**TITLE**

# A Delphi Study on Perceptions Concerning Training for Information Professional in Academic Libraries in Italy

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**ABSTRACT:**

The purpose of this study was to review the level of awareness of the importance of education and training through association policy and organisational practice in the profession of librarianship in Italian academic libraries. A total of 50 librarians were surveyed from university libraries in the North and Centre of the country, distributed through e-mail, limiting the investigation to development of professional and para-professional staff.

In particular, this study covered post-qualification education and training activities for professionals, including those opportunities which have educational or training potential, such as conferences and seminars, alongside with formal/informal educational activities: (short courses, lectures, courses for further qualification, in-service training programmes) and all those activities that do or do not lead to a recognised qualification not provided by qualifying bodies.

## INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that academic librarians play a strategic role in assisting users as undergraduates, graduates, faculty professors and other institutions in the research process, and that it is really important that librarians possess all the technical skills that will help them to perform their job efficiently and effectively. The situation of academic libraries in Italy does not seem to confirm such assertion. Therefore, in order to define it, the present study was thus formalised:

1) to examine and review a sample of academic libraries to establish whether an awareness of the importance of continuing staff training and education is reflected through policy guidelines of each, or in the event of no such policy being formulated, through its practice;
2) to review the policy of professional organisations and to examine whether a national strategy for professional training has been devised in order to offer opportunities to extend the period of initial formative education, to update and refurbish possessed skills and competencies;
3) to try to understand of the role played by academic librarians relatively to training offered in Italian academic libraries, at the same time looking at the state of the art of some other realities (ex.UK, USA) in order to draw hypothesis and suggestions to enhance training.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology used in this study, following the scheme of the Delphi method, is in-depth questionnaires which record the perspectives of those involved in interpreting the role of librarians with at least a degree (Humanities, Modern Languages...) and post-qualifications diploma in Library Science.

The research questions were as follows:

- What are the perceptions of library staff in Italian academic libraries towards training programs?
- To what extent do Central Administration apply training practices in their staff development programs?
- Who determines the training needs?
- What is the role of the manager or co-ordination centre in the staff learning process?
- Who should be responsible for providing information technology training opportunities for library staff in Italy?

## ASSUMPTIONS and LIMITATIONS

The participants to the questionnaire were selected so as to ensure representation of different viewpoints of experts and practising librarians and of a variety of subject areas (business, science, humanities).Experts were accepted as volunteers for an interview prior to a selection based on their publication records as well as their stature as delegate at libraries conferences.

Anyway, it was assumed that experts and practising librarians were in a sufficient way informed on the state of the art of library training and able to assess the needs for professional staff.

Limitations are:

1) This dissertation focuses on the University libraries in Italy only;
2) The data retrieved from the responses to questionnaire have not been weighted according to the library size or geographical provenience (North, Centre, South of the country);
3) Respondents were asked to report mainly their perceptions, not objective estimations.

## RESULTS

The Delphi method was used to achieve a consensus inventory model of the perceptions above described and to find out the most important trends in changes observed in the library environment by academic librarians.

The intent was to develop a comprehensive scheme around the key question that is "*what is the perception of library staff around training and information technology innovations in Italian academic libraries?"* and Delphi has proved an effective method of eliciting input, defining the problem of the study, and arriving at consensus among a group of respondents.

An open-type questionnaire and a five-point Likert type scale were used. The Likert type scale indicates the degree to which the respondents agree or disagree with each statement; it was created initially as a means for improving standards of measurements in social research by the

use of response categories; these categories enable users to make a choice from a range of possible values in questionnaires.

The response categories here were: “strongly agree”(SA),”agree”(A), “disagree”(D), and “strongly disagree”(SD).

