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Libraries in crisis: a glimpse over Greece and Cyprus

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Abstract

The current global financial crisis is the biggest economic upheaval for all libraries around the world and especially for those in Southern Europe. Due to this crisis, Greek and Cypriot libraries face many problems deriving mostly from their state funding and personnel reduction. The paper focuses on the effects on operation and services of Greek and Cypriot libraries, and the impact caused by salary reductions and personnel layoffs on their actual survival. A survey was conducted through an online questionnaire available in Lime Survey to all Greek and Cypriot academic, public and special libraries. Responses were gathered and analysed. In conclusion, the paper proposes some ideas for the development of new services and activities that may help libraries to deal with the effects of financial crisis and help them stay alive and to reactivate their users support.

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1. Introduction

The global financial recession appeared in Greece in 2009, as a result of the over-indebtedness of the public sector. The Greek society is undergoing an enormous socio-economic crisis, which has brought dramatic cuts in vital sectors such as education and culture. The financial crisis in Greece has affected the state funds and the budgets for all Greek public organizations. The budget cutbacks seem to be significant and strain fundamental public services. Cypriot financial crisis was manifested in 2012; it involved the exposure of Cypriot banks to overleveraged local property companies and to Greek state bonds, which lead to a “haircut” of deposits in spring of the same year. As the public sector has been mainly affected by the crisis, libraries became victims of the hard austerity measures that followed.

The governments had forced not only to reduce budgets, but also to make major reductions in salaries. We decided to examine both the situation in Greece and Cyprus, because are parts of the Greekspeaking community with grate similarities in social and cultural aspects of life. In library sector there are similarities and differences. The

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information scientists (professionals) that work in Cyprus have in their majority been educated in Greek Library Schools and their professional profile is molded within the Greek system.

Differences can be detected in two areas: status of libraries within each country and particular conditions deriving from pure economic factors. As far as status of libraries we see the following parameters: in Cyprus, the Anglo-Saxon tradition influences the state organization and especially sectors such as the educational system; this has a positive impact on libraries (public and academic) as they are valued more and their usefulness is highly stressed. However, in Greece libraries were at the bottom of the state's priorities even before the crisis. A good example of this attitude is the fact that the operation of many public libraries is based on a grant and activism taken by a non-governmental organization, which is the legacy of a well-known Greek ship-owner. The same organization has undertaken the cost and all the work for the National Library's new building. Furthermore, the Greek academic libraries that had a rapid development before the crisis mostly because of the EU funding and the consequent hiring of information professionals are rapidly declining after the severe budget cuts. In this respect the status of libraries in Greece was always somewhat lower than that of their Cypriot counterparts and financial crisis has made things worst.

As far as the particular conditions of financial crisis in each country and their impact on libraries, it should be mentioned that they indeed play an important role. The fact that the financial crisis in Cyprus started three years after the Greek one is a major factor. The consequences of budget cuts and salary reductions have not sunk in yet in people's minds and lives as much as have been in the Greek fifth year of hardship. This leaves libraries in somewhat different state in each country.

However, the global economic recession has revealed that the role of libraries within the crisis environment creates both «threats and opportunities». The efforts of libraries to adapt to the ongoing changes and form a survival- development plan within the new reality, it is global phenomenon. According to a survey conducted among 1442 U.S. libraries of all kinds, the 33.22% of them suffered budget cutbacks in 2009 while the percentage of reductions rose to 43.72% in 2010 (Guarria, 2011). In Norway, although the general expenses for culture had risen by 27%, the expenses for libraries were reduced from 20.2% of the cultural budgets in 2003 to 15.9% in 2009. In the same period, library branches declined from 892 to 784 with consequent reduction in library personnel (Sveum&Tveter, 2012). It is remarkable that in Japan, despite the fact that there has been an increase in the construction of new Library buildings, funding for employing librarians has declined (Varheim, Ide&Lju, 2013). At the same time and independently of the crisis, changes in the field of information increased digitization and records management projects. The increasing importance of information in all socio economic aspects is expected to force the necessary adjustments in libraries that will create the basis for their survival and set the means for their recovery from the recession. In many ways it is expected that the crisis, in this area will create opportunity and libraries will act as incubators for innovation within the information environment.

