

Conspectus Method Used for Collections Mapping and Structuring of Portals in Czech Libraries

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Abstract

The paper describes the history of how the Conspectus method was implemented in Czech libraries, mainly at the National Library of the Czech Republic. After its "traditional" application for description and evaluation of collections and collection building strategy, Conspectus became an extremely useful tool for other areas: subject crossroads for universal portals and subject gateways; organization of open access and subject areas in the new library building (to be finished in 2010) and also for determining subject-level responsibility and cooperation in the newly conceived Czech Digital Library.

History Before and After November 1989

Looking back to the period before the "velvet revolution" in 1989, it is nowadays difficult to recall all the limitations Czech libraries faced in collection development and description. There were many prohibited authors, titles and subjects. The Communist regime did not support any methods that would clearly show strengths and weaknesses (especially the gaps) in library collections.

General and vague collection description and collection development policy were not only quite sufficient but even required. International cooperation with communist countries was highly supported and its value overestimated, while cooperation with the rest of the world was limited, if not prohibited. Of course, comparison with collections of libraries in those countries was far from desirable.

After November 1989 all the limitations (except the financial ones) disappeared. At that time of major changes in many different areas, the top management of the National Library (NL) felt a strong need for confirmation and/or change of mission of the NL as the national, universal, and de facto also university library as well as a special library in its own right, focused on historical and music collections, librarianship and Slavonic collections. After confirming its mission, the NL needed a new collection development strategy and policy that would be clear and internationally understandable.

A strange situation existed after November 1989 in the area of acquisition policy, which, unfortunately, continues today. Theoretically, our acquisition staff became totally free to obtain anything from anywhere to fill in the gaps from the decades of totalitarianism and to offer users information resources of a quality and quantity comparable to that in foreign libraries. However, there were (and still are) such severe financial limitations resulting from too many gaps in different areas and other priorities for the state budget that we cannot speak of any visible improvement in our acquisition policy since the revolution. Sadly, this is the reality. There is also not enough cooperation in collection

development among Czech libraries, which results in waste of the insufficient financial resources of the whole country.

Step 0-1: November 1989-2000

There were too many challenges and priorities after the November 1989. After several decades of isolation and limited international cooperation, in many areas we had to start either from scratch or redo in a completely different way. We had to master many international standards and tools available for different areas through analysis, understanding, comparing, testing, choice, translation and implementation. Within several years or even months we had to travel the same route our foreign colleagues had taken over decades.

In contrast to library formats, cataloging rules, classifications etc., where we could identify more or less clear international standards, nothing like that existed in the area of collection mapping. Although Conspectus seemed to be well developed and internationally used, it did not have a UDC version, which we needed. It had been developed and applied mainly in university libraries, and there were serious doubts about its applicability for our national archival collection.

Our discussions became especially complicated after Czech university libraries and several large research libraries refused to use and test this tool in the very environment where it had been born and had many applications, comparable situations, etc. There was not much progress in this area until the NL decided to be a pioneer and apply Conspectus to its collections, being aware that testing at the NL would be much more difficult than in its “native” university and research library environment.

Step 1: Conspectus for library collections’ evaluation and development, 2000

In 2000, the concept of a national portal, the “Uniform Information Gateway”, was born. We needed a decision about the general subject division for this portal. Without clear and uniform collection description and a collection development strategy, the difficulties in identifying which libraries had strong or weak collections in particular subject areas became more obvious. In 2000, the NL decided to translate the most important documents concerning the Conspectus method and to implement it for its own collections’ description and evaluation and for its future collection development strategy.

Pictures 1, 2: Conspectus at the NL

The collections of the National Library of the Czech Republic grew over the centuries and now contain some 6 million volumes. It is the largest collection in the country. Its significance and value are unique, not only in the Czech Republic but also internationally. However, the lack of adequate financial support over several years has resulted in the inability to enhance this cultural and intellectual heritage and to preserve it adequately for future generations. The following overview created using the [conspetus](#) method provides more detailed information.