Table 1 illustrates the topics of possible or predicted educational interest or needs and feelings on new information technologies grouped into four main themes.

| Elements of great impact on library ethos | Library Management – Problems | Information Technology | Reasons for Training |
|---|---|---|---|
| Library collection development, customer services, information skills, indexing and cataloguing, resource sharing, acquisition policy. | Economics and fundings, development work, licensing, copyright, competiveness project & team work. | Weak technical infrastructure, upgrades, legal, networks, digital libraries, software, marc formats, opacs, library users, intermediaries, collection development.. | Learning organisation, collaboration with degree programmes, life-long staff training, misuse of services, language skills, IT skills, development, committment |

[Table 1]

The first argument submitted by the questionnaire was the inclusion of digital news as part of academic library orientation, the significance of the librarian moving from gatekeeper to principal collaborator in the digital world mediating the role from the house-of-books library model to the new house-of-digital information model and its impact on the development of academic librarianship in the professional world.

The population and sample were thought according to the Delphi method, which used the options of expert personnel for forecasting future events.

The group of professional academic librarians chosen hold at least a degree and some of them a master degree in Library science; all of them working in academic libraries from a minimum of 5 years to a maximum of 21+.

They represented libraries in a variety of subject areas, from business to education to the humanities. The categories of personnel included representatives from directors of university libraries to librarians of departmental and faculties structures, and the categories were identified on the basis of institutional and positional scope in the field and selected on principles of stratified sample; however, they cannot be deemed to represent the entire population of librarians in Italy.

Directors of University Libraries (Categories EP1,EP2,EP4) play a strategic role in developing libraries and stimulating librarians in learning and research, and therefore were considered prime participants.

Along the lines of the Delphi method, after defining the problem of the study, the researcher prepared two questionnaires, one with a key-question as stated above, mainly

concentrating on the factors that influenced academic Italian libraries, and another on the training provision in libraries.

The respondents answered most questions; in some cases detailed answers were not given for the reason " Overwhelming issue too long to respond here" or "Too long to respond here".

The study's main research questions asked and the parts of the questionnaire that were useful are indicated below:

SECTION A [Questions (1), (2), (3)])

(1)What is the perception of library staff about factors and future library activities in Italy?

SECTION B : [Questions (4), (5), (6), (7)])

(2) What is the perception of library staff towards training in Italian academic libraries in terms of the following items:

- ✓ Training related to IT use; Long-life training activities; Active participation to training activities; [questions (4)]
- ✓ Reasons for attending training activities; [questions (4.1), (4.2)]
- ✓ Who determines the training needs, the employee, the manager, the training department (if any), or the AIB?; [questions (4.3)-(4.6), (5)]
- ✓ What is the role of the agency (AIB) appointed to the responsibility of providing information on technology news and training opportunities for academic library staff employed in Italian University libraries? [questions (6),(7)].

## CONCLUSIONS

The final analysis, followed by an attempt of forecasting a probable future for the Italian library environment, is based on the arguments and the questions stated above and on the statistical prospects constructed in the previous paragraphs.

The data gathered, supported by literature review in the foregoing chapters, stress the main question concerning the future of librarianship in Italy as a profession and the level of services and quality required to provide access to materials by users. The data confirm the idea that the academic librarian's professional development remains important but in a new sense, in the sense that in Italy the role of the academic librarian must be re-considered within the information management professions of the 21st century.

Respondents to the questionnaires all agreed that IT innovations have a great impact on academic librarianship and are the most effective resource sharing among libraries, but the Italian weak technical and political infrastructures (burocracy) make it difficult to develop them in all their potentiality.

Technology is, in an absolute way, one of the best means of getting information content at the end of a search but only when a librarian has the skills to understand the right way to access pertinent information; so, updating skills and long-life training activities that seemed desired by both academic community (professors and central administration) and librarians, become extremely necessary, helping in the attempts of integrating technology into the professional role of academic librarians. The library environment will expand under the influence of technology and the users' demands, and it will become a virtual library governed by global policies that will ensure access to information for its diverse users.

Among the respondents, all were users of information technology and for the most part using IT on a daily basis; few of them attended IT programs and the 52% declared a good degree of satisfaction with the training they received. This indicates a need of more training on the use of available information technologies in Italian academic libraries.

Findings show that the Library Association AIB, the library training departments, the library managers, and finally the Central Administrations are expected to promote activities to help librarians in moving in a digital environment, organising professional development conferences aimed at self-reflection and helping librarians to discuss their own skills and professional identity. Especially AIB, as being the most desirable agency for determining the librarians' needs, is expected to give the greatest help.

