

The National Library of Greece: Its Situation and Prospects for Development with a Note on Academic Libraries in Greece

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Abstract

The National Library of Greece (NLG) has had a long and checkered career. Founded in the earliest years of the modern Greek state, it has long been a repository of books, newspapers, and other materials relating to Greece and the Greeks. It has weathered all manner of crises and neglect, but more recently it has benefited from new financial support, much of it from the European Union. Although there is much work to be done, it is moving ahead and stands poised to take its place among the national libraries of the developed world. A full accounting of the history, collections, services, and operations is here provided by the former Director of the NLG followed by an extensive note on the more positive situation of academic libraries in Greece.

Introduction

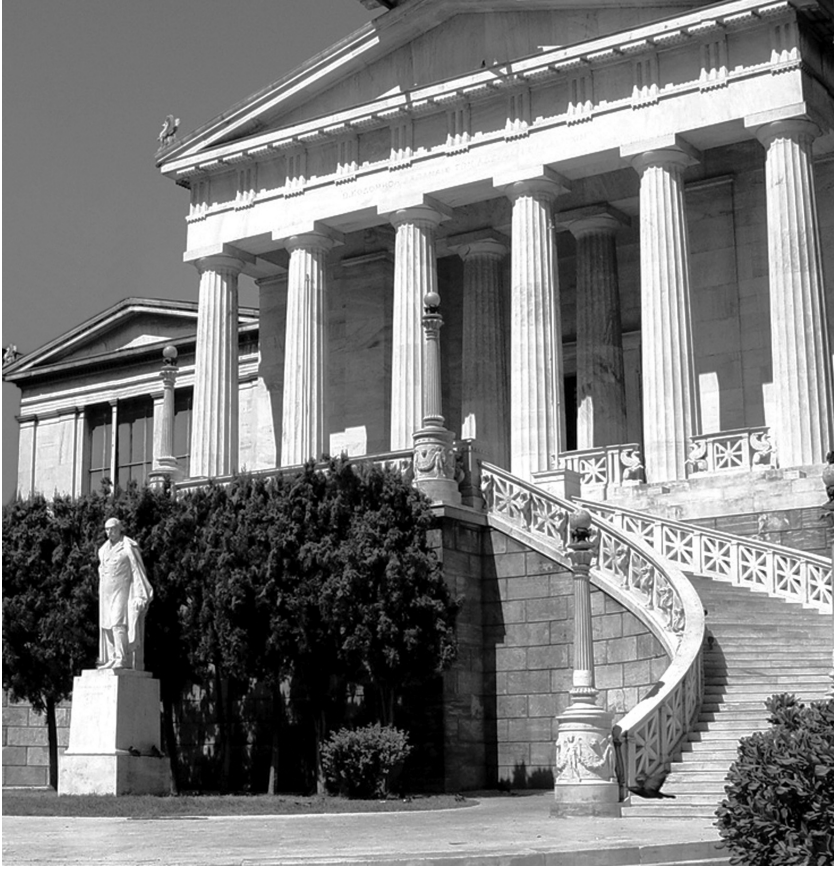
Libraries are cultural institutions that play an important role in societies. They exist to serve the educational, research, and cultural needs of their client groups. In response to the different needs of diverse client groups, various types of libraries have evolved. For example, academic libraries exist mainly for the fulfillment of certain informational needs of the academic community in support of research and education. Despite the fact that national libraries are found almost universally and can be distinguished as a particular type of library, they differ greatly from one another with respect to their origins, functions, and statuses in their respective countries (Goodrum 1986; Tyilina 1976; Line and Line 1979). The difficulty in determining the common elements which make a library “national” is reflected in the numerous attempts that have been made to determine and categorize them. National libraries, however, are usually defined in terms of their functions and responsibilities. The traditional

role of a national library was the acquisition, conservation, and provision for use of all significant publications published in the country. In this respect it functioned as a “deposit” library and was subject to various laws and other mandates regulating its operations. Consequently, a national library normally performed all or some of the following functions: production of a national bibliography, maintenance and updating of a large and representative collection of foreign literature about the country, compilation of union catalogues, publication of retrospective national bibliographies, and service as a national bibliographical information center (Lor 1997). From the time of its establishment, these were the main roles of the National Library of Greece.