National Archival Collection	Universal Library Collection	Study Collection
<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Characteristic</u>
Collection evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • domestic production • foreign production 	Collection evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • domestic production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ production A ◦ production B • foreign production 	<u>Collection evaluation</u>
Collection development strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • domestic production • foreign production 	Collection development strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • domestic production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ production A ◦ production B • foreign production 	<u>Collection development strategy</u>

Collection Development Strategy

Collection development strategy for individual subject areas is clearly indicated in the following table and explained in the text. By clicking on individual subject categories you get detail information on collection development strategy, by clicking on [collection depth indicators](#) and on [language codes](#) you get their description and meaning.

Foreign production

Table

Universal Library Collection - Foreign production			
	GL = collection development strategy (what we should acquire)		
	L = language		
Number/content	Subject area category	GL	L
1	Agriculture	2a	S
2	Anthropology	4	W
3	Art and Architecture	4	W
4	Biological Sciences	4	W
5	Business and Economics	3b	W
6	Chemistry	4	W
7	Computer Science	3a	S
8	Education	4	W
9	Engineering and Technology	2a	W
10	Geography and Earth Science	4	W

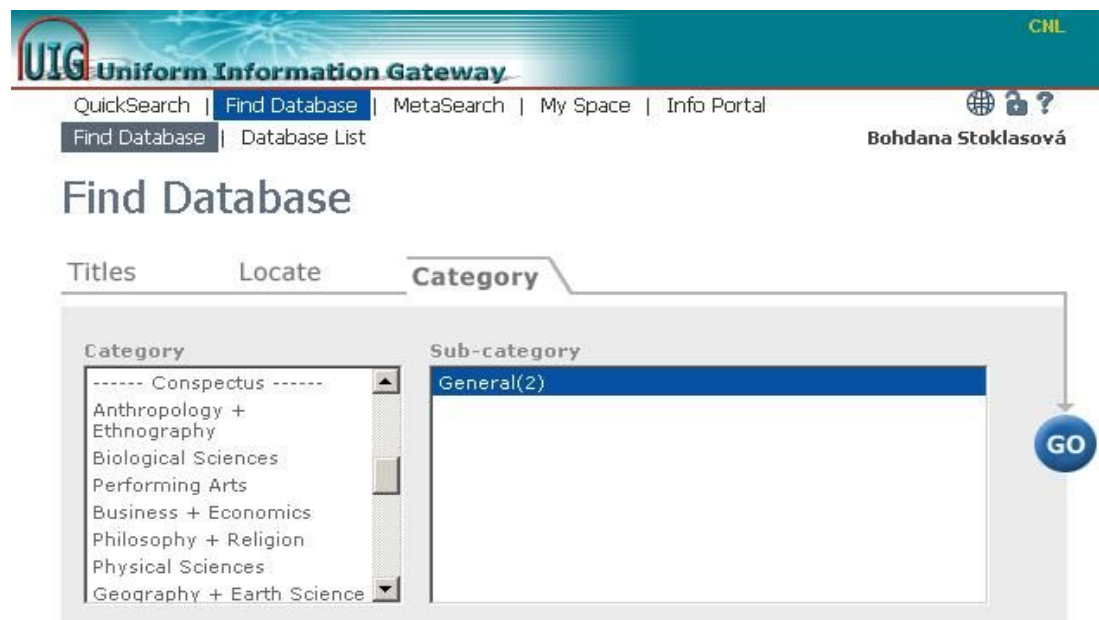
Step 2: Conspectus for subject cataloging and access, 2001

Another important milestone was the start of enriched subject cataloging by including Conspectus data in 2001. Until 2000 we had to rely on the qualified evaluation of our collections, but since 2001 quantitative data is also available. Conspectus is an added value not only for users, but also for librarians. They download Conspectus data with bibliographic or authority records from the NL to their own databases to improve consistency and make collections assessment and comparison much easier. Some inevitable Conspectus modifications were needed for special libraries. UDC-DDC concordance tables were developed and are permanently maintained at the NL.