Undoubtedly libraries play an important role in supporting learning and research. They provide a wide range of information services to diverse communities and users. Academic libraries seek prestige by expanding their collections with the aim of supporting learning. Public libraries put emphasis on collections and services with the aim of meeting competitively the growing needs of their users. In other words, libraries, no matter the type, have the mission to promote knowledge, learning, research and culture to the public. Nowadays, libraries have to seek ways to collaborate with publishers, foundations and organizations in order to support effectively their role and fulfil user's growing expectations. Needless to say, that the role of the librarians is changing as well. Librarians have the tendency to be advocates, educators and publishers (Gashurov& Kendrick, 2013).

The present study illustrates the effects of the crisis on Greek and Cypriot libraries. It includes all types of Greek and Cypriot libraries, and focuses on the problems that they are facing. Moreover, the paper introduces ideas for new services and activities that may help the libraries play their important role within the particular socio economic environment that the financial crisis has created.

In particular, the purpose of this paper is to:

- present the status of Greek and Cypriot libraries
- portray the crisis consequences on library operation, services and personnel
- manifest the changes on librarian's job market (salary freezing, dismissals, etc.)

Furthermore, an analysis of financial and other official documents of the Greek and Cypriot libraries was made in order to report the imposed cuts in expenditure and to reveal the effort of libraries to find ways to respond to the crisis.

2. The survey

A questionnaire was developed based on our experience as academic staff and given the relevant literature in specific disciplines (Kostagiolas et al., 2013; Hickey, 2012). The questionnaire was uploaded to the web using open source software in June 2013. It was circulated in Greek and Cypriot academic, public and special libraries through mailing lists and personal communication. It was clarified that one response of every library is needed. The survey included questions which fall into five categories: information about the library's name, type (academic, public, special), sector, and communication details, such as phone and email, the ways and the degree in which the crisis has affected their performance, budget, salary, personnel recruitment and services, their perception on economic crisis and if it had influenced user needs; the areas in which they should be focusing during this period, for example the open access tools, and the changes in the administrative model, the cooperation and the expansion of their role and services. The participants were asked to respond to the questions on a 5 point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a large extent), along with open ended questions.

A total of eighty onelibraries belonging to different sectors returned the questionnaire. Sixty twoquestionnaires were excluded from the analysis since they were incomplete. The majority of therespondents are Greek libraries (mainly academic) and to a large extent the results reflect the situation in Greek libraries. However, despite the fact that only 12% of the responses are from Cypriot libraries, are sufficiently representative, as derived from significant institutes of all the categories.

3. Results

One of our basic questions was to determine in which sector the participants belong to. Most of the libraries are in the public sector (64.20%) and a further 22.22% are also part of what is defined in Greece as the broader public sector. Specifically, Greek municipal libraries and Cypriot university libraries have a combination of public and private funding and this places them to the "broader public sector". Finally, a 13.58% of the participating libraries belong to the private sector. Figure 1 presents the libraries' perception on the level of crisis impact on their institution. This was mainly expressed in budget cuts. The majority of the libraries (85.18%) have decreased budgets in 2013. This had an impact on book purchases, subscription renewals and/or purchases. In addition, reductions were imposed on operating expenses and equipment upgrades (Fig. 2).

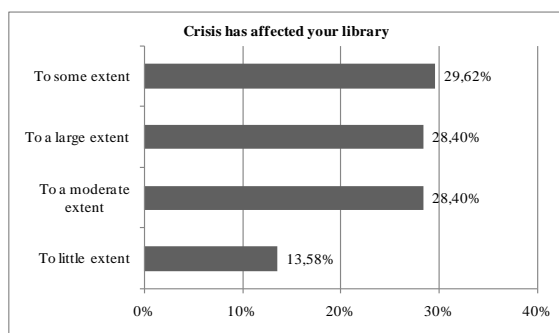


Fig. 1. Crisis has affected the libraries to a large extent.

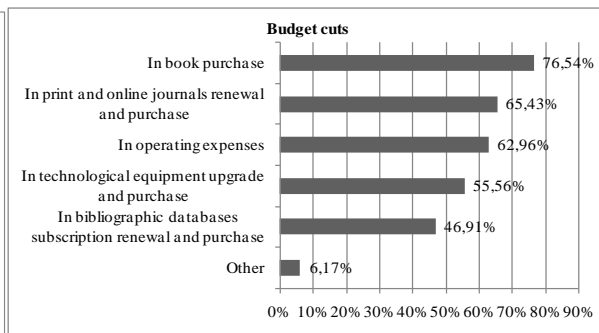


Fig. 2. Budgets cut offs.

