Voluntary work at the Library
VOLUNTARY WORK AT THE LIBRARY:
THE EXPERIENSE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MACEDONIA LIBRARY

Anna Fragkou, Director, University of Macedonia Library
Yota Patragkou, Librarian, University of Macedonia Library
AMERICAN FARM SCHOOL OF THESSALONIKI
23/10/2001

From December 1999 till August 2001 the Library of the University of Macedonia participated at a European Project, which run in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme. The project was called ACCELERATE, which stands for Access to the Modern Library Services for the Blind and Partially Sighted People. For the needs of the project an adaptive workstation was installed at the Library enabling visually impaired people to access the Library's services. In brief, the workstation consists of a modern PC with CD-ROM drive and connection to the Internet, special software for reading the screen and producing audio and tangible output, a software for magnifying the screen for people with low vision, a special synthesizer for the Greek language, a Braille display with 40 refreshable cells, a Braille printer, and a scanner used for scanning print texts and transforming them into fully searchable electronic form with the help of an OCR software.

The installation of the workstation was the first step of the Library to offer information services to visually impaired students. However, accessibility doesn't insure equal participation to the educational procedures. In a very short time, the need for supporting visually impaired students with educational material (mainly textbooks and classroom lectures.) in alternative formats became apparent. These matters demand central decisions taken by the University Administration, which responded by creating a special Committee for Students with Disabilities for developing a standard policy for the support of these students. These matters also demand a considerable period of time in order needs to be located and analyzed, and measures to be discussed and implemented properly.

Although, the Director of the Library became a member of the Committee from the beginning of its creation, it was apparent that the Library should proceed with some immediate actions in order to cover current needs of the visually impaired students. So, we searched for solutions in providing textbooks in alternative formats. The easiest to do was to scan and OCR textbooks and offer them in electronic form that could be easily used in the Library's workstation. However, we realized quickly that this procedure was very time consuming and couldn't be included in the every day work of the librarians. On the other hand, due to restricted funds we couldn't employ new people for this task.

Thus, an initiative was introduced by the Library and supported by the University Administration to issue an announcement, calling students for voluntary work in scanning basic textbooks of the curricula attended by the visually impaired students. The announcement was a poster that was launched on the information boards of the University Departments on February 23rd of 2001. We tried to make the poster attractive but also informative in terms of what we needed and what we could offer as a benefit to volunteers. In the poster, we were presenting the need to support visually impaired students in their courses, we were briefly describing the task, we were implying the technical skills the volunteers would acquire during their voluntary work and we were referring to the certification the Library would give them for their work.

The announcement coincided with the ending of the winter exam period and the beginning of the new semester, so the interested students already knew their everyday time schedule and consequently the time they could devote to this task. Having no previous experience, the Library had little expectations for the success of this effort. In a two weeks period however, the number of interested students of the University of Macedonia had gone up to 15,

whereas, two students from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and two administrative employees of the University of Macedonia expressed interest as well.

In parallel, we prepared a kind of registration form where candidates would write some information about their availability and their skills in using a computer. In this way we could develop a weekly working program for them. During their registration, candidates acquired information about ACCELERATE project and the goal of the initiative.

In the same time we contacted the Voluntary Work of Thessaloniki, a non-profit organization that trains volunteers, offers support to people with disabilities and also one of the ACCELERATE project's partners. Although, the contact was initially made in the framework of the project, in order to organize a scheduled seminar for training the librarians on how to offer services to visually impaired people, the Voluntary Work suggested that candidate volunteers should also attend the seminar. So, we shaped the program of the seminar in a way to include topics on volunteerism and we invited all candidates. The seminar entitled "Volunteers, Students with Visual Impairment, Library" took place at the University of Macedonia and lasted 5 days in total (1-2/3/01, 8-9/3/01 and 15/3/01). 11 librarians, 8 students of the University of Macedonia and 2 students of the Aristotle University attended the seminar.