Step 3: Conspectus for the Uniform Information Gateway, 2001

The Uniform Information Gateway (UIG) project started in 2001 as a joint pilot project of the NL and Charles University in Prague. It became a national project in 2002. The UIG is a universal gateway covering all subjects, so there was a strong need for subject structuring from the very beginning. Conspectus divisions are the main UIG subject intersections, and Conspectus categories are the more detailed subject divisions.

Picture 3: Conspectus divisions in the UIG



Step 4: External audit, 2003

After obtaining both theoretical and practical experience with Conspectus implementation and having some results to show, evaluate and discuss, we decided that an external audit would be helpful. Other Czech libraries were starting to consider implementation of Conspectus, and they wanted to use the NL experience and results as models to be followed. It was necessary to be sure that we understood the new concept well.

We were not quite sure about our qualified estimates, which were probably used for the first time in connection with Conspectus. We really needed to have our results evaluated by somebody experienced with Conspectus in different countries who would be able to compare them. We were extremely lucky that Mary Bushing kindly agreed to evaluate our results. The evaluation procedure had three parts.

At the beginning we received an Initial Evaluation Report based on analysis of our results, which were available on the web. Then Mary Bushing came to Prague to evaluate our results on site and to look at our physical collections in the stacks. Her visit was also a unique opportunity for discussions with the key people who had been responsible for the Conspectus implementation in different areas and projects at the NL. After her visit we received the Final Report.

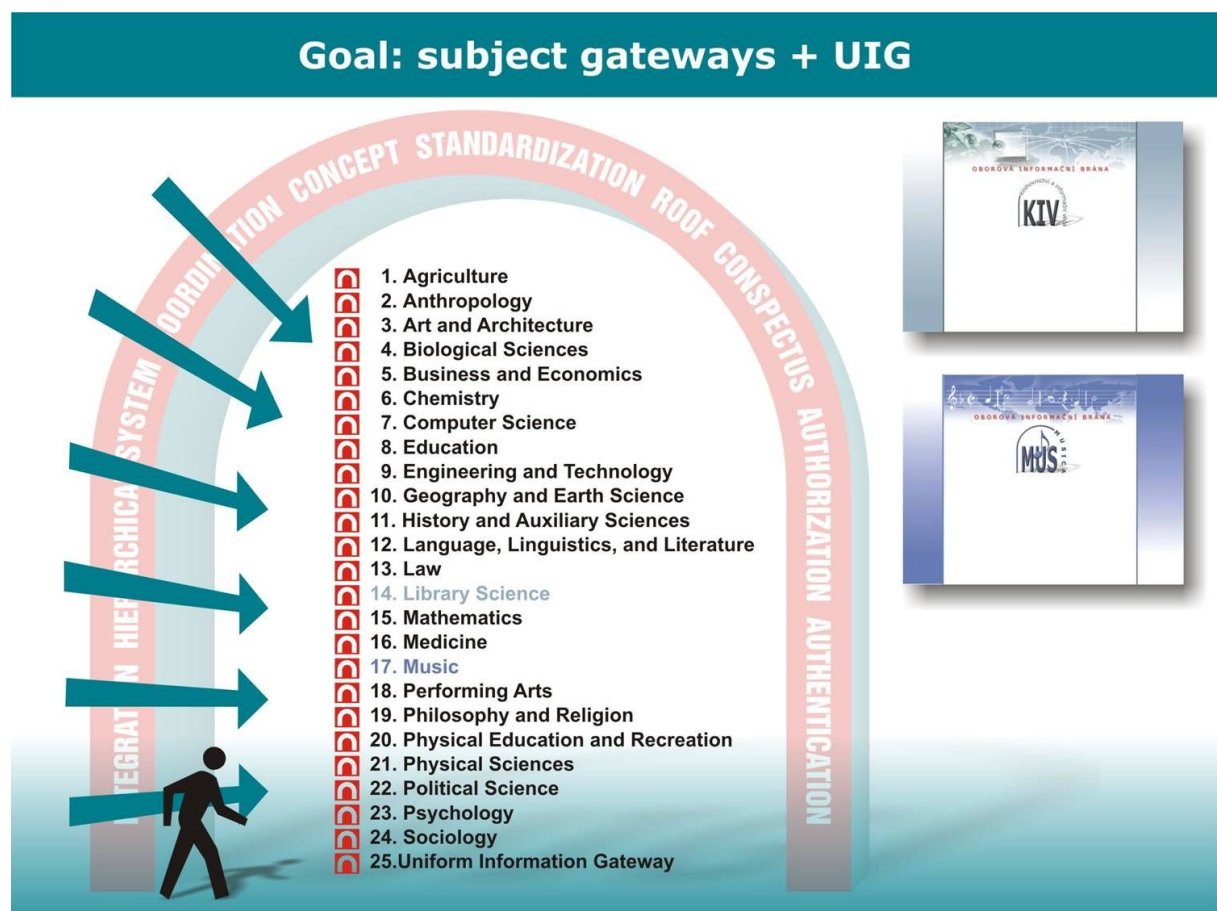
This external audit was extremely helpful to us. Its conclusions were mainly positive, which proved that our way of handling Conspectus was correct and that it can serve as a model for other Czech libraries, perhaps even foreign ones. And of course, the perspective of an experienced person coming from outside uncovered some mistakes and weaknesses the inexperienced cannot recognize from within.