The library Director/Manager plays a significant role in the staff learning process, therefore he is required to be open-minded and sensible to the staff's requests. Often, however, he has to fight against what is called " lo strapotere dei docenti", that is to say the overall power of professors who preposterously intrude upon the library management and affairs such as funds, acquisitions, personnel roles and their jobs.

No statistical differences exist between the professional and paraprofessional library staff in their perceptions concerning training provision. All the questionnaire respondents maintain that all levels of staff should be equally trained; that long-life training is very important to the library profession and to the library staff, also in view of career advancement; and that adequate information technology training helps to make work easier for the librarian and users' requests more rapidly and correctly carried out.

Anyway, the general feeling pervading questionnaires is that many librarians have been faced with learning new skills on the job, often with little systematic training, coping with a continuously changing environment, leading to poor morale and no job turnover.

It also appears evident that many librarians, especially those practising the profession since long, do not really want to become full time students of post-graduate courses, but are most interested in continuous professional education. Therefore, the majority prefer to spend evenings on what they think more useful studies for their profession, or are willing to have distance modules, using networks, that is to say an open and flexible learning, as in other European countries.

Some of them are degree or post-graduate diploma oriented, but only for personal motivation or satisfaction, not looking for career advancement. They observe, however, that while library schools are faced with the problem of continuous updating curricula, in order to prepare new librarians, yet there remain too many discrepancies in their core; so it would be rational to organize a unique doctoral programme for librarians approved by the Italian Ministry of Education.

Core area in information science programmes should in fact contribute to develop information scientists with a common knowledge of the theory and practice of creating, acquiring, assessing, organising, storing, retrieving and disseminating information; disciplines to be introduced should range from information sources (all recorded information) to analysis of information, from information management (planning, communications, human resource management, financial management, economics and marketing, political social and legal factors) to Information Technology, with a deep analysis of computer systems, telecommunications (standards, protocols, interfaces); finally, from the study of research procedures as part of important ancillary skills to the study of foreign languages.

Drawing up to an overall conclusion, the researcher is bound to confirm what emerges from the questionnaire answers, which is also her conviction, that many aspects of the Italian academic library environment have changed and go on changing in consequence of the rapid

increase and improvement of technology, although there are major government issues to solve, as copyright, intellectual property rights, archives, information cataloguing standards, funding and training of library staff.

All the respondents' answers were sensible and thoughtful and included good comments and details that provided interesting issues for discussion and valuable information for relating the study findings to the subject literature. They all showed awareness of the fact that, where in the past the librarian was *the custodian of books*, helping users to select subject headings in an appropriate way and use databases, card catalogues and bibliographic reference; in the present the librarian is *a guardian to collections and pathway to information* helping users to define their information needs and construct a search strategy, suggesting how to identify and attain materials available in ephemeral or multimedia forms and how to retrieve them from local collections or from remote collections depending on the interlibrary loan agreement.

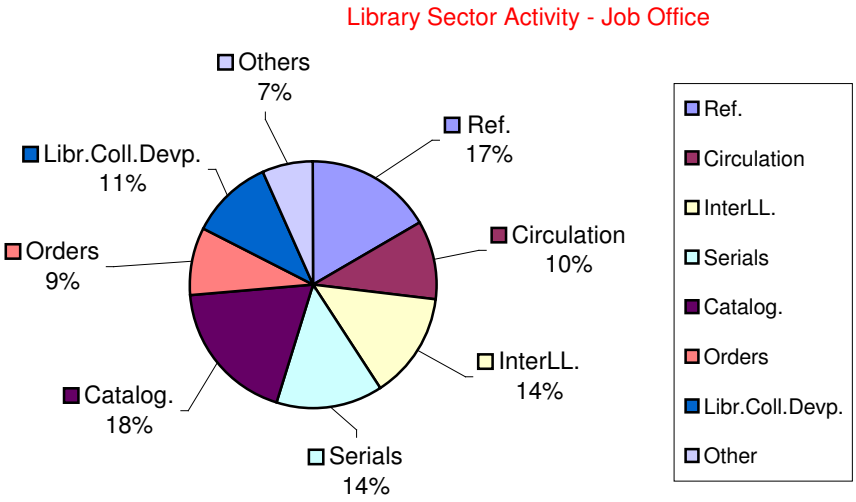
As for the future, the librarian is seen as an *architect of information sources and services and client consultant*, technology becoming more user-friendly that will utilize the skills and expertise of librarians, and librarians will likely use advanced systems to search, acquire and deliver information to the users.

