

Academic Librarians and Project Management: An International Study

Silvia Cobo Serrano and Rosario Arquero Avilés

abstract: Because information and documentation units in libraries have responsibility for an ever-increasing number of projects, this paper aims at analyzing the discipline of project management in library and information science (LIS) from a professional perspective. To that end, the researchers employed quantitative and qualitative methodology based on a questionnaire of 17 items sent to academic librarians. The questions dealt with the geographic origin and institutional affiliation of the respondents, the education of the librarians, their professional experience, and the library projects in which they have been involved. The survey also asked about the presence of project management as courses in library and information science studies.

Introduction

In 1996, Liz MacLachlan stated, “The LIS professional must actively prioritize a commitment to continuous professional development. The information industry is growing fast and the LIS profession is experiencing very rapid change.”¹ Libraries and other information services must adapt to rapid technological progress and to users’ shifting demands.

One way to meet these challenges is to implement operational and strategic planning in information and documentation units, followed by management of the projects that are planned. The advantage of this management strategy, as Sheila Corral observed, is that “if we think of strategic planning as a coherent framework for a combination of projects directed towards a common purpose, then *project management* becomes a key competence for implementing our plans and achieving strategic change.”² Barbara Allan defines project management as follows:

Project management involves using a range of management skills and techniques to successfully carry out a project. The types of activities involved in project management include: thinking ahead, carrying out research, planning what happens where and

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when, managing the people and resources, monitoring the project, changing the plan, communicating with people, evaluating the project.³

Given the abundance of projects resulting from operational planning in libraries and other information services, project management is an appropriate tool that makes it possible for these cultural institutions to reach their objectives.

The objectives of this research paper are the following:

- To identify academic librarians' education and training in project management.
- To analyze academic librarians' perceptions of their project management skills and their participation in library projects.
- To discover the perceptions of the library staff on project management courses in the LIS curriculum.

Literature Review

LIS academic literature describes numerous examples of project management experiences. Robert Hull and Susan Dreher discussed a project for the digitization of photographs and other nonelectronic visual materials.⁴ Rose Holley focused on the training and retraining of library professionals, the development of working networks, strategic planning, and the drafting of working policies.⁵ Fillipa Marullo Anzalone examined a system of rotating human resources in the Biblioteca (library) di Ateneo at the Università degli Studi di Trento in Italy.⁶ Kwasi Darko-Ampem studied the conversion to digital format of 10,000 bibliographic records and 250 periodicals at the library of the Faculty of Engineering and Technology of the University of Botswana.⁷

Project management techniques and skills are also used in digital collections and for the implementation of virtual reference services. Mary Piorun and Lisa Palmer discussed the creation of a digital collection to preserve the intellectual work of PhD candidates at the Lamar Soutter Library at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.⁸ Among the projects involving virtual reference services might be considered the implementation of a chat service in the libraries of the University of Kansas in Lawrence and the incorporation of QuestionPoint, an online reference service, at the University of Central Florida Libraries in Orlando.⁹ Both efforts emphasized the importance of project management software and project working culture.¹⁰

Other authors have shown interest in librarians' perceptions of project management. Shirley Chambers and David Perrow reported on a survey sent to academic library staff who were members of the British organization SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) and to the managers or directors of a project called eLib, the United Kingdom Electronic Libraries Programme. The survey explored the use of project management tools and software in academic libraries in the United Kingdom.¹¹

Jody Condit Fagan and Jennifer Keach distributed a survey through four electronic mailing lists and obtained responses from 121 Web project managers.¹² Finally, Jenn Anne Horwath analyzed project management techniques in libraries in Ontario, Canada. She sent a questionnaire consisting of 28 items through seven e-mail lists as well as professional and social networks. Additionally, Horwath conducted interviews to investigate the topic in more detail.¹³





Methodology

Based on academic librarians' professional experience, the authors posited that the librarians' perceptions would help identify weaknesses, strengths, trends, and best practices in project management in the LIS field. To confirm or disprove this premise, this paper aimed to analyze how project management courses in university training affected the working environment of information professionals from all over the world.

