

Regional Cooperation: A network of archival educators? Possibilities, payoffs, pitfalls

a Discussion Paper
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Traditional International Cooperation

ICA-publications on archival education stress the necessity of international cooperation - and rightly so:

- in general, archival educational institutions are very small: understaffed as they are, they have to cope with different and time-consuming demands from the archival profession:
 - o preparing new colleagues for the job
 - o organize or participate in CPD-programs for archivists already working in the field
 - o constantly adapt education and training to a changing environment

As the argument goes: archival educational institutions are too small to deal with their regular tasks and especially too small to deal with adapting their programs to modern needs in a changing environment. Therefore, they should strive for international cooperation: working closely together, they can profit from each others experiences and will more effectively modernize their programs.

And, in fact, international cooperation there is.

There is the ICA itself, producing material which is very useful in (developing) archival education.

There are ICA's regional branches like EURBICA, regularly expressing their dedication to archival education. And there is, of course, the SAE, the Section for Archival Education and Training.

In the past years of its existence, the SAE has been very active in bringing forward relevant projects on the international agenda and in delivering products that might be of use to archival educators and educational institutions.

Moreover the SAE has organised a series of conferences on issues in archival education which should be required reading for archival educators and archival educational institutions all over the world.

However ... aren't we dealing here with too much 'might' and 'should'? Some examples:

- There is an important bibliography of literature used in archival education, but ... who uses it while developing new modules? Not even some of my colleagues from the Archiefschool, I have to admit.
- A beautiful research database has been developed by the SAE during the last term, but ... has it been functioning in your organisation?
- There is by now an updated version of the Dictionary of Archival Educational Institutions; did you use it? Have you even been taking a look in it?
- Have we read the papers of the conferences?
- And: how many times have we recently visited the SAE website?

From these observations, it seems to me that there still is a distance to bridge between the worldwide SAE and the individual, local institutions. As a result, the SAE-products do not seem to 'emanate' to the basic level.

Is this a matter of content, time or communication?

Whatever it is, somehow we have to repair the missing link.

Networking

I propose to repair this missing link by creating regional networks. International cooperation can be very interesting, but to most institutions it is usually pretty much out of sight.

A regional network could change that.

For a regional network to work, it needs more than sheer enthusiasm or sheer devotion to international cooperation: the local participant has to be convinced that it brings direct benefit on the local level as well.

Three elements appear to be essential:

1. A common core business
In this case that should not be the problem, because we share the core business, that is: archival education
2. acquaintances
The people in the network, or at least some of them, must know each other already, for instance because of earlier cooperation.
3. A common interest
I will go into that in the next paragraph: payoffs

Within this line of thought I propose to develop a "Network of Northern European Archival Educators".

Recent experiences helped me in developing this idea: discussions with members of FARMER, a meeting of the archival educational institutions in Great Britain, but also with colleagues from Brussels, Potsdam and elsewhere focussed on topics that we in the Netherlands are heavily involved in as well: European credit points, international exchange, accreditation, research etc

Payoffs

The network that I envisage should at least focus on issues, themes, problems which are shared by its participants.

At this very moment I cannot think of a better example for cooperation within a European context than the adaptation of archival education to the "Bologna Process".

The most obvious goal of the Bologna Declaration is to encourage the intellectual exchange between European countries - especially on student level.

A well-known issue is the establishment of a European credit point system: the different countries have to relate their system of credit points to the ECTS: the European credits transfer system.

The real proof comes by eating the other parts of the Bologna pudding:

- grading is an issue; it was discussed at the II Conference for Archival Educators and Trainers at Härnösand (2003) at some length and it certainly needs attention
- more important, and even more difficult, is international benchmarking: how do the units in specific programs relate to each other?
- and another interesting aspect: international corroboration of accreditation; in the Netherlands, a new system of accreditation is being set up, in which international contacts and cooperation on different levels plays an important role.

I am convinced that these issues will encourage us

- to cooperate on the level of content, and therefore to the kind of cooperation that was envisaged in the first paragraph: exchanging - or even jointly developing - modules, didactic concepts and the like.

- to facilitate the exchange of students and lecturers: knowing what is going on elsewhere in Europe will make it easier to inform students on where to go and where to stay, and to invite colleagues as guest lecturers.

If this network would be functioning, it will likely contribute to:

- express more clearly our needs within the context of a broader international cooperation like SAE
- evaluate and use more effectively the products of the SAE
- have a more articulate view and a more positive contribution to the needs of archival education elsewhere around the world.

Pitfalls

If there are so many possible payoffs, there can hardly be room for attention to pitfalls... Nevertheless, it is obvious, that the most important pitfall is - and will always be – TIME. Therefore, the pivotal question is: are we prepared to devote some of our precious time to this network?

Proposal

Given the arguments above for a 'compact' network I propose that we start and develop a "Network of Northern European Archival Educators" - that is, to start with modesty and invite a small group of educators:

Great Britain: Liverpool, London, Newcastle, Wales,

Sweden: Härmösand,

Norway: Oslo

Finland: Tampere

Germany: Potsdam, Marburg,

Netherlands: Amsterdam

Belgium: Brussels

This looks like an interesting mix of "academic" and "professional" higher educational institutions, and of "cultural-heritage-orientated" and "information-management-orientated" learning programs.

Kick-off

I suggest that we have a kick-off meeting in Amsterdam in Spring 2005.

Concerning the programme of this meeting: I can think of at least three points on the agenda:

1. the network itself: what do we expect from it, how are we going to organise it?
2. archival education programs: strengths and weaknesses
3. meeting the students: an international workshop

To handle this agenda properly and to leave enough time for informal discussions, it should in my opinion be a two-day meeting.

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