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Building New Knowledge for Archivists: Part Two - Evolving Towards a Common Core Curriculum

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Whose master's voice?

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Introduction

In 1999, in the Italian town of Bologna, the Ministers of Education of the European Union signed the so-called Bologna Declaration. Every European country committed itself to structure its Higher Education according to the structure already well known in English-speaking countries: the bachelor-master-structure. After Bologna, there have been several meetings in other prestigious places during which measures were taken to further the transparency and the comparability of National Higher Education systems. The whole operation is by now usually referred to as the 'Bologna Process': within a decade after 'Bologna' the process will lead to one European Higher Education Area¹.

For Europe, it is an organisational earthquake: higher education in Europe, reflecting the very diverse national, cultural, historical and political backgrounds, is a kaleidoscope of local solutions and/or traditions. In most European countries, the Bologna Declaration will therefore lead to a rather fundamental restructuring of higher education.

This important decision creates a unique opportunity to analyse how the archival communities of Europe deal with their future. What programs are the Europeans developing, and on what level? Are they using the Bologna declaration as a tool to modernise and/or to uplift archival education? And if so, what picture do they have of the future archivist and how are they planning to realise it?

Allow me to make three reminders to finish this introduction.

Firstly, about geography:

I have not included the Central European countries because my colleague, dr. Karsten Uhde, will deal with developments in that region. In addition, I have not included the British Isles because the bachelor-master structure already has a long tradition there, which means that the fundamental impact of the Bologna Process is expected to be negligible.

Secondly, about level:

As will be clearly indicated by the title of my lecture I will focus on the initial education of archivists on the highest level. So, do not expect any findings on bachelor level or in-service training nor any remarks on CPD (continuing professional development).

Thirdly, about status:

My report will be a provisional one. My specific research activities so far have been the following: I have sent a little questionnaire to the relevant educational institutions, I have studied the websites of those institutions and I have read contributions to the relevant listservs and journals.

In order to test these provisional findings I will relate them to the more fundamental questions on the high-level education of archivists.

1. The present state of European archival education

If the state of European higher education is already bewildering to non-Europeans, the state of archival education is even more:

- Archival education can be situated in independent archives schools. Usually, these schools are in one way or another related to the higher education system, but in a very loose way. Take one of the most renowned Archive Schools as an example: The Marburg Archivschule is related to the University at Marburg, but it is certainly not controlled by it: the new rules for organisation and education had to be approved by a federal commission. Another example of this type of education is of course the most famous of all archives schools: the Ecole de Chartes
- Another place where archival education takes place is the national archives. An important part of the Italian educational system takes place in the Archivi di Stato, although other opportunities exist. But Italy is certainly not the only example: in Denmark, for instance, archival education used to be concentrated in the National Archives, and in other Scandinavian countries the National Archives play their part as well.
- To make things more complicated we have archival associations interfering with initial education
- And finally, there are countries where, indeed, archival education is a part of the educational system; they are found in the areas that can be expected: in History Departments and in Information Science Departments.

2. Challenges for European archival education

It may be clear that, in this context, most of the present archival education at this level is essentially outside what has to become the “European Higher Education Area”.

The first type has acquired a superstatus, which will hardly survive the ambitions of the EHEA.

The second and third forms are so much outside of the system that they will hardly obtain European recognition as higher professional education by itself.

But there is even reason to doubt the survival of those archival education programs that are within the system – given the ancillary status they tend to have in the present organisation.

Therefore, at the start of my research my hypothesis was:

A confident profession takes notice of these developments, looks at the possibilities, looks around to see what happens elsewhere in the world and, consecutively, positions itself as a master program within this higher education environment.

3. Response to the challenge: do we want a master?

The results of my research until now lead to a disappointing question: do we really want a master in archival studies?

My first results indicate that there is hardly any country in Western Europe in which the development of a master program in archival studies is an issue – not for archival educators, let alone for archivists.