Additionally, the authors identified LIS university programs whose academic curriculum included at least one course on project management. To make up the list of these courses, we consulted the following sources:

- The IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) *World Guide to Library, Archive, and Information Science Education*, which includes 1,033 records on education in LIS.¹⁴
- A catalog drawn up by Tom Wilson from the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom on education in LIS from 1996 to 2013.¹⁵
- An international study on the geographic distribution of project management courses in the LIS sphere.¹⁶

Accordingly, the authors identified 70 universities throughout the world. An online, self-administered questionnaire was by far the most suitable tool to gather data from academic librarians at those institutions.

The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions divided into five sections. The first section identified the geographic origin as well as the institutional affiliation of the academic librarians. The second section analyzed their university education and their training in project management techniques. The next section sought information on the librarians' participation in projects and on the use of project management methods or software. The fourth section collected the respondents' perceptions on the presence of project management courses in LIS education. Finally, the fifth section invited respondents to comment on other concerns related to the research.

The questionnaire, designed in English and Spanish, was validated by means of a pilot trial. The authors invited 4,979 academic librarians to participate in this study via e-mail. The closing date for the questionnaire was January 16, 2015. Eventually, 649 responses were collected.

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Results

Geographic Origin and Institutional Affiliation

Most of the librarians who participated in the study worked in the Americas or Europe. The largest number of responses came from North and South Americans, who numbered 372 LIS professionals representing 58 percent of the whole (see Figure 1).



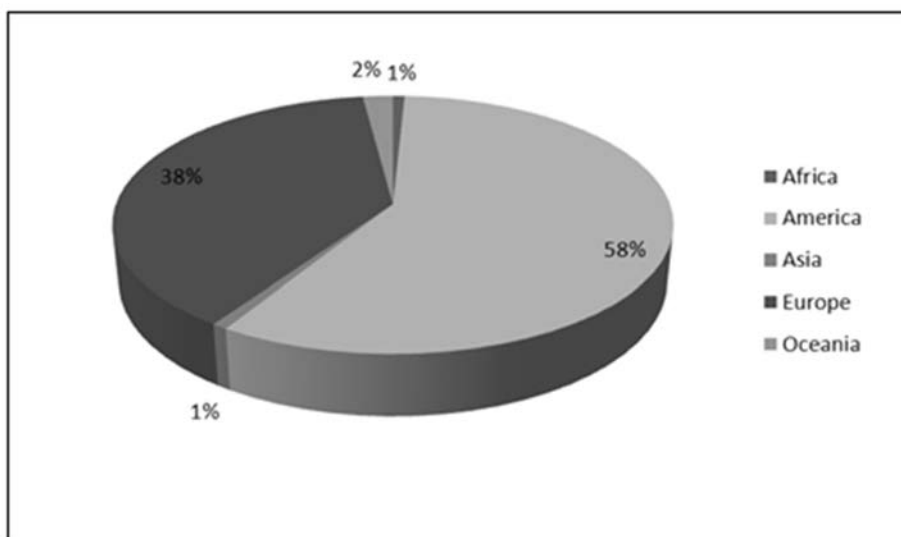


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of responses by continent

The second leading continent in geographic distribution was Europe. Responses came from professionals working in the libraries of the 22 European universities, amounting to 38 percent of the 640 people who responded to the question.

The high response rates in Europe and America contrasted with low response rates in Africa and Asia. The lack of participation from those continents may have resulted from the small number of African and Asian universities participating in the survey as well as the few professionals identified in their institutional websites (34 in Africa and 89 in Asia). Thirteen academic librarians participated from Oceania, including Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands.

The questionnaire enabled respondents to specify the university where they developed their professional activity, making it possible to determine which institutions led in the active participation of their library staff. Figures 2 and 3 show the American and European universities where there were 10 or more participants.

