faculty libraries, the computer centre, the audio-visual centre, and the editorial centre, which were all restructured. The idea of the Information Centre came from the demanding goals, which directed Palacky University's development to achieve a status comparable to that of universities abroad. After lot of discussions, constructive debate and policy decisions about libraries and IT in the Academic senate and on board of University management, the Information Centre was to prepare and realise the information system of Palacky University, including a broad range of information in all necessary forms (from traditional printed information to digital electronically-processed information). Very often the main topic of mutual talks was: Centralized versus Distributed, but ICTs obviously eroded the boundaries between these formerly distinct functions.

The Information Centre of Palacky University in Olomouc has existed since January 1, 1991, as a special academic institution operating within the whole university and incorporating an Audio-Visual Centre, Computer Centre, Conference Service, Centre for Distance Learning, University Press (Publishing Centre with University Bookstore) and University Library.

The opportunity for such an integrated Information Centre and Library has existed at Palacky University in a uniquely attractive and compelling form. In 1991 the University received from the former Czechoslovakian government a gift of a remarkable building in the very centre of its "campus".

In autumn 1999 all departments of the Information Centre, together with Palacky University Archives, were newly located into the historical building of the Theresian Armoury[1], which had been hugely reconstructed in terms of time and money during the period of 1995-1999.

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[1] The Theresian Armoury dates from approximately 1768 when Olomouc was the northern edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Empress Maria Theresa had extensive fortifications built in Olomouc, including the Armoury, to repulse Prussian incursions. A symbol of the Empire's power and authority, the Armoury – covering roughly 60,000 sq ft (5,600 m2) at the ground floor including courtyard – was built directly in front of the Archbishop's Palace. The building became the property of the Czechoslovak Army

The premises are optimally utilised to suit the needs of particular parts of the Information Centre and other University departments, because their activities often bend together. At the same time the Centre meets need for refreshment, rest and social and cultural life (housing a restaurant and an art gallery).

## Audio-visual centre

Palacky University Audio-Visual Centre (http://www.avc.upol.cz) provides services connected with audio-visual technologies and production. They mainly produce educational, advertising and documentary video programmes and video recordings, as well as reportages and documentaries, create multi-media programmes, and last but not least they produce audio records and provide counselling in the field of video technologies.

## Computer centre

In accordance with the conception approved by Palacky University, the Information centre is responsible for comprehensive computerization of the University, introduction of information systems used by the University's administration in managing students' data, the organization of studies, statistical processing, and, not the least, for setting up an appropriately configured computer network (UPONET). Having passed through several stages of development (assisted by the Computer Centre), the network evolved into the computer network of CESNET that forms one of the components of the regional centre of computer networks. The university wide area network (UPONET) was built using high capacity fibre-optic cabling that serves both the administrative and information needs and is connected to CESNET and Internet.

Palacky University Computer Centre (http://www.cvt.upol.cz) caters for the conception, development and operational management of computer and communication technologies supporting the advancement of science and research and teaching along with the administration of the University. It is responsible for implementing new modern technologies (high performance computing, video conference, e-learning) in these fields and their technical support, including the training of both staff and students.

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in 1918 - 1939, then it continued to serve as a military facility during the Nazi occupation 1939-45, and under Communism from 1945 until 1989. In 1991 building ownership was transferred to Palacky University and now it serves students and the community of Olomouc as the Information Centre.

## Conference service

Conference Service of Palacky University provides complete services for congresses, symposiums and other activities concerning science and education. Services include creating participants' database, organizing and preparation of venues, technical equipment, printing publications, organizing accompanying programmes and publishing information on the Internet.

## Centre for distance learning

This centre (http://www.cdiv.upol.cz/) is responsible for organisation and administration of distance education at Palacký University and represents the University in contacts with other institutions of distance and open education on both national and international level. Its activities include designing concepts, methods, co-ordination and organisation for the preparation, elaboration and realization of educational projects, including their accreditation and technological support. It guarantees logistics of distance and open education programmes (promotion, recruiting and admission of students, record-keeping and contacts with students as well as distribution of study materials, gathering completed assignments and administering examinations).