- The Scandinavian countries do not have many opportunities for archival education. There is attention paid to archives in departments of information/library science in Norway (Oslo University), Sweden (Härnösand University) and Finland (Tampere University) but none of them seems to have plans to develop a master specialising in archival science.
- In France, there are several higher education programs for archival education but they have until now remained within their complex, ‘Ancien Régime’ definitions: the DEUG, the ‘licence’, the DESS etc. Recently a new program has been set up in Yvelines which boasts its ‘European orientation’; but apparently, Yvelines has archives in mind, not educational structure². Finally, the famous École de Chartes seems to have recently been engaged in a restyling of its program but it has firmly remained within the structure and boundaries of the ‘Grandes Écoles’³.
- For the other country well known for its long archival tradition, Italy, it is more or less the same old song. The most prestigious archival education is still to be found in several Archivi di Stato. In the Universities, I have not been able to find one master program in archival science in the regular curricula of the Italian universities. The only thing coming close to it is a master in ‘development and management of advanced documentary services’ at the University of Urbino, in which archives and/or archival science make up for about 60% of the one-year curriculum⁴.

4. Is there a master out there?

In fact, until now, I have been able to find only three master programs in the region:

- at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)⁵,
- in Belgium, offered by a group of Universities, co-ordinated by the Free University of Brussels⁶ and
- in Madrid (Spain) at the University Carlos III⁷.

Do these examples reflect a similar approach, a similar profile?

There are some similarities but some striking differences as well, as you may notice yourself.

	Madrid	Brussels	Amsterdam
Entry requirement	Licenciado or Ingeniero	Master in History	Bachelor in Information Science
Duration	Approx. 2 semesters	2 semesters	3 semesters
Courses	Archival theory	Archival theory	Recordkeeping Systems
	Document management	Document management	Societal context of Archives
	Records management	The Archival Landscape (organisations, laws)	Comparative Archivistics

	Information Technology	Information Technology	“Dual” semester (Research projects in practice): * Analysing RKS * Appraisal * Access and Outreach
	Organisational Theory	Preservation	
	Practice	Practice	
	Thesis	Thesis	

One of the most interesting observations is, that none of them is dealing with archives *stricto sensu* (‘historical archives’):

- the focus of the Madrid master is perhaps most explicitly focused on records management
- the Brussels master is combining subjects that seem directed towards archives with topics on records management
- the Amsterdam program has chosen for the ‘records-continuum’ as the basic model behind the program.

The master that has a degree from these universities is expected

- to be sufficiently equipped to deal with the work processes in Archives Management as well as in Records Management at this level and
- to have an understanding of the common and ‘life-cycle-specific’ issues.

It is interesting to note that, despite this conviction, Brussels defines a Master in History as entry requirement, whereas Amsterdam is the only one that has positioned the Master as a specialisation for a Bachelor – in this case: a bachelor in (‘Documentary’) Information Science.

Another remark: the MAS-programs are almost exclusively dealing with archival issues *stricto sensu*. The Amsterdam program is perhaps the most ‘contextual’ of the three, having a module on the Societal Context of Archives and a module on Comparative Archivistics. However, even in Amsterdam these modules do focus on the influences on the functioning of record-keeping systems.

5. What kind of master?

There may be another, even more important difference between Amsterdam and the other two programs. The Brussels and Madrid programs deal with disciplines that are considered necessary for archivists and have a period of practical work, apart from the theoretical courses. In Amsterdam practice is not an autonomous item in the program but an integrated part of the curriculum. The Amsterdam program focuses on acquiring competencies.

The difference between a disciplinary approach and a competency-oriented approach has been discussed by Theo Thomassen at the first European Conference on Archival Education (Marburg, 2001)⁸.