The university departments where the respondents worked were divided into two main groups. The first group consisted of seven departmental units mentioned between 20 and 70 times: (1) reference (including information seeking, academic advising services, customer service, and bibliographic information units); (2) management (supervision, project management, administration, leadership, or service management); (3) in-house materials use and circulation (including loan, reservation, return, and interlibrary loan units); (4) technical processes (such as cataloging, acquisition, and metadata); (5) collections (especially collection management and selection); (6) technologies (for example automation, digital initiatives, or institutional repositories); and (7) support services for teaching and research. As Figure 4 shows, the second category includes serials libraries, library user training, archives, dissemination, and preservation departments as well as other units where nonbook materials are managed.

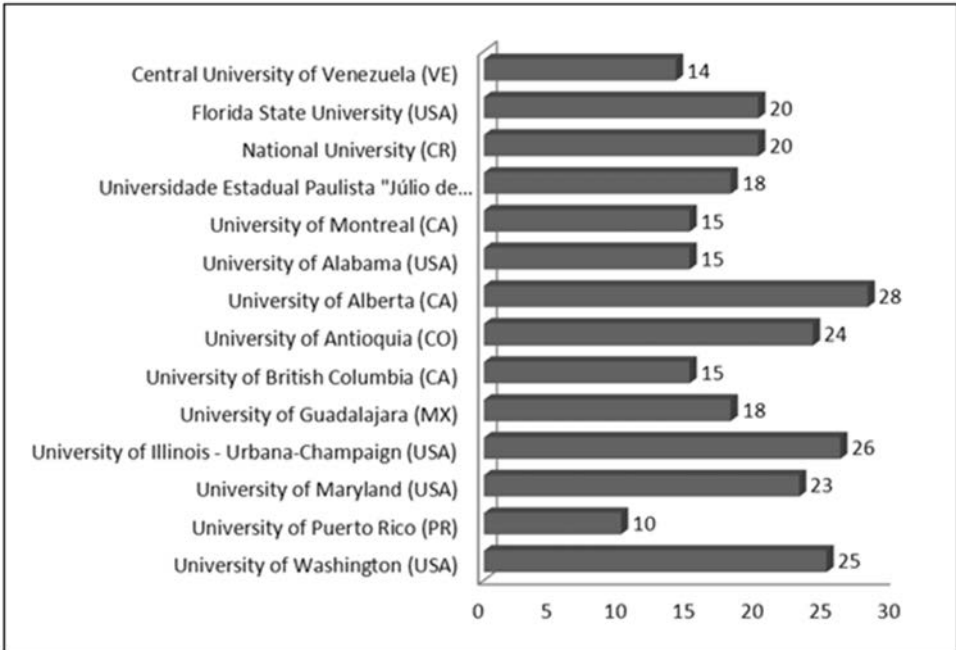


Figure 2. Universities in North and South America providing the largest number of responses

