

Professors Emeriti Network **Lifelong eLearning and eEducation**

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 Meeting of the Professors Emeriti Network and the representatives of the network University
 eLearning and eEducation Group
 September 29, 2021

SLSP and *swisscovery* – a Swiss success story on how to create a multilingual, national library network

Launched on 7 December 2020, the national library platform *swisscovery* gives users access to the full range of scientific resources of more than 470 academic libraries in Switzerland. More than 40 million books, periodicals, journals, and non-book items and over three billion digital articles can thus be accessed via a single shared digital platform. With its multilingual orientation and integrated library system, this deeply integrated national collaboration between libraries to form a shared library platform is the first of its kind in the world.

The *swisscovery* library platform is centrally managed by the Swiss Library Service Platform Ltd. (SLSP), a limited company founded in 2017 by 15 academic institutions and libraries. Together with the libraries in the network, SLSP has been implementing the *swisscovery* platform over the last four years. One of the major changes in *swisscovery* concerns the business model under which the platform was established. With the creation of the service company SLSP Ltd., the institutions investing in the creation of the network, and more specifically in the purchase and realisation of a cloud-based library management system, had a vehicle to secure the investment and to distribute the installation and running costs between the network participants. With the creation of SLSP Ltd., investment into the new network could be fully allocated to this separate legal entity. Moreover, a form of financing was chosen that had little precedence in the higher education sector in Switzerland. In addition to (a rather small amount of) equity capital, the 15 shareholders leveraged SLSP with debt credit of over 10 million Swiss Francs. This credit will be paid back over the course of the useful economic life of the implemented software, estimated at 10 years. The yearly costs of the platform thus amount to the running costs added to the amortisation of the credit. The typical business elements represented quite an innovation (and a change in culture) in a sector used to public financing and political arbitration. However, a unique pricing model that considers the size of the participating libraries was chosen, introducing throughout the network an element of fairness typical of the public sector.

The size and complexity of the network presented a further issue that was solved during the project. With a large number of small libraries with staff of 1–5 librarians and a few large libraries with 100+ employees, a solution had to be found to integrate this diversity into the network architecture. With the creation of a superordinate “network zone” above single “institution zones” for all *swisscovery* libraries, the sharing of common resources like catalogue records, access privileges and patron data could be achieved. In a major effort during the project phase, all local item policies, the local variations for terms of use at all participating libraries, the numerous local fee scales, the various local user groups and access restrictions to library materials were harmonized. As a result, these efforts allow a system-wide coherent access for end-users, no matter which academic institution they are requesting library services

from. Moreover, synchronized library management could be realised, which reduces the costs of configuration changes and allows better exchange of practice between the libraries.

The management of patrons across the whole network represented another challenge. To generate a real advantage for library users, it was clear from the start that a single registration should allow access to all libraries in the network. The choice of the SWITCH registration platform, edu-ID, was thus paramount to the success of *swisscovery*. Indeed, edu-ID conforms to data protection law, offers the required functionalities and could be adapted to optimize the interface with the library management system.

One of the major hurdles, and one central to the safe operation of the whole library platform, were the issues regarding data protection. European countries mostly operate within the single frame of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), “the toughest privacy and security law in the world” by its own account. Though recognizing the basic elements of the GDPR, Switzerland has its own data protection law, or rather laws. While the Federal Act on Data Protection applies to all federal institutions as well as private companies doing business in Switzerland, 26 cantonal data protection laws apply to public institutions in the Swiss cantons. Since *swisscovery* mainly brings together public institutions from more than 20 cantons (universities, libraries, archives, and collections) as well as several federal institutions, 21 data protection laws would theoretically apply to the new library network, in which SLSP takes on the role of data processor, and the library institutions that of the data owner. As library patrons are free to use any library in the network, and since their user data is accessible at the level of the network zone, any individual attribution of user data to single institutions is not possible, nor is it wanted. Indeed, one of the major advantages of the network comes from the fact that patrons do not need to manage individual library user accounts but can access all the libraries via a single sign-on.

Major challenges remain in the management of a multilingual library network with a single common system, e.g. use the German (GND), the French (IdRef/Rameau) and the Italian (Nuovo soggetario) authority databases in parallel. To improve working in a multilingual environment in the coming years will be no easy task, as the library communities in the three Swiss linguistic regions are each working in the professional context of the library communities in their respective large neighbour countries. Moreover, the management and application of the language authority files follow very different logics depending on the language.

After the decision for a joint (or union) catalogue was taken, a major task was to agree on common formats and standards. Especially in resource management, the situation in the Swiss language regions was heterogeneous. The libraries moving to SLSP decided to apply the RDA standard as the future common cataloguing rule for *swisscovery*. Since RDA has not yet been introduced neither in France nor in Italy, it was decided to apply RDA following the application rules of the German-speaking countries, which are managed by the German National Library. As they are constantly evolving, an ongoing task for SLSP is to continuously make these application rules practicable for the non-German speaking libraries in Switzerland.

Finally, with the creation of SLSP as an independent service provider for the Swiss libraries, the governance of the *swisscovery* network had to be decided. As a limited company, the governance of SLSP is clearly defined by law, and is based on the concept of an independent legal entity with shareholders and stakeholders. On the other hand, the customer libraries each have their own governance, as independent institutions or as organisational units of universities and public administration. However, another layer of governance concerns the *swisscovery* network itself, namely

for issues regarding all members of the network – the library institutions and SLSP. At this level, the externalities and risks of free riding must be minimized through a common understanding of each institution’s role within the network. The sharing of data and resources is fundamental to *swisscovery*; it is therefore vital to avoid individual members profiting excessively from the network and giving little in return. Arbitration between the interests of individual members should be ensured, and ways to solve conflicts must be put in place.