Historical development

The establishment of a national library in Greece was among the first steps taken by the newly liberated Greek nation to create a key national institution as an expression of national identity and a repository of the national heritage (Katrachouras 2004). The National Library of Greece (NLG) was founded in 1828 by Ioannis Capodistrias, the first Governor (head of state) of the fledgling Greek state. Incorporated with an archaeological museum, it was the first cultural institution established in modern Greece and was initially housed in a newly-built orphanage on the island of Aegina. In 1832 it was separated from the museum and declared an independent entity with the name “Public Library.” It was moved to Athens, the new capital of Greece, in 1834. That same year the first Legal Deposit Law in Greece was enacted. This law required that all valuable manuscripts and books located in monasteries, churches, and other public places be transferred to the library. Every publisher was also obligated to deposit in the library copies of each book, newspaper, and periodical printed in Greece. In March 1842 the Public Library was united with the University of Athens Library and in 1866 the two libraries were consolidated into one with the present name, the National Library of Greece. In 1890 the Library’s numismatics collection and all the manuscripts relating to numismatics were moved and incorporated as the National Numismatics Museum. The National Library was permanently moved to its present neoclassical marble building in the center of Athens in 1903. This building was constructed especially for this purpose with donations by the Vallianos brothers from the Ionian island of Cephalonia. Plans were drawn up by Danish architect Theophilus Hansen and executed by the famous German architect Ernest Schiller.

Despite this magnificent building, the Library developed slowly and by the early twentieth century it was languishing. In 1920, it was



The National Library of Greece.

granted a degree of operational independence in an effort to improve administrative efficiency. Things did get better, but in 1943 new legislation revoked this relative autonomy and the Library became a department of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. This decision had negative effects both on the administration of the library and its development. In 2003 the legal status of the Library changed once again. New legislation clarified the mission and administrative structure of the Library and addressed related matters such as legal deposit, copyright issues, deposit of electronic sources, and the like.¹

Collections

Most items in the initial core of collections in the NLG came from donations by Greeks and philhellenes. The implementation of the Legal Deposit Law as well as the acquisition of important collections, such as those of former monarchs, resulted in the rapid enrichment of its collections. Today the Library's collections include printed books, journals, newspapers, pamphlets, university dissertations, manuscripts, codices, and audiovisual materials. The main subjects covered are history, literature, philosophy, theology, education, letters, and art with the natural and physical science less extensively represented.

An inventory done in 2004 resulted in the following figures, which represent the most accurate account of the National Library's holdings:

Collections	Number²
Books (titles)	500,000
Books (items)	700,000
Journals and newspapers (titles)	12,500
Journals and newspapers (bound volumes)	150,000
Journals and newspapers (current subscriptions)	700
Audiovisual materials	500
Microfilms	4,500
Musical editions	6,500
Maps	3,000
Pamphlets	30,000
Dissertations	3,000
Documents (historical and personal archives of politicians, authors, etc.)	450,000

There are also 130 incunabula (books printed before the invention of typography in 1501) and almost 2,500 early prints (dating before 1600). First and rare editions of famous publishers such as Aldus Manutius, Yuda, Froben, E. Stephan, Elsevier, et al. are well represented. Among the books in the collections are valuable artistic albums and rare illustrated volumes. The NLG also has a valuable collection of intaglio, lithography, and wood prints as well as a series of 3,000 prototype pages of valuable works of various European engravers donated by George Gennadius, the first Director of the Library and father of Ioannis Gennadius, benefactor of the famous Gennadius Library of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens.