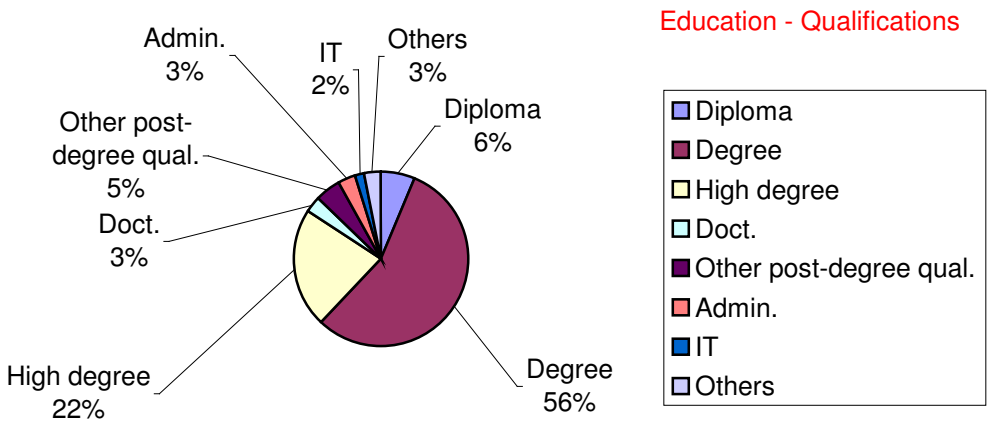
The researcher is aware that, as the field of inquiry is quite vast and changeable, the findings of her study cannot be either permanent or exhaustive. Therefore she would suggest that, in further studies on the Italian librarians perceptions of their changing roles, a more specific inquire might be made on some aspects of the Italian library environment. First of all on the reasons why the University co-ordinating library centres (SBA,SAB) do not periodically and systematically organize orientation courses for library staff in real interaction with the librarian working life, or conduct training needs assessments. An important inquiry might also be hold into the reasons why it happens that library directors and central administrators do not always, but only randomly, inform library staff about available training courses, programs and workshops in Italy or abroad and do not encourage attendance. Yet, coordinated continuing education on an European basis, as AIB and the English professional agency ASLIB underline, is among primary concerns in order to support the developing of groupware used for changes in the organisation of the libraries and of training methods, combining distance learning and on-the-job training. A deeper analysis of the effectiveness of IT training programs of all types given by Italian training agencies would also be interesting in the panorama of the Italian librarians' responses to changing times.

These and other perplexing issues and questions would perhaps receive due answers if written training policies were made available in Italian University libraries in order to create some consistency in staff training and human resource development.