The above figures indicate the downgrading of all library operations. This fact has made difficult even the prioritization of needs and the making of relevant adjustments as the total affliction of all library functions left little room for such manoeuvres.

The next two questions deal with the most important factor in the successful operation of a library: the human capital. The most negative aspect of the crisis was indicated by 79.02%, of our participants as the salary reductions which ranged from 10% to over 30% depending on employee's level and qualifications (Fig. 3).

Furthermore, hiring freeze and the stopping of any new recruitments lead to severe reduction on library personnel, thus making everyday operations difficult. Almost 25% of respondents indicated that it is in their immediate priority to recruit stuff as soon as budget will allow it (Fig. 4).The survey records the unpleasant

situation in libraries until the summer of 2013, when everybody thought that things will be in a recovery process by mid- 2013. Unfortunately the new developments in September 2013 exacerbate the problem: the Greek Ministry of Education following the austerity measures has a plan of firing almost the 1/3 of the administrative staff of the two biggest universities in Greece, including library staff.

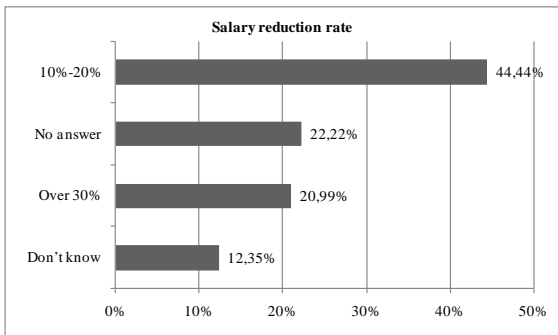


Fig. 3. Salary reduction rate.

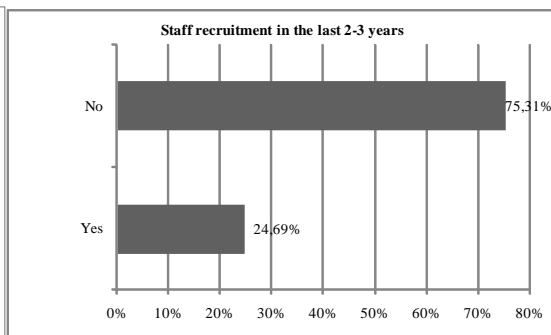


Fig. 4. Staff recruitment.

On the other hand, and beyond staff and salary reductions, library staff succeeds in a remarkable percentage (54, 32%) to enhance or develop new services (Fig. 5). It should be noted that user information needs have not been affected (or reduced) by the effects of economic crisis (Fig. 6). Information needs are remaining the same or be slightly affected while information providers have been reduced in numbers and resources.

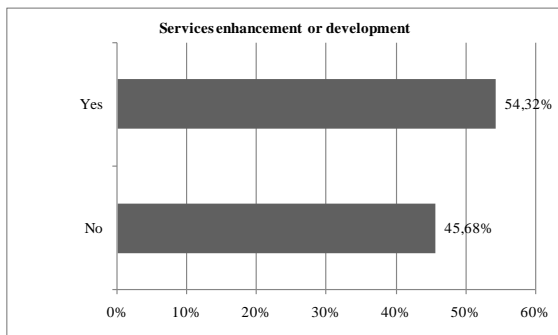


Fig. 5. Services: enhancement and development.

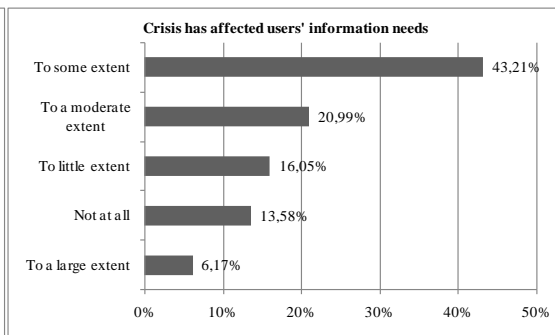
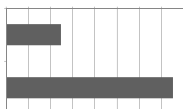


Fig. 6. Change of information needs because of the crisis.