The Department of Manuscripts houses 4,500 codices, of which most are ecclesiastical and legal documents, along with six papyri (three Greek, two Egyptian, and one Coptic). Some illustrated codices of the

New Testament, containing miniatures and other illustrations, are of great value and frequently studied by Greek and foreign researchers and artists. For example, *Δια τεσσάρων* (*Among the Four*), a gospel written on a marvelous piece of parchment dating to the end of the eleventh century, is decorated in an extraordinary way and is considered the most valuable manuscript in the Library. In addition, the Department of Manuscripts has three *Chrysobulla* (Byzantine imperial documents) and 40 *Sigilia* (Orthodox Patriarchal documents), some of which have excellent colored images. It also has eight palimpsest manuscripts. Located in the same department is the historical archive of the Greek fighters of the 1821 Revolution against the Ottoman Turks. This comprises 200,000 documents relating to the Greek Revolution and the years following. There are also a large number of printed proclamations from the Revolution and various family archives in this collection. Significant facsimiles of religious and classical codices, such as one of the famous Sinaitic code, also reside in this department.

Assessment

There are various ways to assess the state of a particular national library. It can be compared to national libraries in countries of equivalent size and level of development or a benchmark can be used for comparison. Both techniques require a significant number of statistical data to develop evaluation indicators appropriate for comparisons.

As such data are not available for the NLG, a peer assessment based on personal knowledge acquired during my term as its Director is given. This assessment covers the relationship of the NLG to its external and internal environments. The fact that legislation describes mainly its roles and activities related to the external environment, its assessment is based on the degree to which the NLG fulfills the mission and roles assigned to it by the legislation under which it operates.

The following table outlines the legislated mission of the NLG and an assessment of the degree of its fulfillment.

Mission	Degree of fulfillment
<p>a) To Develop and preserve (in any given language of form) the national collection, which includes material from Greece as well as material produced abroad that is connected or relevant to the people, the country, the traditions, and the culture of Greece. To collect, process, preserve, protect, present, and offer accessibility to the materials in the collection to everyone equally, keeping in mind freedom of education, information, and research.</p>	<p>Material produced in Greece: There is significant coverage of older material although a large number of books are not in the collection despite being listed in the catalogue. There are many gaps in later material despite improvements in recent years.</p> <p>Material produced abroad related to Greece and the Greeks: Such material is almost non-existent in the library.</p> <p>Materials in other formats (electronic, a/v, etc.): Only recently has the NLG collected material in such formats. As a result this aspect of the collection is very limited and little utilized.</p> <p>Preservation of material: Preservation of material is very poor. A vast number of books, along with most codices, manuscripts, maps, documents, and other rare materials, are badly in need of repair and/or preservation.</p> <p>Presentation and disposal of the collections: The lack of space creates many problems. A great number of books and newspapers are not accessible at all.</p> <p>Protection of the collections: Protection of the collections from fire, theft, and other hazards is poor. The fire protection system in the main building has never been put into operation and, despite recent measures, theft protection for all collections is limited.</p>
<p>b) To develop activities for the improvement of the cultural and intellectual life of the country</p>	<p>Cultural Activities: The NLG was involved in very few cultural activities in the past. Efforts have been made in recent years, but still the NLG's role in those activities is still limited.</p>

Mission	Degree of fulfillment
c) To be a national bibliographic and information center through the acquisition of relevant materials	<p>Bibliographic center: Any actions to justify the role of the NLG as a bibliographic and information center, such as the development of Union Catalogues, dissemination of bibliographic records, etc. are almost nonexistent.</p> <p>Recipient of mandatory deposit per the Legal Deposit Act: Since the earliest years of its establishment, the NLG has been the recipient of materials mandated by the Legal Deposit Act. Due to inadequate resources, however, it has never been able to comply fully with this mandate. The situation has improved in recent years, but there is still not complete coverage of all published material in Greece.</p> <p>Support for other libraries: Such support is almost non-existent. The NLG does not play any role in the development of the Greek library infrastructure such as coordination of library networks, joint projects, and the like. Some support has been provided in the form of donations of duplicate copies of books to small libraries and the development of library manuals such as Universal Machine Readable Cataloguing (UNIMARC).</p>
d) To compile and publish past and current national bibliographies and catalogues of manuscripts, printed material, and all other formats in its collections as well as those in other libraries.	<p>Compilation of past national bibliographies: This has not occurred for every year and there are long delays in publication.</p> <p>Current bibliography: This was non-existent until recently. After the introduction of the relevant Informational Technology (IT), the situation improved.</p>