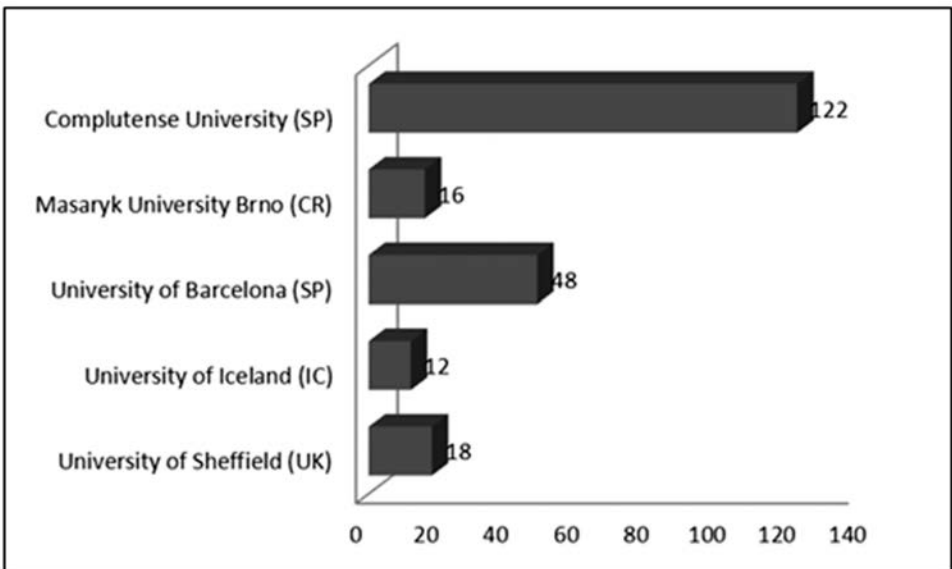


Figure 3. Universities in Europe providing the largest number of responses

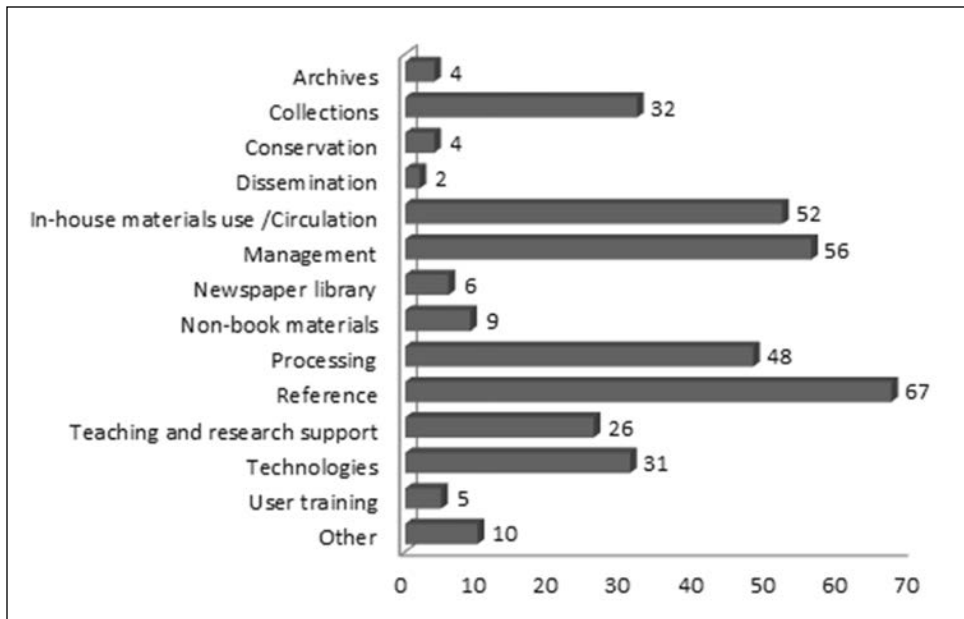


Figure 4. Library departments in which respondents work

The professional level of the academic librarians comprised three categories: director or manager, assistant librarian, and library page. Of the participants, 220 information professionals identified themselves as assistant librarians, 154 as directors, and 84 as library pages. Eighty-two percent of the participants who found themselves managing projects had a relevant professional category.

Regarding gender, approximately 70 percent of the librarians were women. As for the age range, 31 percent were between 51 and 60, followed closely by those aged 41 to 50 (27 percent). The third group was in the 31 to 40 age range (24 percent).

Education

The second section of the questionnaire focused on gathering information about the participants' education and training. A total of 561 academic librarians provided information about their university education. The question was multiple choice, with four possible responses: (1) bachelor's degree (436 responses, 78 percent); (2) master's degree (306 responses, 55 percent); (3) doctorate (42 responses, 7 percent); (4) other education (96 responses, 17 percent).

Out of the 436 professionals who declared having a university degree, 36 percent reported having received university education in LIS. As regards master's degrees, of the 306 professionals who marked that option, 215 had studied in a LIS postgraduate program, representing 70 percent of the whole. Twelve professionals had studied in a doctoral program in LIS, representing a minority of participants in this research study.