It is not certain that the services which enhanced or created in libraries were designed to respond to needs arising from the financial crisis. What is certain is that these services will strengthen the relationships between the library and its users in an extremely difficult period. These relationships will determine the role and future of libraries. However, many studies(e.g. American Library Association, 2009; Rooney-Brown, 2009) show increased use –both in regular and virtual visits- of libraries in recent years of recession.

Most of the participants believe that libraries have (or should have) strengths and competence to facilitate the users that have been affected by the crisis at least to some or a moderate extent (Fig. 7).They could help users by providing book lending and ILL services, WWW access, areas for study, cooperation and meetings and added value sources (Fig. 8).

In addition, they could act as points of electronic job searches. Furthermore, libraries can serve as points for providing lifelong learning seminars and skills development.



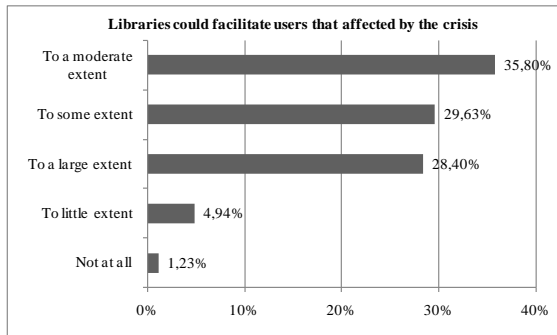


Fig. 7. Facilitating the users.

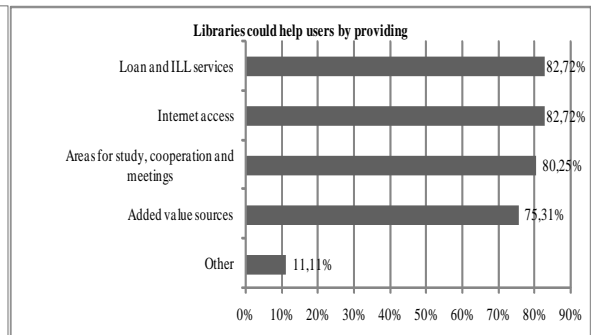


Fig. 8. Helping the users.

The answers are indicative of the libraries' social orientation and their will to regain the importance of physical space (building) of libraries, offering contemporary services to their users. A study from US shows that there is an increasing trend among citizens who believe that the library can help each one of them to gain free access to materials and resources (Mostad-Jensen, 2009).

Figure 9 presents that the majority (in different scales) believes that open access could be a vehicle for battling with the crisis. Especially, open access software tools like Google Scholar, Koha as an ILS solution, Blogger for blogs etc., open access e-journals, e-books and repositories should be utilized (Fig. 10).

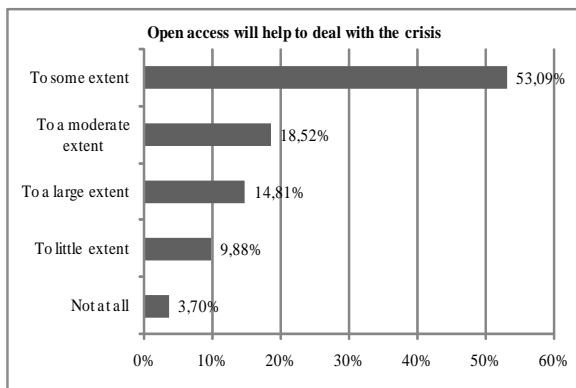


Fig. 9. Using open access.

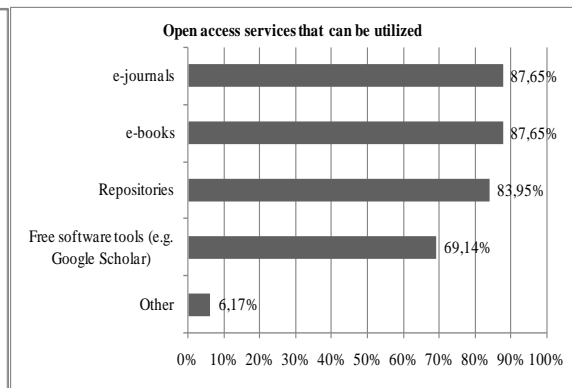


Fig. 10. Open access tools.