Mission	Degree of fulfillment
e) To function as the official national center of directions, guidelines, and standards in matters relating to bibliography, preservation, conservation, digitization, material restoration, and production of relevant reference materials.	<p>Compilation of library science standards: This has not been accomplished.</p> <p>Compilation of directions, guidelines of preservation, digitization, etc.: This has been very limited to date.</p>
f) To provide the assignation of international numbering for books (ISBN), periodical publications (ISSN), and music (ISMN).	<p>Formation of a national library and information science policy: There is not a formal national policy on library and information in Greece. Different ministries and institutions are implementing such policies, but the NLG has never played a role in such policies. Even the establishment and operation of a Council of Libraries is still unfulfilled.</p> <p>International numbering: The NLG provides ISBN services at an adequate level, ISSN services at a moderate level, and ISMN services at only a limited level.</p>
g) To cooperate with other public and private organizations, both in Greece and abroad, on library issues as well as participate in research and developmental projects	<p>Cooperation: Cooperation among Public Libraries in Greece is very limited and the NLG plays no role in this.</p> <p>Realization and coordination of national projects on library and information science: Such national projects are almost non-existent. The government has never financed the NLG for such activities. As a result there is no such role for the NLG.</p>
h) To represent Greece in the international arena on issues that relate to its mission.	<p>International representation: The NLG represents Greece in cooperative efforts with the Conference of European National Libraries (CENL), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and other such organizations.</p>

Any assessment of a library must have a clear picture of its resources, operations, and internal environment. To fulfill its mission, an institution like the NLG needs appropriate resources in adequate numbers and capabilities. The most important resources needed for efficient operation are: a) staff b) finances c) collections and d) infrastructure. The following table assesses the resources that are available to the NLG in these areas and their statuses:

Resources	Status
Human	<p>Staffing: The permanent staff of the NLG is fewer than 80 individuals, of whom only 12% have any formal education in library and information science. The staff is entirely inadequate for the operation of both technical and reader services. By way of comparison, the National Library of Holland has 349 employees, that of Sweden 370, and Hungary's 570 (CENL http://www.nlib.ee/cenl/members.php).</p>
Financial	<p>Finances: For the past few years the annual budget of the NLG has been €420,000, although in some years less than €300,000 was provided. Given that more than 80% of the budget covers fixed expenses only, such as rental of buildings, electricity, heat, postage, telephone, etc., monies for any development are almost non-existent. Recent improvements in infrastructure were realized mainly with co-funding from the European Union and other international organizations.</p>
Collections	<p>Collections: The NLG has the largest collection of Greek publications in Greece as well as substantial special collections. It is estimated that around 70% of all Greek publications are represented in its collections.</p>
Infrastructure	<p>Library building: Space at the NLG is in very short supply. Thus it is unable to organize and provide proper library services, adequately house its collections, and serve patrons efficiently. The rental of other buildings has improved the situation, but the resulting fragmentation of services and collections has further contributed to the deterioration of services and internal operations.³</p> <p>IT infrastructure: For years the NLG was operated with outdated IT hardware and software and without IT specialists and support services. The installation of modern hardware and proper library automation software has improved the situation and projects for the development of digital collections are in progress.</p>

More and better resources alone are not enough to change and improve the efficiency of an organization if the proper conditions for their use are not in place. Such conditions and requirements that affect the efficient use of resources are dependent upon existing internal organizational culture, administrative practices, the use of IT, the acceptance of change by both staff and administration, the housing conditions of the collections and provision of services, the technical skills and morale

of the staff, and the support of the government ministry responsible for oversight and financing.