Step 5: Conspectus for subject gateways, 2004

Several subject gateway pilot projects appeared in 2004. Many things had to be resolved in connection with the UIG. The most important question was the level of connection or independence between the UIG and the subject gateways. Cooperation and coordination are necessary to avoid double efforts in some subjects and blank spaces in others. There will be a change from the present, where the UIG serves as the very strong heart of the whole system.

A user interested in particular subject has to go first through the subject crossroads of the central UIG portal and select his/her desired subject. After that he/she navigates to a subject gateway offering special resources, services, etc. At present, only handful subject gateways in the pilot project stage are available in our country.

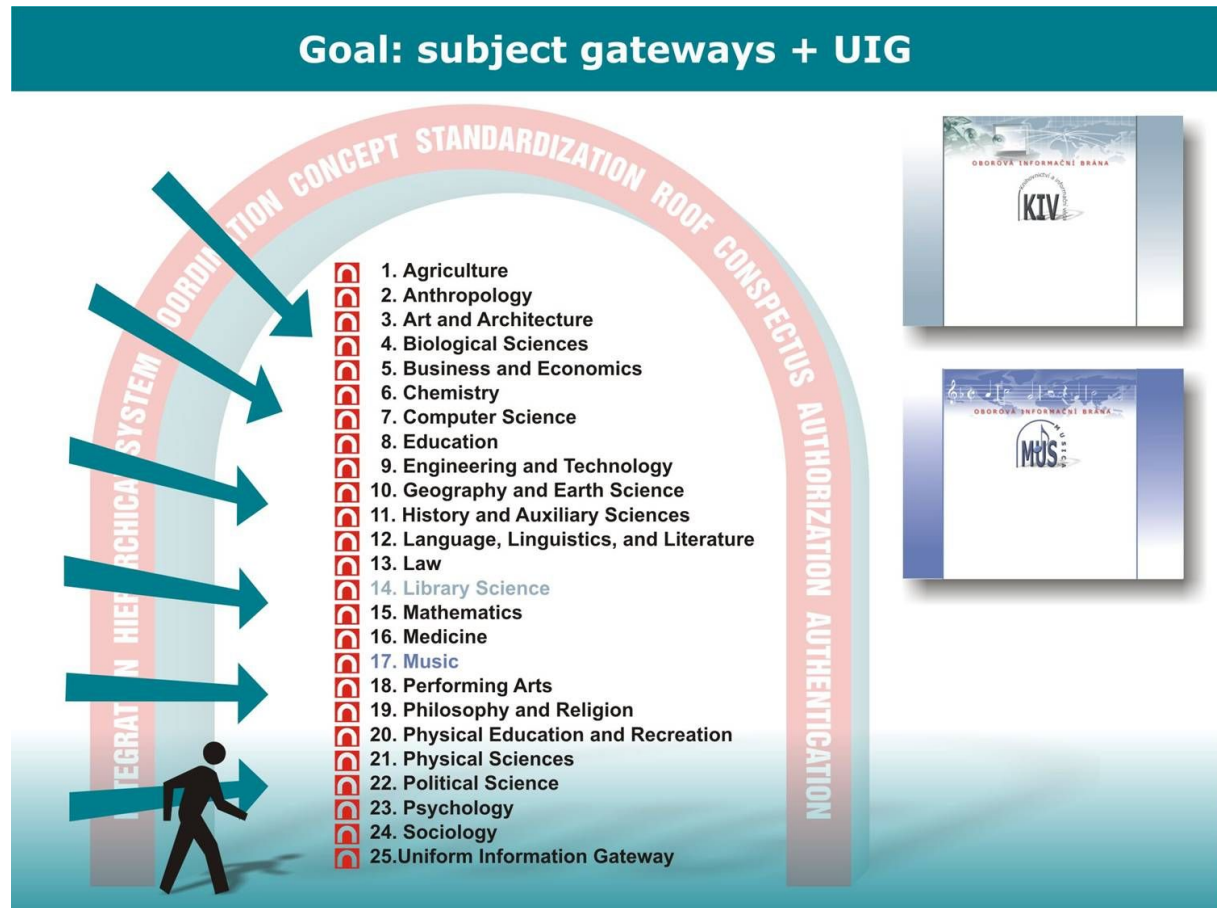
Picture 4: UIG + subject gateways: present situation and the goal