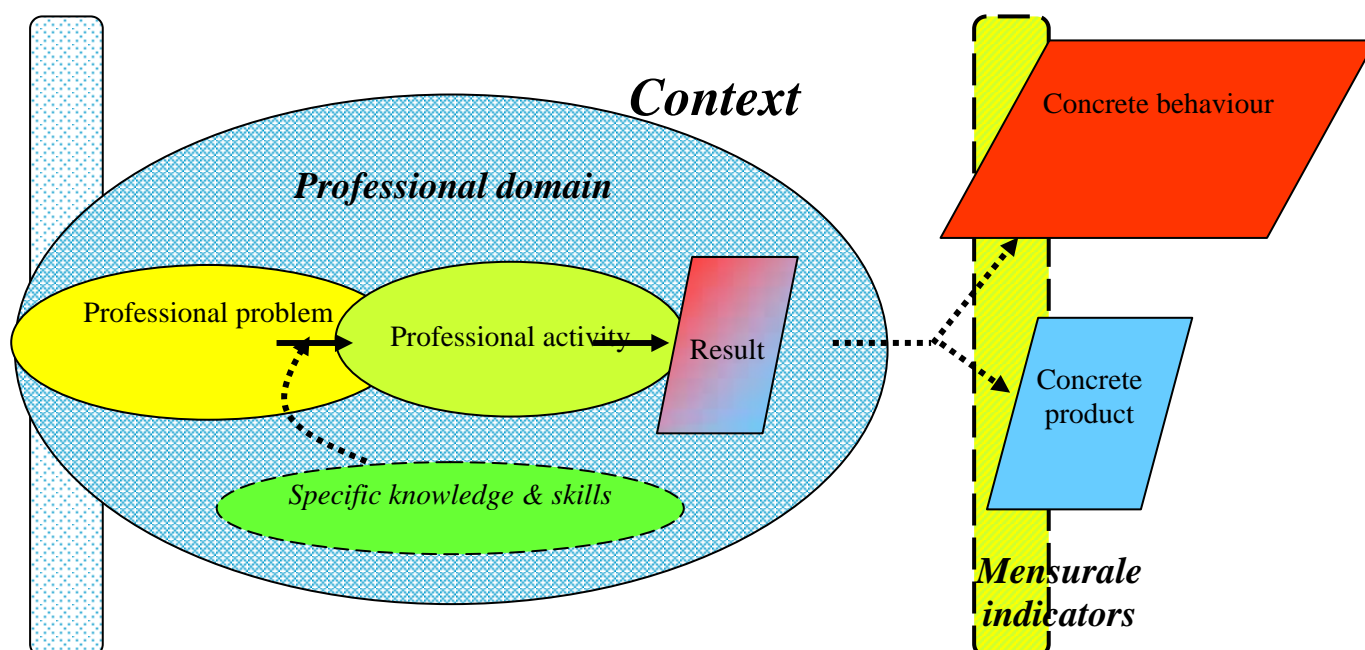
Thomassen states that “in industrial society competent individuals on any specific level in any specific field are the result of an industrial production process. This production process is structured according to a central procedure called the curriculum, which organises a number of sub-procedures, called courses”.

Thomassen suggests that the shift from an industrial society to a knowledge society forces us to rethink the learning-process. In the knowledge society, the model of teachers transferring a body of knowledge is replaced by the model of students acquiring instruments to find and develop knowledge. In education, assessment will not primarily focus on the amount of knowledge acquired and the ability to organise knowledge in a linear way. It will focus on the understanding of general and specific problem solving methodologies and on processing information by creative application. The interaction between archival educators will aim at mastery of non-procedural, more creative thinking. Context will gain priority over contents and methods over subjects.

Indeed, we can observe a shift within professional organisations whereby not so much the knowledge of professionals is valued as well as their competencies. The high speed in developing knowledge and, at the same time, the tremendous increase in the possibilities for diffusion of that knowledge has led to the conviction that knowledge quickly becomes obsolete. For this reason, in professional activities and functions other skills than knowledge are increasingly being rewarded: problem-solving skills, organising skills, recognition of specific learning necessities etc.

This development has led to the rethinking and reshaping of higher education; the outcome has been the reframing of the curriculum from a discipline-oriented to a competency-oriented curriculum. This is fundamental change.

In the Netherlands, we use a model, which, I think, will make that clear.



In this model, every educational unit departs from a professional problem. I have underlined 'every', because in discipline-oriented curricula one can find units like 'integrating modules' which have more or less the same approach; in this model, this 'integrating module' is the standard. The essential goal of every unit is: the student solves the problem. Therefore, the students will have to analyse the problem, to find out what specific knowledge and skills they need and to find out how to behave in order to solve it.