The objective of the second question in this section was to discover the academic librarians' education in project management skills. An overview of the results can be seen in Figure 5. The options independent learning 1, independent learning 2, and in-house training at work suggested that professionals felt a need for training in proj-

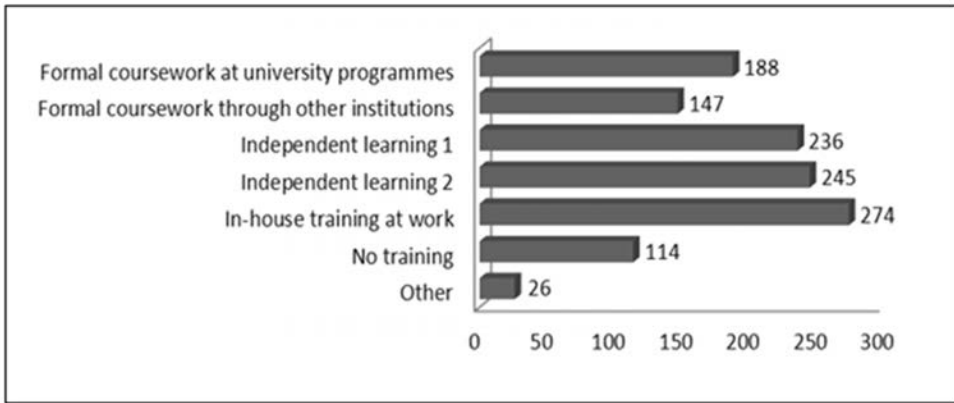


Figure 5. Where academic librarians learn project management skills: independent learning 1 refers to participation in conferences, seminars, and webinars; independent learning 2 focuses on reading scientific articles or monographs

ect management skills. Independent learning 1 refers to participation in conferences, seminars, and webinars, whereas independent learning 2 focuses on reading scientific articles or monographs. More than 200 participants selected these options. Professionals at libraries and other information services had increasingly become part of work teams to implement new projects. However, their lack of training in project management indicated a need for courses or workshops to equip them with the knowledge to properly manage library projects. In addition, 481 respondents complemented their knowledge by self-directed learning, through participation in conferences, seminars, webinars, or reading scientific articles or monographs.

The percentages and number of responses received regarding formal and nonformal education did not differ greatly (33 percent and 26 percent, respectively). Finally, a smaller number of professionals confirmed they had no education in project management (20 percent).

Professional Experience and Library Projects

In this section, 33 percent of academic librarians stated they had participated in three to eight library projects in the last five years. This finding emphasized the importance of including project management courses in LIS university degrees due to the high number of projects in which academic library staff become involved.

Another relevant result refers to those participants who had managed more than eight projects, representing approximately 13 percent of the sample. In contrast, 28 percent of those questioned stated that they had participated in fewer than three projects, whereas nearly 26 percent of the academic librarians reported that they were not involved in any library project.

Eighty-two percent of the participants who found themselves managing projects had a relevant professional category.

After considering these results, it was essential to go into detail and identify the participants' roles in these projects. In particular, nearly 83 percent stated that they were members of the project instead of project managers (46 percent of the respondents).

Surprisingly, neither specific methods nor software in library project management had become particularly popular, as about 91 percent of the respondents declared in

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each case. Among the most commonly used project management methodologies were the *Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*; Scrum (a group of methodologies in which requirements and solutions evolve through collaboration between teams); PRINCE2 (PROjects IN CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENTS), a method that deals with the

organization, management, and control of projects; and the logical framework method, in which the objectives of the project are clearly defined and agreed upon. Among the most relevant software, academic librarians specified Basecamp, Microsoft (MS) Project, GET CAESAR, and Asana. Most academic library staff indicated that they had either high or average knowledge of project management skills, 36 percent and 12 percent, respectively.

Finally, the third section of the survey focused on the relationship between management skills and library strategic planning. Specifically, 85 percent of 459 professionals responded positively to that question, confirming that students and information professionals need to train in managerial techniques, strategic planning, and operational planning.