During the first day of the seminar, an introduction was made about voluntary work, its characteristics and different categories, its positive outcomes and its differentiation from charity, social welfare, social security and dilettantism. The second day mainly focused on the objectives and methods of how the public should be informed and get sensitive about issues of voluntary work and the needs of disabled people. The third and fourth day included practice in living situations in which visually impaired people have to adjust to (ex. walking with covered eyes and leaded by someone else, using the cane to find your way, etc.) and trust games. In the last day, the group met with visually impaired people and representatives of the Pan-Hellenic Association for the Blind. Issues on the needs of visually impaired people were discussed and with their help, practice on the ways to approach and lead visually impaired people was exercised.

The seminar proved to be very useful not only for the librarians, but also for the future volunteers who had the opportunity to comprehend the notion of volunteerism, to see how a voluntary program can be organized and to understand the responsibilities and the rights of the volunteers. Most important, the seminar brought together volunteers with their visually impaired co-students enhancing in this way their feeling of social offer and making them conscious of the right of equal access to education.

As soon as the seminar was completed, a weekly working program was formed. Each volunteer worked for 3 hours per week for scanning print textbooks, doing OCR and archiving the electronic files produced. In the working program 8 students participated, the 4 of which had attended the seminar on volunteerism. Decrease in the number of working volunteers was inevitable because the available hours of two or more volunteers coincided and we only had one scanner in the Library.

For each volunteer a personal file was created where he or she was registering the hours they have worked each week and the task they had accomplished each time. The Library had already contacted the visually impaired students of the University and gathered the textbooks and other educational material that had to be transformed into electronic form. Each volunteer undertook the scanning of a portion of this material. All volunteers were also trained by a librarian in how to use the scanner and the OCR software and how to archive the electronic files. Additionally, written guidelines were prepared and given to volunteers for use in practice.

Main responsibility for the organization and control of the voluntary program of the Library was appointed to one librarian (Ms. Yota Patragkou). Co-operation with the system administrator of the Library was also required to resolve technical problems in the use of hardware and software and in archiving.

After all the preliminary work, as described above, was done, the voluntary program started at the end of April 2001, and lasted till the end of the semester. Not all the volunteers were consistent with their appointment. After checking their files, it was proved that only 4 persons had shown a remarkable stability in their work.
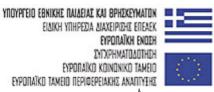
What we have learned so far is that:

- For the reasons described previously, the seminar on volunteerism was very important for both the Library's personnel and the volunteers. The Library should continue offering this kind of seminar to all new volunteers to introduce them to its general framework.
- A regular communication with the volunteers is required for insuring continuing interest and enhancing devotion to the program. In our case, regular communication was not always easy either because the librarian's in charge working hours didn't coincide with the available hours of the volunteers, or because of the work overload of the librarian. On the contrary, in cases where communication was constant, volunteers seemed to acquire the necessary information and acknowledgement of their job that made them more consistent to their goal.
- Technical problems were also an obstacle that we shall have to eliminate in future programs.
- A more open acknowledgement and reward of the voluntary work may on the one hand encourage existing volunteers and on the other hand attract more people to voluntary work.
- A number of volunteers were attracted by the potential benefits (not financial) they would gain while offering voluntary work. In our case the benefits were the extra skills they would acquire in using a computer.

  And finally,

- Voluntary programs need to be well prepared, organized in detail and evaluated as every other program the Library undertakes.

Now the Library is entering a new circle of its voluntary program. We intend to appoint a second librarian to the program so that communication with volunteers is possible throughout the day. Fortunately, most of the existing volunteers have already contacted the Library to continue with their work. We hope that with the experience we have gained from our first effort we will be able to organize the voluntary work program in a better way and perhaps to widen it to other tasks as well.

Contact our Automation department for comments on our website.
Last update: Nov. 7, 2003