## Data analysis

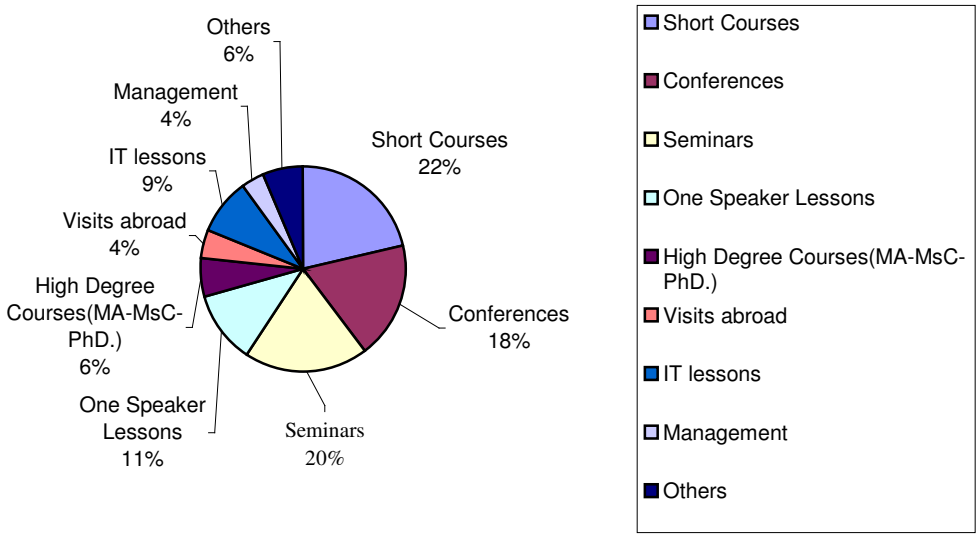
## Respondents' Sector Activity, Education and Working Age



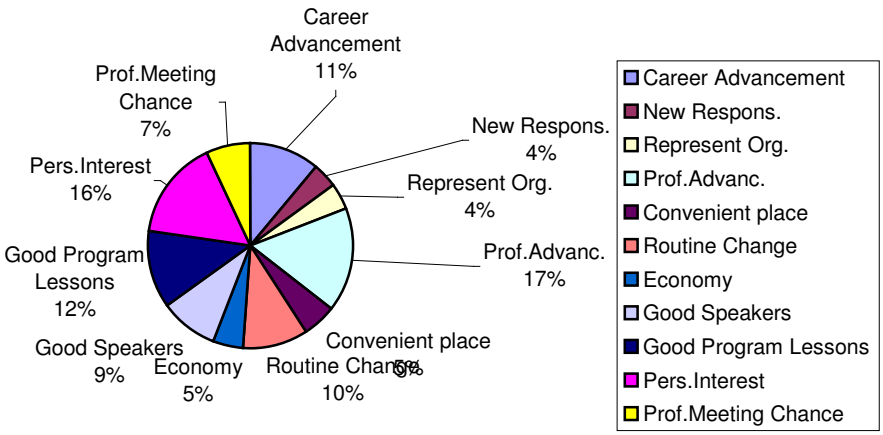



# Perceptions about Training in Information Technology Usage and Personal Skills

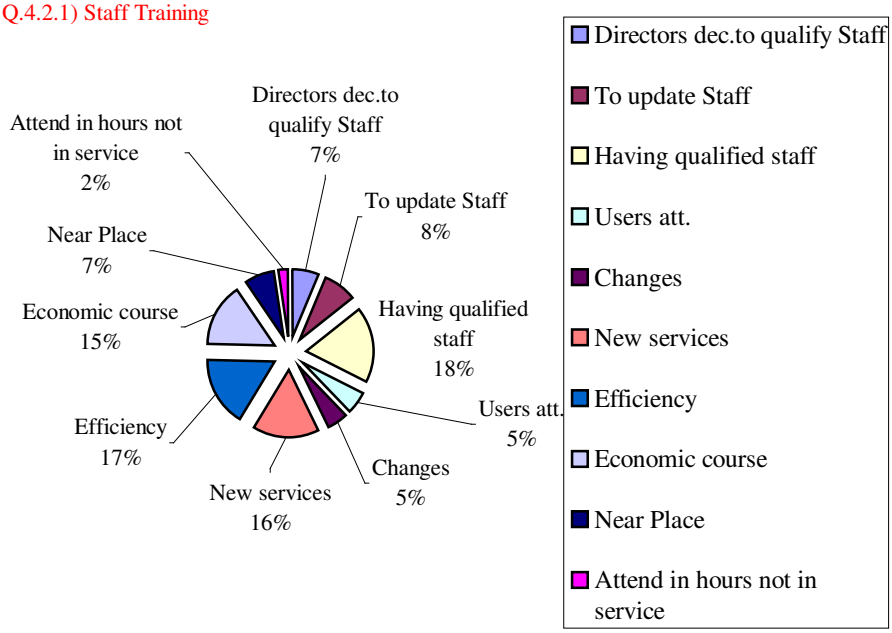
Q.4)Training Activities




4.1) Reasons For Attending Training Activities



Q.4.2.1) Staff Training



**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Personal Details**

*PERSONAL DETAILS:*

Please give the following personal details which are needed for cross analysis. They will remain confidential.

