

Unveiling Portuguese governmental libraries trends and challenges: confluence of futures studies, action research and stakeholder analysis

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Abstract: In March 2016, the Directorate General for the Qualification of Public Workers (INA) created an Informal Working Group on Central Public Administration Libraries – *Thinking the Future* (GIBACE) whose mandate was to develop a strategic guidance document for this library sector. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methodological approaches used in this process, namely the confluence of future studies, action learning and stakeholders' analysis, integrating different practices (academy, experts, and organizations) in a participatory action research to think and create shared futures for Central Public Administration Libraries (CPALs).

After presenting the methodological approaches, particular attention is given to the outputs generated by the main phases of the action research process: (1) experts' vision(s) of future; and (2) stakeholder analysis, participation and (co)construction of CPALs' shared futures. Finally, GIBACE's recommendations for action are presented, as well as some final remarks concerning the opportunities for research and practice in the Library and Information Science arena.

Keywords: Governmental libraries; future studies; action learning; stakeholder analysis; change management methodologies;

1. Introduction

The economic, financial and social crisis that has been affecting Europe and particularly Southern countries like Portugal exposed the library system's fragilities and brought to light the vulnerability of governmental libraries and the urgent need to prepare their future. Aware of this situation, the Directorate General for the Qualification of Public Workers (INA) decided to create the Informal Working Group on Central Public Administration Libraries – *Thinking the Future* (GIBACE) in March 2015. The five information management experts that integrated GIBACE were mandated by INA to develop a strategic guidance document for this library sector in order to:

- Contribute to the definition of a national information policy that integrates Central Public Administration Libraries' (CPALs) role and strategy.
- Promote recognition of the importance of information management practices in Public Administration.
- Encourage the debate about CPALs' value and impact, focusing on strategic collaboration and listening to stakeholders.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methodological approaches used in this process, namely the confluence of future studies, action learning and stakeholder analysis, integrating different practices (academy, experts, and organizations) in a participatory action research to think and create shared futures for this type of libraries. This case can be considered a combination of the professional and academic intervention in a context of public administration reform, which can give rise to specific changes and impacts on libraries.

2. Methodological approaches

The action research process was developed in two main phases with diverse methodological approaches (March-September 2015):

- Phase I – *Experts' vision of the future* – based on an action research approach, it was focused on discussing the impacts of a particular question: "Why are these types of libraries closing or facing strong difficulties?"
- Phase II - *Stakeholders' analysis and creation of shared futures* (stimulated by a facilitator intervention).

To implement Phase I, three working sessions were planned and conducted between April and June 2015. During each session, the key points addressed by the working group were discussed and selected. A model for reflection was developed focusing on the analysis of three strategies / axes:

1. Information services management
2. Information resources management
3. Bibliographic transition management

This process was complemented by five questions:

- How to create a strategic position that can guarantee libraries' sustainability and value in the future?
- How can information management improve citizenship and enhance Public Administration efficacy?
- How to manage unique / specialized / heritage collections as Public Administration information resources?
- How can CPALs react to the on going bibliographic transition process?
- How can we create the future of CPALs?

Although Phase I depicted a helpful and widely-used conceptual framework to work, it also rose a number of questions about the future of libraries that needed to be answered by stakeholders. So, the introduction of a think tank method to promote another moment of reflection with 28 public organizations involved in this process was proposed to INA. The intention was to achieve three levels of Consensus (C):

- Level C1: expressing the set of elements shared by all or most of the people who participated in the initiative;
- Level C2: expressing the set of elements shared by a significant number of elements;
- Level C3: expressing the set of elements that were considered relevant, but about which there were diverse readings and it was not possible to identify a clear dominant direction.

GIBACE chose to analyze four reference groups of stakeholders' visions of future as an outcome to be examined within the context of Future Studies – anticipating, but also constructing the futures –, using participatory action learning. Based on the diversity of stakeholders' interests and the complexity of interdependencies and unpredictable behavioral dynamics (Markley 2011), this method differs from others for allowing reflection and learning by non-specialists in this practice, questioning various epistemological categories of participants (Inayatullah, 2006) that open new perspectives to be studied and theorized (Stevenson, 2002).