The situation is changing, and the subject gateways are becoming more independent. The UIG will remain as an umbrella, holding individual subject gateways together with uniform concepts, standards, etc. These will be mandatory for those building subject gateways.

Of course, users will benefit from uniform standards because they allow seamless connection of different subject gateways and connecting different services, but users should not be limited by centralization from the freedom of direct subject access. As we can see from the following picture, for the user the UIG will disappear and he/she will go directly to his/her subject gateway.

Picture 5: UIG + subject gateways: the goal



So far the areas of usual Conspectus implementation have been described. However, there are two new big projects where Conspectus proved to be extremely– and in some areas even surprisingly– useful.

Step 6: Conspectus for the new building

The NL will be out of space for storing its collections in 2010. A new building is needed urgently and should open in 2010. The new building will offer different services, and it will be a nice place not only for studying. The picture illustrates its main areas. The picture intentionally reminds us of traffic lights with green saying you can go and red saying stop.

Picture 6: Concept of the NL new building



We strongly believe that the combination of nice restaurants, cafes, spaces for different cultural events and with different reading rooms located in a beautiful modern building facing the park and the St. Vitus cathedral will be a special place to come and spend time.

Conspectus will be a very helpful tool for organizing the open stacks and reading rooms. Mainly new documents published after 2001 will be in the open stacks. These have been classified according to Conspectus since 2001. At that time nobody expected the possibility of a new building with space for open stacks by 2010. But in 2010 these documents will be prepared for easy removal from the closed stacks in the historical building and will be organized in the open stacks of the new building.

Step 7: Conspectus for the Czech Digital Library

The Czech Digital Library is another new concept. Conspectus will be used on several levels: as part of metadata accompanying digital objects, it will make subject access and integration much easier. There are many subject-oriented digital documents and repositories. Conspectus is available to help us organize and map them.

Conclusion

The NL decided to implement the Conspectus in 2000. The decision was extremely difficult, and of course, it is not an ideal tool. No tool is ever completely ideal; and in looking for such a thing, one would never come to a decision. Comparing our different projects organized according to the same principles, we are lucky that our decision was made in time.

Apparently, WHEN a decision is made is even more important than WHICH tool is selected. It is important to choose ONE (whatever) tool for identifying collections at different levels IN TIME for their seamless integration and presentation in different systems. The longer the decision is postponed, the more different solutions will appear to complicate future integration and cooperation.

Conspectus is one of several strong tools, being very powerful and flexible. Surprisingly, it proved useful even in unexpected ways. Once you decide to use Conspectus as an evaluation tool, it makes the integration of different projects seamless and life much easier for librarians and, importantly, our users.