What is you job title?

Age group 20-26 [ ] 27-35 [ ] 36-45 [ ] 46-55 [ ] 55+ [ ]

Sex M [ ] F [ ]

Library:
[ ] Departmental
[ ] Interdepartmental
[ ] Service Main Centre
[ ] Faculty Library
[ ] Coordinating Centre
[ ] Institute Library
[ ] Other, please specify:_____

Your Job Office:
[ ] Reference
[ ] Borrowing
[ ] Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery
[ ] Serials
[ ] Cataloguing
[ ] Order
[ ] Collection Development
[ ] Other, please specify:_____

Any qualifications:

[ ] High School Diploma
[ ] Degree
[ ] Post-doc Courses (MA,BA)
[ ] Ph.D.
[ ] Other : Librarianship
[ ] Management /Personnel Management
[ ] IT Courses
[ ] Other, please specify:_____

**First-Round Questionnaire:**

*What is the perception of library staff about training and information technology innovations in Italian academic libraries?*

**SECTION A [Questions (1), (2), (3)]**

--1) EXPRESS THE LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH THE PROPOSITION USING THE SCALE AS FOLLOWS:

1= Strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree

1)These following **factors** have a great influence on the academic library in which you work:

- Finance policy: Different fundings, increased costs of journals,national information strategy [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4
- IT development and progress: difficult in keeping up with it
  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4
- Law regulations: copyright laws, legislative status of academic libraries
  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4

**--2)** LIST FIVE **ELEMENTS** WHICH CURRENTLY HAVE THE MOST IMPACT ON THE PICTURE OF YOUR ACADEMIC LIBRARY STARTING WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT ONES.

1:

2:

3:

4:

5:

*2.1)Library activities*.

Arrange in order of importance starting with the most important ones, the main areas of library activities nowadays in Italy.

1: Involvement in teaching and education [ ]
2: Building collections and making them accessible [ ]
3: Managing in general [ ]
4: Co-operation and resource sharing [ ]
5: Reference, support for researchers [ ]
6: Social activities [ ]

---2.2 *Present and future staff training.*

List at least four **characteristics** of a person to be employed in an academic library, in order of their importance. (eg.Training skills, IT skills, work knowledge, committment...)

1:
2:
3:
4:

---3. *Digital Library*

**---** 3.1) List five of the most difficult problems to be considered in managing electronic information (Storage, change infrastructure, legal, finance, people...)

1:
2:
3:
4:
5:

---3.2) *Perceptions concerning the use of IT in libraries*

Give your personal level of agreement to the following questions:

1= Strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree

- All levels of staff should be trained adequately in the use of IT

  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4

- All levels of staff should be given the opportunity of ongoing training education, as attending workshops and conferences on IT

  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4

- Librarians should show committment and enthusiasm towards IT innovations in Libraries

  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4

- It is very important that Library Managers/Directors keep staff informed on new IT developments

  [_] 1 [_] 2 [_] 3 [_] 4

**Second-round questionnaire:**

*What is the perception of library staff towards training in Italian academic libraries in terms of the following items:*

**SECTION B : [Questions (4), (5), (6), (7)]**

Training activity

--- 4) *The following is a list of training activities which are being surveyed.*

Please indicate which activity you have attended as a delegate over the past two years:

| |
|---|
| Short external courses(half a day or more) [_] |
| Conferences [_] |
| Seminars [_] |
| Lectures (given by one individual) [_] |
| Courses for further qualifications (MA, MSc, PHD) [_] |
| In-service training courses [_] |
| Visits abroad [_] |
| IT: Computers, allied technology(db and software applications) [_] |
| Management : of personnel, finance, self management [_] |
| Communications: interpersonal skills, presentation skills ect. [_] |
| Specific to the profession [_] |
| |