According to Inayatullah (2002), «The goal is to create alternatives by questioning the future; Objective and subjective are both true; Interaction between meanings and actions are the most crucial; Language is constituted through creating communities of meaning and doing; The future is not fixed but continuously being revisited; Reality is process-based; Learning is based on programmed knowledge and questioning [the future] plus ways of knowing; Learning from doing, from experimentation; Participation - asking all participants how they see the future; Research agenda is developed with respondents - the future is mutually defined» (p. 204).

The main concepts and typologies used were: the *futures default*, an official and standardized future, sometimes considered the only one; the *used / borrowed*

futures, based on ideas and other images, consciously or unconsciously adopted; the *disowned futures*, the skipped future, which include our own or those of others; and *alternative futures* to look at other alternatives and possibilities for choice, as the most probable, possible, plausible and preferred futures. The futuristic studies present a wide variety of methods, among which stand out the anticipatory thinking protocols, the environmental analysis, the method of scenarios, the history of the future, cross-impact analysis, the wheel of the future and trend analysis.

The instruments used were based on the discussion around five reference questions, set out in the previously circulated draft report to all participants (they were asked to do an exercise of reflection on the subject during the month before the working meetings) Through a facilitator intervention, the results of this exercise were presented at each meeting, providing the starting point for the construction of a shared vision within each stakeholder group.

3. Experts' vision of the future

The vision of future results could be summarize in a set of reflection key points addressed within the context of each of the following five questions:

Questions	Key points
How to create a strategical position that can guarantee libraries' sustainability and value in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working model of information services. • Deepening and defining the concept of CPALs. • Consolidating CPALs' role on national information policy and on the national library system. • Incorporating the results of CPALs impact evaluation into both strategic management and performance evaluation of Public Administration, national library information system and national information policy. • Enhancing collaborative work. • Developing new competencies among library and information professionals.
How can information management improve citizenship and enhance Public Administration efficacy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organic complexity, interactions, the processes, the subsystems and the stakeholders involved in Public Administration information. • Access to public administration information as an enhancing factor of citizenship. • Interoperability and Open Government services and practices as drivers of Public Administration efficiency.
How to manage unique / specialized / heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information resources management and its relevance to CPALs performance and to the type of intervention that they may take within Public Administration and the information environment (particularly in what concerns changes targeted at information provision <i>via</i>

Questions	Key points
collections as Public Administration information resources?	<p>the Internet, access to databases, electronic journals and e-books, implementation of new formats, content access through mobile devices, crowd sourcing, impact, social networks and cloud computing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three hierarchical levels in the management of CPALs collections: <i>strategic</i>, <i>tactical</i> and <i>operational</i> – associated with three interrelated (sub)concepts of collection: <i>collection as a set of things</i>; <i>collection at access level</i>; <i>collection as a process</i>.
How can CPALs react to the on-going bibliographic transition process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emergence of new paradigms in the bibliographic universe and the effects of its application are causing a disruption in the way bibliographic products are created and understood by libraries. • The FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) model is the fundamental and vital element of a new paradigm that will allow content and services remodeling. This new paradigm points at the need for breaking down and reshaping bibliographic data. • The need to break down the barriers that frame conceptual and technical specificity of bibliographic information by changing information services and systems architecture (bibliographic catalogues design must be modified: their access and display structures have to be re-equated in order to properly adjust them to users' conceptual model). • The bibliographic catalogue should be viewed as a broader instrument, with a new descriptive structure, that interconnects users and relevant resources and fosters relationships between entities, going beyond its function as a data storage mechanism.
How can we create the future of CPALs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating value-added services by supporting the work of researchers: infrastructure, availability of resources and reference help. • Anchoring CPALs positioning on the intrinsic value of their heritage collections and services provision and also by strengthening ICT use in resources management and in the creation of new shared services, developing new forms of cooperation and collaborative work in order to ensure their sustainability. • Developing library and information professionals' skills in the management, leadership and technological literacy areas, valuing their professional contribution to organizational performance and excellence. • Promoting reflection and debate <i>fora</i>, involving

Questions	Key points
	stakeholders in the discussion of the future and other issues, and encouraging higher education institutions to invest in the development of Information Science curricula aligned market and citizens' needs.

Table 1 – Questions and reflection key points

4. CPALs' shared futures

Based on the question “How to create the future of CPALs?”, the four reference stakeholders groups expressed their points of views on the vision they had of the future(s), as a result of their different positioning in relation to the arguments and issues exposed in the preliminary study.