Librarians support open access which promises to remove both the price barriers and the permission barriers that undermine library efforts to provide access to the journal literature, and scientific information generally. In addition, they invest in the scientific and valuable content that the repositories organize, provide and preserve. Even universities that are in the process of establishing repositories are positive in self-archiving (Kyriaki-Manessi, Koulouris, Giannakopoulos & Zervos, 2013).

Figures 11 and 12 present other possible solutions to deal with the effects of economic crisis. The majority believes that the management model should change and it should include solutions having expanded cooperation in infrastructure and services. Consortia with statutory role should be strengthened and developed. "Administrative consolidation with other information organizations in local level" collects relatively high number of hits given that the majority of responses derived from academic librarians. It should be noted, that academic librarians used to regard their activity exclusively within the boundaries of the academic institution (Fig. 11). Respondents agree that libraries should expand their role in providing information literacy and WWW access. They also believe libraries could guide citizens in using e-government services and in solving everyday practical problems. A large number of our respondents (70.37%) felt that the library should strengthen its ties with the users through cultural educational and entertainment events (Fig. 12).

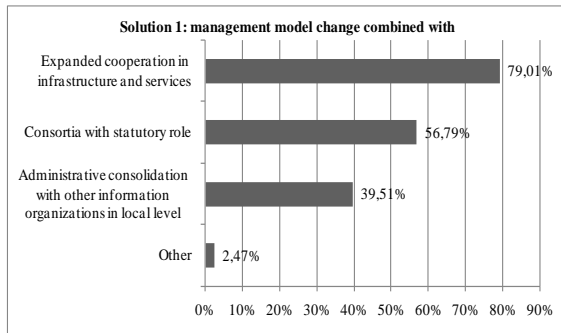


Fig. 11. Changing the management model.

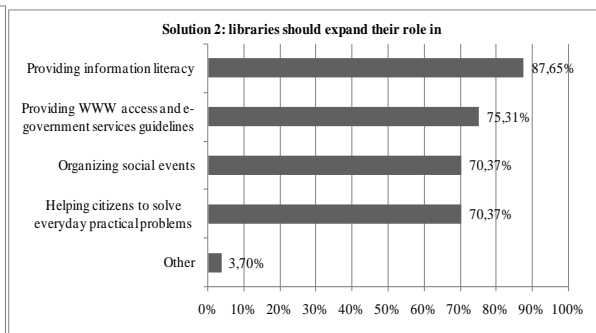


Fig. 12. Expanding libraries role.

4. Conclusions

Research indicates that libraries are in the verge of collapsing. In the beginning of the crisis libraries tried to adapt to the new environment and the disruptive changes, but at the time of writing this report it seems that they cannot survive the crisis impact.

The survey revealed that even the Cypriot libraries and in a large extent the academic libraries of both countries that had more resources to resist, are inflected. However, there is a common sense that libraries may change and adapt and transform into an answer (“antidote”) to the crisis, which is beyond economic measures, but rather a moral and social obligation.

The public libraries should enhance their social role by providing free Internet access, by participating in social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), by organizing cultural events, by supporting information literacy programs and by supporting lifelong learning and every other –not typical and official- education. Using volunteers and pursuing grants and supporting actions of local political and social organizations, they will enhance social cohesion and solidarity. It is indicative that 94% of the responders point out that the libraries can play a role and may support the users that have been affected by the crisis.

Almost the majority of the participants agree that the expanded cooperation between information organizations is crucial for their viability. Even the administrative consolidation of libraries with other information organizations (e.g. archives, municipal archives) it is essential at least in local level (Giannakopoulos, 2008). Information integration has already started in multiple digital libraries and repositories, with most representative example *Europeana* (Garoufallou, Banos & Koulouris, 2013) that harvests and administers heterogeneous digital content from libraries, archives and museums in European level.

Academic libraries should participate actively in the educational process –as it seems that libraries maintain and increase their role in education of all levels (Bikos, Papadimitriou & Giannakopoulos)– and the gaining of new skills that will lead to employment for many of their users. They have to organize information literacy programs, help the researchers, implement institutional repositories, participate in e-class administration and support distance learning programs.

The implementation and use of open access technologies and services will be crucial. Libraries as non-profit organizations are the recipients –the “clients”– of the results of the universal open access movement. Open access tools have been already implemented and utilized especially by the academic and research libraries that produce scientific content.

However, the key to the success is the human factor. Without information professionals with experience and specialization libraries will not accomplish their social and developmental role.

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