--- 4.1) *Please indicate your reasons for participating in each of the above activities:*

4.1.1 Job related reasons

[_] a)Employer's decision/request
[_] b)To prepare for new responsibilities
[_] c)To represent organisation
[_] d)To update skills/knowledge

4.1.2 Convenience

[_] a)Convenient location
[_] b)Change from routine of work
[_] c)Low cost of activity

4.1.3 Activity related persons

[_] a)Good speakers
[_] b)Good programme
[_] c) Interested in subject
[_] d) To meet fellow professionals

--- 4.2) *Please indicate the reasons why you have been* ***encouraged by your employer*** *in attending continuing education activities during the past two years.*

( Please circle the relevant number to show degree of significance in each case).

4.2.1) (Staff development)

⇒ To enhance the general professional development of staff [_]
⇒ To increase the promotion prospects of staff [_]
⇒ To keep staff abreast of new developments and research [_]

4.2.2) (Service development)

⇒ To keep up with the need of users [_]
⇒ To facilitate job rotation [_]
⇒ To develop new services [_]
⇒ To ensure services keep abreast with state of the art [_]

4.2.3) (Activity related)

⇒ Low cost of activity [_]
⇒ Convenient location of activity [_]
⇒ Course held in out-of-work hours [_]
⇒ Relevant to the work in the library [_]

--- 4.3) *What priority does your employer (the Central Administration) place on training opportunities for LIS staff?*

(Please think only one relevant box)

High priority [ ] Medium priority [ ] Low priority [ ]

--- 4.4) *What priority does your Chief officer / librarian place on continuing education and training opportunities for LIS staff?*

High priority [ ] Medium priority [ ] Low priority [ ]

--- 4.5) *Is your organisation willing to pay for attendance at continuing education courses?*

Nearly always [ ] Always [ ] Sometimes [ ] Never [ ]

--- 4.6) *Are training activities related to any appraisal scheme in the organisation?*

Nearly always [ ] Always [ ] Sometimes [ ] Never [ ]

--- 5) *Does it exist a Coordination centre in your University (SBA, SAB) organizing any seminars or training activities in the last five years?*

[_] Yes [_] No

■ *If your answer is positive, who did decide which training activity was the best for staff?*

[_] Survey of the Coordination Centre

[_] Librarians' demands

[_] Effective policy to start new services

[_] Planning activities for a continuous training in the University

*Did you receive any benefits from this activities?*

[_] yes [_] no

■ Which kind of learning? Please state.

--- 6) *AIB (Italian Association of Librarians) in organizing training activities, does it offer good programs?*

Nearly always [ ] Always [ ] Sometimes [ ] Never [ ]

■ *According to you, are they adequately coordinated at national or regional level?*

Nearly always [ ] Always [ ] Sometimes [ ] Never [ ]

--- 7) *If you know AIB-CUR, do you think it has any educational support*?

Nearly always [ ] Always [ ] Sometimes [ ] Never [ ]

Which topics?_____

**THE EXPERTS' POINTS OF VIEW**

Name:_Anna Maria Tammaro

Title: Researcher (past General Coordinator of Firenze Universities Libraries)

Institution : Parma University

Date : 11/09/01

Study Questionnaire

The Changing Academic Library Environment

1) *What is the library size? (space staff and collections)*

The Florence Libraries system is spread in the city. Libraries are five but distributed in many sections; about 1 million and half of books and journals. The data are updated on line at www.unifi.it/biblioteche/mis

2) *Does the library have a training policy?*

Yes, the Libraries System has had a written project of training since the beginning of the re-organization in 1995. You can read the Laura Vannucci article in Bollettino AIB about the organisation of the Library system as a Learning organisation. I add to this a Report I submitted to the University Administration Director as Libraries General Coordinator in 1999

3) *There are three types of decisions making: collaborative, optional, and authority decision: what type do you follow when deciding on:*

a) *Bringing or adapting information technology to the library*
b) *Establishing training needs?*

My preferred style of decision making , as General coordinator, was always collaborative inside the vaious Working Groups we had organised; anyway somtimes my collegues were limited in their vision and I found myself isolated becuse they wanted to limit their training to doing better what they already do; I instead wanted to do in different way, critically thinking. In these cases, the training options I supplied were voluntaty. The example of this is the start of the Master by

distance with UNN where the Libraries Director (for whom the Master was organised) did not want to participate.