The following table shows the most important conditions and requirements of the NLG, along with an assessment of their situation:

Conditions and requirements	Situation
Use of IT	<p>IT: The adoption and use of IT has been very slow until recently. The situation has improved in the past few years with the introduction of computer-based cataloging, digitization of newspapers, introduction of OPACs (Online Public Access Catalogues), and the like. Cataloging of periodical and newspaper collections are in progress, but the lack of staff with proper expertise and knowledge has necessitated extensive outsourcing of operations. This has retarded the efficient use of financial resources, impeded the development of internal expertise, and had other negative consequences.</p>
Service provision	<p>Reading room services: Internal borrowing in the main reading room is provided at an adequate level. Nevertheless, the poor conditions of the collections' housing, the limitations of the catalogue, and outdated service practices have had a negative impact on NLG use by readers. The situation in the Manuscript Department is also negatively affected by lack of space, bad environmental conditions, and the dearth of staff with knowledge in paleography and other specialty areas.</p> <p>Interlibrary loan: There is no interlibrary loan service.</p> <p>Electronic services to users: Such services are extremely limited.</p> <p>Services to other libraries: Such services are very limited.</p>
Conditions of service provision	<p>Service provision: Due to a lack of space and proper infrastructure, environmental conditions for technical and reader services are not up to standard.</p> <p>Working environment: Conditions in the main reading room have improved in recent years with the installation of air-conditioning, OPACs, photocopying services, access to e-journals, and the like, but much remains to be done.</p>

Conditions and requirements	Situation
Internal culture	<p>Personnel issues: Inefficient management and conflicts in library's management demoralize the staff. The fact that there is no formal organizational chart of the library's administrative structure makes things worse. The situation has improved lately, but progress is slow. The fact that the government put off the selection of a new Director and the library for several years has had a negative effect on operations.</p>
Acceptance of change	<p>Change: For years both management and staff were extremely resistant to change. The situation has improved in recent years, but there is an urgent need for new staff and professional development for existing staff.</p>
Collection housing and building conditions	<p>Physical Conditions: Although improvements have been made recently (repair of the main building, restructuring and improvement of the collection stacks, organization and opening of the Department of Periodicals, etc.), environmental conditions remain sub-standard and positive actions are needed. There are also significant problems with the maintenance of rented properties. Some improvements have been made of late, but much more are needed.</p>
Support	<p>Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Y.P.E.P.TH.): For years support from the ministry which supervises, controls, and finances the NLG has been only nominal. This is a major reason for the NLG's present predicament.</p> <p>Academics and Intellectuals: The academic and intellectual communities in Greece have rarely expressed concerns about the negative situation of the NLG. Publishers associations have voiced their concerns about conditions at the NLG and other libraries on several occasions, but little has been done.</p>
The public image of the NLG	<p>Public relations: Due to the inefficient operation of the NLG for many years, its public image is generally negative. The situation has improved in recent years with exhibitions of special collections, the founding of a support group (Friends of the NLG), and the like, but much effort is still needed to reverse the negative impression that still persists among the public.</p>

Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence presented above more than demonstrates that the NLG does not fulfill its mission in a satisfactory manner. Despite the improvements of recent years, the Library still faces significant challenges. It does not receive adequate funding from the state, resources are very limited, and conditions for the proper operation and housing of collections are woefully inadequate. Dealing with all these problems is a complex and difficult task. From the experience of my three-year term as the Director General of the NLG (Feb. 2002–Feb. 2005), I have concluded that only a series of coordinated actions by: a) the State b) the management and staff of the library and c) the research and intellectual communities are needed to have any truly positive effects on this lamentable situation.⁴

The aim of such efforts must be the transformation of the NLG into an organization that has the resources and the operational prerequisites for carrying out its mission in a way identical to those of similar libraries in developed countries, particularly those of the European Union. In this “new” national library, sufficient financial resources will be provided to achieve its mission, the required personnel (in sufficient numbers and with appropriate qualifications) will be hired, adequate space will be available for storage of the collections and provision of services, collections will cover all publications in Greece as well as publications in other languages that refer to Greece and the Greeks, research collections will be developed in designated areas (or whenever there is a need), electronic sources will be developed and made available, access will be granted to electronic and traditional collections through cooperation and mutual agreements with other libraries, quality services will be provided to users, effective acquisition policies and material processing practices will be implemented, an overall preservation and material protection plan will be drawn up and executed, and the needs for appropriate equipment and technology will be met.