I hesitate to use the word paradigm shift here, but a fundamental change it is.

Some arguments:

- The student becomes the organiser of his/her own learning process.
- The lecturer will act as a coach; he advises the students and helps them to solve the problem.
- The disciplines, which had a central place in the 'industrial' curriculum, have an auxiliary status. They are definitively not absent, but they will play a role only in so far as they will contribute to the solving of the problem.
- The student is not judged on the 'body of knowledge' acquired, but on the usefulness of the product delivered and - even more important - on his/her behaviour during the problem-solving process as well as in defending the product.

Corollary to these observations are some other significant ones:

- No discipline will be handled in its own right. To take just an example: the archivist entering the profession will definitely not master the 'institutional history' of a given state, region, town or whatever. However, he/she will certainly be aware of the necessity to acquire the specific knowledge required in a specific situation.
- The archivists entering the profession will almost always have deficiencies: they will have to accommodate to the specific domain in which they are expected to function – but they will be prepared to continue their professional development after their initial education. Consequently, competency-oriented education is tightly linked to CPD.

Therefore, in the University of Amsterdam program, the module on "Record-keeping systems" is NOT about whatever record-keeping systems are possible, available, thinkable or whatever. It focuses on the problem of analysing record-keeping systems and on what elements might enhance the quality of these systems and in what way.

Therefore, again, the time allotted to "Practice" in the Amsterdam program is not about spending some months in an archival institution in order to get acquainted with the actual archival work. In the Amsterdam scheme, it is a semester that students devote to doing research into how problems regarding three fundamental aspects of archival behaviour are handled in a specific situation. This is supposed to lead to suggestions to enhance the quality (to satisfy the organisation involved) but also to a contribution to the academic discourse on the issue involved (to satisfy the University). Needless to say, the University lecturers are coaching the research of the students in this specific situation. Moreover, the e-learning environment (Blackboard) is used in such a way that 'peer-coaching' plays a significant role.

Is this the master we need ...?

There is – and perhaps, there should always be – a tension between archival education and archival practice. Painting this, for the sake of the argument, in black and white:

- Archival education is looking ahead: what will be expected from the professional archivist in the near future and how will we procure for our students a good position on the professional market?
- Archival institutions, on the other hand, are facing actual HRM-problems and are forced to look for instant solutions.

It is remarkable, that, whenever institutions of archival education are developing new ideas in order to fulfil their mission, the archival profession reacts by defining what ‘body of knowledge’ is required to become a ‘real’ archivist.

These different contexts may lead to differences of opinion, or even to clashes. What is important is that both groups are prepared to engage in a continuous discussion. This should not be a discussion on the necessity of discipline X or Y, or how much weeks practical work is needed.

In my conviction, the discussion should be on the professional profile and on its development in the near future: the range of the professional domain, the competencies needed etc.

If some agreement can be reached on these issues it is the responsibility of the educators to prepare students for their future role in the profession.

In that case, it seems inescapable that the core competencies will constitute the nucleus of the curriculum.

Thank you for your attention.

Hans Scheurkogel
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¹ The easiest way to get more information on the Bologna Process is R. Sedgwick and Nick Clark, Explaining the Bologna Process to the Rest of the World (*World Education News and Reviews*, sept./oct. 2003) on www.wes.org/ewent/03sept/pfpractical.htm

² http://www.cg78.fr/actu2002/communiqués/09_2002dés_archives.htm

³ <http://www.enc.sorbonne.fr/etudes.htm>

⁴ http://www.uniurb.it/sbc/ist_bal/master/ser_docu/index.html

⁵ <http://www.student.uva.nl/marw/>

⁶ <http://www.vub.ac.be/ofiches/Varchiv.html>

⁷ <http://www.uc3m.es/uc3m/gral/TC/ESMA/ESMA20/presentacion.html>

⁸ <http://www.ica-sae.org/mrconfpaper1.html>