4) *Do you think that your employees or collegues are aware of the training programs offered by training agencies or organizations (IFNIA, AIB, and so on, to make an example) inside the country or abroad?*

Yes, they are and often they asked to the Central Coordination support to participate and they have had this opportunity in addition to the programm yearly organised from the Library System, if it was related to the Library or Libraries System priorities. Some director of Libraries had organised internal programs of his initiative also

5) *How do you keep your employees/collegues informed about training programs, workshops, symposia and conferences?*

The Training Programm of the year, together to the Year Plan of Libraries System, to which it was strictly linked, was submitted to all persons in the Libraries, before the definitive approval with opportunity to add or complaining about the suggestions

6) *Is there a training department in the library? If the answer is no, do you think that having a training department in the library is important and why?*

Inside the Central Committe there was a Working Group (Look at the Organigram in the Florence University Libraries Web site)

7) *Any training program should add new knowledge or improve current skills of the employee; have you noticed any positive change in the employee performance after attending training programs or using information technology?*

I tried to evaluate the outcomes of the training programme, asking more than once to the Libraries Directors but it was impossible a systematic approach to it. In the framework of the assignments I have had to do as student of the UNN Master, I realised a user survey to students, with unobtrusive observation made at the reference desk from others students. Results were very interesting and I transmitted them to the Libraries Directors. What is difficult I think in our

culture is that evaluation is felt as control and in all the cases I said here I found the defence of the librarians without, unfortunately, any develpopment in the service

8) *Today there is a myriad of information sources accessible through the global networking. What are the issues of governance, i.e. ownership,integrity of the whole, provision of information, standards, funding and cost recovery, information privacy…., over the long term?*

In Florence University the Central Coordination of Libraries directly govern the electronic resource access together with ad hoc Working Group with librarians from the different libraries. It works inside the Italian Consortia and I can say that University Libraries in Florence have a strong power in deciding the Italian information politic in access to information resources. Single isolated libraries cannot compete in the digital information space: of this I am strongly convinced.

***9) The AIB is the responsible training professional agency for librarians in Italy, do you think that the training programs that are provided by the AIB at national and regional level are appropriate or satisfy your library needs in terms of training ?***

They could be appropriate (but it depends on the local needs and so it is difficult to generalise) but they are never satisfactory. Continuing education is to be built in Italy as it is to be built basic education for librarians. One of the biggest problem is exatly the confusion between training basic needs and continous education. Note I say education and continuing education not training: at the moment I say that librarians in Italy have a form of apprenticeship lifelong learning (in the best case) not education. The teaching reform of universities has given new opportunity to profession as the Laurea specialistica. The situation of basic education could change but if employers decide to ask this new academic qualification for new employeers.

*10) What would you say are areas in needing improvement?*

Really I did not want to list topics or curriculum contents. I can do also this but it is not very important. In Italy or in Florence University System, if you prefer, we have to start with clarifying the professional (and academic) qualifications of librarians, the role in Libraries responsability the have to have (Directors or no?), the distributed decision making lines or the herarchical lines we want and so on…For the situation I know in many university libraries, it is perhaps enough the apprenticeship that staff usually have. But these libraries are not libraries as many librarians are not librarians. It is easy, in this situation, that librarians have no responsability. I want to add that it is wrong to wait for something or somebody chancing this situation: it depends on any librarians wanting to change this situation, for the benefits of students and teachers in the universities. This means that in my opinion, every librarian has the duty of his/her continuing education and that this can be supported by the institution (but not always). Educated librarians will change the situation

*11) What role will the librarian as information intermediary play in the future?*

Librarians are essential in the future. But we have to educate them, first of all, at academic level. Only with academic qualification for basic and for continuing (or further) education the librarians can think to have a role in the future.