Groups	Positioning
Group 1	Interest and collaboration
Group 2	Different conditions and distance from general difficulties faced by CPALs
Group 3	Interest and consolidation of General Secretariats' roles played in information management in each Ministry, with greater visibility of professional skills. Interest of library and information professional associations in the definition of public policies for the national library system, as well as in vocational training for library and information professionals .
Group 4	Interest in the development of a policy and strategy for the library and information sector that make opportunities and challenges possible.

Table 2 – Stakeholders' positioning

After gathering and analyzing stakeholders' visions of the future(s), the alternative futures identified were mapped (Inayatullah, 2013), using a *typology of future* (vid. section 2 in this paper). Table 3 shows stakeholders' visions of the future in relation to the categories of alternative futures.

Groups	Typology of Alternative Futures			
	<i>Possible</i>	<i>Probable</i>	<i>Plausible</i>	<i>Preferred</i>
Group 1	Shared services	-	-	Technological-based management (the main strategy for integrating CPALs into

				national information policy).
Group 2	-	- Recognition of organizational best practices. - Integration in clusters rooted in thematic and/or typological, specialization .	-	-
Group 3	-	-	-	Existence of : - better knowledge and diagnosis of CPALs sector; - a Government vision and strategy that values this sector; - public policies for CPALs; - vocational training targeted at improving CPALs professionals skills.
Group 4	-	-	Increased decadence of some CPALs and their disappearance in the short time.	Improvement in CPALs management: - identification of development areas aligned with international trends; - better dissemination

	<p>of specialized collections and services;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more and better qualified staff; - adoption of shared services and data curation practices.
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Table 3 – The stakeholders’ visions of the future(s)

5. Recommendations for action

The stakeholders’ auditing process validated the key questions that boosted the reflection and debate on the future of CPALs and provided the justification for developing new approaches capable of strengthening the prospective analysis, while formulating a policy for the sector.

Considering INA’s mission:

To promote the development, qualification and public workers mobility through management skills and assessment of staffing needs in view of the mission, objectives and activities of public services and career management, aiming at the integration of organizational development processes. It serves as a national reference in the field of training for national and foreign organizations pursuing similar objects.

as well as stakeholders’ contributions, GIBACE made several recommendations underpinned by the three strategic axes:

Axis 1 - Library Services Management

INA should...

1. Position itself as a catalyst for synergies among stakeholders’ top management and national key players (National Library of Portugal, Administrative Modernization Agency, etc.), with a view to creating a National Coordinating Body for information management.
2. Promote and coordinate the national debate about the need and importance of having an information policy that includes CPALs
3. Participate in the European debate on the value and sustainability of these libraries in public administrations.
4. Prepare a diagnosis of training needs of Information and Documentation professionals working in Central Public Administration, listening to stakeholders and giving feedback to their governing bodies.

5. Identify EU funding opportunities and resources for CPALs, fostering collaborative projects nationwide or partnerships with other EU public administrations.

Axis 2 - Resources Management

INA should...

1. Propose the creation of a new operating model for CPALs based on shared management of resources, which would bring them financial sustainability and greater efficiency in service provision.
2. Partner up with the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) for the creation of an Information Management Forum, which will be an active tool in the implementation of INA's strategy towards CPALs.
3. Offer new or complementary training courses that fulfill skills development needs of I-D professionals working in Central Public Administration services.

Axis 3 – Bibliographic transition

INA should...

1. Promote information and training sessions on new-generation library catalogues targeted at CPALs professionals,
2. Establish cooperation agreements with international organizations that, through education, can contribute to the development of CPALs' skills.
3. Set up partnerships with national public organizations devoted to promoting technological resources sharing.

6. Final remarks

To conclude, it would appear that the opportunities for research and practice in the Library and Information Science arena are copious:

- Future studies, action research and stakeholder analysis provide precious input into public policy design, namely in what concerns CPALs and other governmental libraries.
- They proved to be useful in the identification and discussion of trends and challenges in the Library and Information field, involving both academia and library and information professionals.
- These (combined) methodological approaches can help bridging the gap between higher education offer and changing labour market and societal needs.
- The creation of a shared vision of the future(s) provides a strong base for drawing new political measures or deepening existing ones.

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