Project Management in LIS Education

This section of the questionnaire asked two questions directly connected to the inclusion of project management courses in the LIS curriculum. Forty percent of academic

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library staff considered these courses of high importance in the university curriculum, and they justified their opinions with their professional experience. Additionally, 121 of 459 participants (26 percent) believed that these courses were extremely important in their field of expertise and working environment. This result indicates the importance

of taking leadership and management courses so that academic librarians can fulfill the roles and responsibilities expected in a library environment.

In the second question, academic librarians were asked to state the educational level (undergraduate or postgraduate) where project management courses should be offered as well as whether these courses should be obligatory or elective. Those ques-



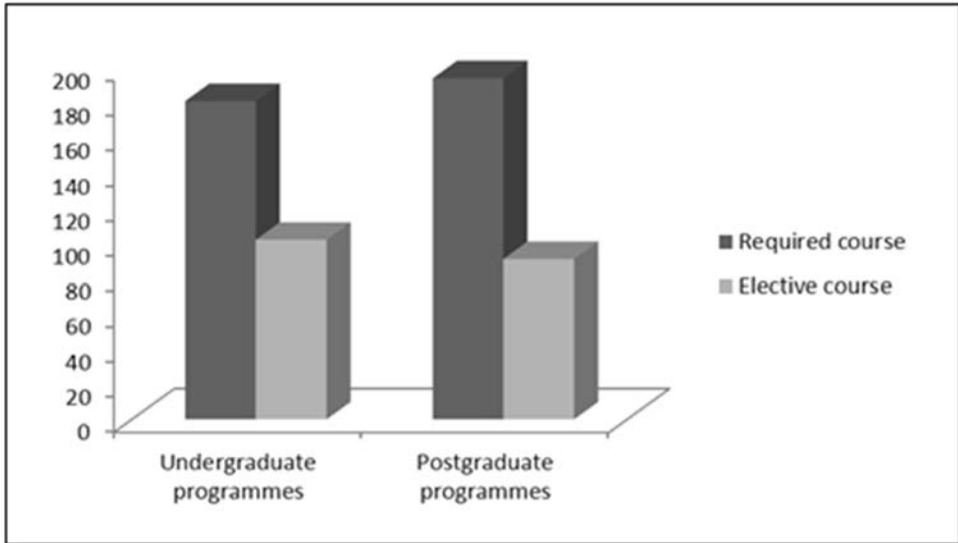


Figure 6. Respondents' opinions about where project management courses should be offered and whether the courses should be obligatory or elective

tioned claimed that project management courses should be included in all four stages of LIS university education (see Figure 6). A nearly equal number of participants called for obligatory courses both in bachelor's (181) and in master's programs (194). Elective courses in undergraduate and postgraduate programs received nearly equal numbers of votes, 102 and 90, respectively.

Final Remarks

A number of respondents considered project management an essential educational concern in the LIS professional sphere. Other comments related to barriers or weaknesses that impede the successful adaptation of project management skills in the library working environment. The most significant hindrances are a lack of human, economic, and technical resources; complexity in the use of project management software; and an absence of conceptual awareness of project management techniques.

Conclusions

Project management has become part of the everyday work of many academic librarians; most of them have participated in three to eight projects in the last five years. This high participation contrasts to the limited training received in their university education. Consequently, this research suggests the importance of providing courses on project management, especially methodology and software, in LIS university degrees.

Both directors and library assistants are involved in projects in their library environment. For this reason, one requirement for hiring in these professional categories might be certification that the candidate has trained in project management.

Furthermore, the results confirm a high degree of encroachment by other professions into library work, with less than 40 percent of library professionals trained in library

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and information science. Many of the professionals who currently manage information services have no specific training in LIS and so might lack the knowledge and competence to properly manage the projects they lead. Such managers might be advised to take courses and workshops to make up for their lack of training. The results also confirm the relationship between strategic planning, operational planning, and project management,

which again stresses the need to offer these subjects for the adequate management of libraries and information services.

Finally, the addition of courses on project management seems highly valuable given the usefulness of the topic in the professional sphere. Hence, we recommend that LIS curriculums increase requirements for project management training.

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