In this effort:

- a) The Greek state, through the Ministry of Education, will take practical actions to demonstrate its true commitment to creating such a National Library.
- b) The management of the Library must have the appropriate technical knowledge for this task as well as a real willingness to support the mission of the NLG and not simply further personal ambitions, as has happened several times in the past.
- c) The staff must play a critical role in the transformation of the NLG by being ready to accept change and work hard to effect it.

- d) The academic, research, and intellectual communities, both in Greece and abroad, must show, in every way, their interest in creating and supporting a Greek national library capable of preserving our country's cultural heritage and providing a high quality environment in which research and intellectual needs can be met.

Note on the situation of academic libraries in Greece

In assessing the situation of Greek academic libraries historically, it is evident that until quite recently the importance of a good library has not been deemed a critical element in the Greek system of higher education.⁵ Traditionally, library services have been provided in *Spoudastiria* (seminar rooms) or in departmental libraries, which were usually inadequate. This practice discouraged the development of a central comprehensive library in most Greek universities.

In the past 15 years, however, this situation has changed dramatically. During this time, fundamental changes have occurred and new educational and research practices have been adopted. As a result, the Greek academic community has changed its attitude and recognized the importance of libraries as fundamental and essential parts of an infrastructure for conducting effective research and providing better education to students.

The Greek state also recognized the practical contribution of libraries to the improvement of higher education and hence to the overall development of the country. A program for the development of academic libraries was funded with a combination of monies from the Greek state and (mainly) the European Union. As a result of those efforts, Greek academic libraries made significant steps toward modernization in a relatively short period of time. Substantial progress is evident, both in the operation of libraries and the development of information networks. All libraries have improved their infrastructure, taken advantage of information technology and networks, computerized their catalogues, offered access to reference material via the internet, and provided services hitherto unknown to their users⁶.

The implementation of library projects by universities and technical educational institutions (TEIs) has enabled both to:

- construct new modern library buildings at several institutions including the National Technical University of Athens; the Universities of Ioannina, Crete, Patras, and Thessaly; the Technical Educational Institutions of Epirus, Serres, and Lamia; and others.

- improve existing library buildings with the creation of more reading rooms and stacks.
- enrich book and scientific journals collections through the facilitation of on-line access to e-journals, CD-ROMs, on-line databases, etc.
- exploit information technology and networks, automate catalogues, and digitize reference and other library materials.
- organize and provide new, previously unknown, library information services.
- create cooperative structures such as the Consortium of Greek Academic Libraries (HEAL-LINK), which offers on-line access to thousands of full-text scientific journals and bibliographic databases.⁷
- deal with significant staff shortages by hiring qualified librarians and information experts.
- implement programs of continuing education for staff members.

From this general picture we can conclude that Greek Academic Libraries have achieved an acceptable level of operation and provision of services similar to those at other European universities thanks to the realization of the reforms described above. Today, however, Greek university libraries face the same new challenges confronting libraries worldwide—the transition of publishing and information dissemination from print to electronic forms. As part of the European university libraries system, Greek university libraries are now in a position to respond to these challenges in a way that guarantees to their users full support for their research and education needs.

NOTES

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¹ (Law 3149/2003 <http://www.libret.gr/1.pdf> Access 17 February 2008)

² Due to difficulties in housing, it is difficult to count the large collections of pamphlets, multiple copies of books, newspapers, etc. As a result these figures are approximations.

³ In 2006 the Stavros Niarchos Foundation announced plans for a new building to house the NLG, but work on this project has not begun.

⁴A detailed account of actions needed for solving the problems at the NLG is included in the Strategic Plan for the NLG Development I prepared and handed to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Zachos 2008).

⁵For an in-depth evaluation of Greek university libraries, see Zachos (1994).

⁶Statistical data on Greek academic libraries are collected and analyzed by the Unit of Total Quality Management of Academic Libraries located at the University of Ioannina Library (<http://www.mopab.gr>).

⁷<http://www.heal-link.gr>

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