The statute of the Multi-Country Programme Phare Study Centre was brought to life on the 1st May 1998, with the beginning of Phare funding. Within Phare Programme, in the sense of the approved technical project, the CODV and Audio-visual centre have been equipped with state-of-the-art computer, office and audio-visual technologies.

## University press

Palacky University Press (Publishing Centre with University Bookstore) (http://www.upol.cz/vup) provides comprehensive publishing, reprographic, printing and distribution services. Its attention is focussed on publications supporting the main activities of the University, its institutions and faculties but also on those dealing with more general topics. The former editorial centre grew up into the Palacky University Press in the past ten years, and now belongs to the "top ten" publishing institutions in the Czech Republic (among 2500), considering the annual production.

## University library

The Library is the first central library at Palacky University. At the beginning of the nineties the relevant units were historically fragmented – there were numerous individual department libraries that were under-staffed and underdeveloped, there was no central catalogue system, the access and research capabilities were very limited at that time. The new library system of Palacky University has been based on the idea of a single wide Information Centre, which allows a coordinated development of the university

library-information service. It is an open stack arrangement, with on-line catalogue, electronic book check-out system, open to students, staff and the general public, thereby greatly increasing accessibility and usability of books and materials over the former system. The University Library is the largest part of the Information Centre, both from the point of view of space and employees. It consists of the Central Library placed in the Armoury as well as faculty library-information centres. These faculty centres are interconnected and provide support to students as well as faculty staff.

With the formation of the University Information centre an electronic union catalogue started to rise. Hundreds of mutual talks and trainings took place, there were conflicts at times, but gradually, a corporal product came into being, and its present qualities are indisputable. After all, the Unix version of Tinlib is operating in the central library on the new central server, and all the library services (technical and public) are processed centrally through the university wide area network (UPONET). The Library (http://tin.upol.cz) enables utilization of information resources in a wide range of forms, either directly on the premises or in the departmental reference libraries at individual faculties, or through the UPONET computer network with those accessible in this way. Faculty Libraries are integrated part of the University Library, their staff deal with specialised library-information services, provide a specialised literature search, inform and advise.

The Central Library is open 66 hours per week from Monday to Saturday. At present, the library is a blend of electronic resources and print holdings, and has active groups of students (2500 visitors per day) using ICT resources and PC rooms as much or even more than the bookshelves.

## *Information Centre in transition*

When speaking about Library and Information services the important point is that all the units of Information centre are separate, but have interrelated activities. Their information strategies cannot be isolated. The main task of the Information Centre is to provide service to students and academic staff, look for and find new ways of improving the services.

By now it is 13 years the Information Centre has been "on the road", yet it is still in the stage of rapid transition to become more flexible information and communication structure. It's impossible to solve problems like this without greater support from the University. Some managers might well find IT issues to be boring or too technical. They have very often other priorities and issue agendas, dealing with enrolment, recruitment, research and teaching concerns. However, a crucial part of top management at university must know a power of IT systems in organisation and must be able to enforce it.

Information centre now faces more budgetary problems than technical. As a public institution, Palacky University is annually subsidized by the state, and these funds seem to be inadequate for day-to-day operations. Well, I learned in various university committees that the Information centre and the Library are defined as parts of the central administrative structure of the University. I do believe that this is not only wrong, but it

is difficult to change. It is wrong because it creates a motive for reducing the budgets of the units that are not tied to their role in higher education. Thus, academic staff try to prune and shrink administrative costs to shift more resources to teaching and research. But this process – because of the way libraries and IT unit are categorised – creates incentives to cut the budget of libraries and information services. The university has allowed libraries and information services to be defined by budgeting systems, rather than by real models of research and teaching in higher education. And they have been defined as part of the problem. I was told – as I am discussing this problem – that we need to follow the overall university budgeting system, which places librarians and the library in particular categories. I think we can find a way to solve this problem, but it will demand political will – and cost us time and energy to get out of this box.

## *Summary*

Information systems are very vital and dynamically developing part of the life of the University. Past years at Palacky University brought couple of changes into life, including those concerning the Information Centre. Nevertheless, there was no reason to change the system in principle, or even to dissolve it, and replace it with another system. It seems that the fourteen year old decision of the university management resulted in creation of flexible and vital information system, with lot of fairly extensive functions and services for users.

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