Report: Professional Training and Study Visit to Berlin Libraries

Date: November 24–28, 2025, **Location:** Berlin, Germany, **Participants:** Svjetlana Đelić, Šejla Džidić, Vasilije Milnović (University Library Svetozar Marković, Belgrade), and Bojan Kundačina (Belgrade City Library), **Grantor:** Bibliothek & Information International

Participation in the study program organized under the auspices of the Bibliothek & Information International (BII) grant provided an in-depth insight into the operations of Berlin's leading scientific and library institutions. The planned itinerary—covering five key libraries: the University Library of Humboldt University, the Philological Library (Free University of Berlin), the Library of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, the Library of the Institute for Advanced Study, and the University Library of Technical University—was conceived as a strategic educational program aimed at exploring contemporary global trends and innovative solutions in the field of international librarianship. Staying in Berlin, one of the world's foremost scientific hubs, provided a basis for a direct comparison between practices in Serbia and the advanced models that currently define standards in Europe and globally.

The visit program was divided into two thematic segments. The first segment encompassed large university libraries (Humboldt University, Free University of Berlin, and Technical University), where discussions with colleagues focused on architectural solutions and the organization of library space, given that all these facilities were purpose-built during a similar period two decades ago. The second part of the program involved visits to libraries within prestigious institutes (Max Planck and the Institute for Advanced Study). During these visits, the dialogue emphasized specific areas such as Open Science and Open Access, support for scholarly publishing, and tailored service models for the scientific research community. This dual approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of different levels of library services and their role in the modern educational and scientific ecosystem.
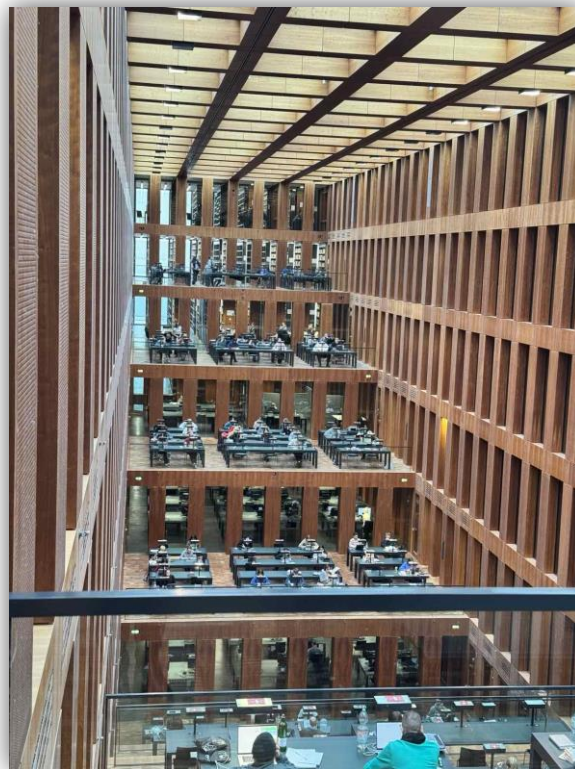
Unversity Library of Humboldt University

The program officially commenced on November 24th with a visit to the Humboldt University Library in Berlin, housed in the monumental Jacob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum. This architectural masterpiece by Max Dudler is characterized by strict symmetry and a minimalist aesthetic. Our host, colleague Katharina Tollkühn, provided us with a detailed introduction to the institution's history, the complex construction process of the new building, and the architect's underlying philosophy. In this edifice, architecture is not merely an aesthetic backdrop but a rigidly functional framework that directly dictates operational models. The Jurassic limestone facade, with its precise, rhythmic windows, is consistently reflected in the interior, culminating in the fascinating central reading room. It was particularly insightful to see how significantly certain services have changed today compared to when the building was first constructed, and how librarians have adapted and modified the spatial concept accordingly. One such example is the initial placement of info desks on every floor; today, it has been demonstrated that a single, central info desk sufficiently meets all user needs.

During the tour, special emphasis was placed on the practical functioning of the open-stack system. Analyzing the user experience within such a massive and high-traffic system provided us with valuable insights into the implementation of modern information literacy programs. These programs are precisely scaled to respond to the specific and diversified needs of the student population in the digital age, balancing physical space with virtual resources.

The working meeting dedicated to Digital Humanities, a field in which this library sets high standards, was inspiring. The focus of the discussion was on long-term data preservation and the development of sophisticated metadata systems. Such an approach ensures the permanent visibility and accessibility of digitized cultural heritage, whereby the library transcends its traditional role and becomes a key guardian of digital memory and the institution's scientific continuity.

Philological Library (Free University of Berlin)

The following day, November 25, we visited the Philological Library of the Free University of Berlin (FU Berlin), an institution recognized worldwide as the "Berlin Brain." The building owes this nickname to the visionary project of architect Norman Foster, whose design symbolizes the human cranium. The facility represents a premier paradigm of the digital-age library, where futuristic architecture is in complete harmony with the principles of environmental sustainability. Its unique double-layered dome allows for natural ventilation and maximizes the use of daylight, drastically reducing energy consumption while simultaneously creating an exceptionally stimulating and pleasant environment for research.

Our host, Carla Freise, provided us with a detailed introduction to the internal organization of the space—which strictly follows the specific architectural layout—as well as the challenges of adapting that space over time. In practical terms, the visit offered valuable lessons on balancing a rich physical collection with modern digital resources. The integrated services in this library allow users to transition seamlessly between analog and digital modes of work within the same workspace, which is an imperative of modern librarianship. Due to its futuristic design, the library continues to generate significant interest today, though perhaps not as intensely as immediately following its opening.

The discussions we initiated with colleagues from the Humboldt University Library naturally continued during this visit. Special emphasis was placed on the complexity of planning library spaces that must remain flexible for services that are yet to be developed in the future. Furthermore, we analyzed the process of centralization, as both the Humboldt and Philological libraries arose from the practical need to consolidate numerous small, fragmented collections into a unified and efficient system. As a valuable, unplanned addition to the program, we also visited the Campus Library of the Free University of Berlin, which completed our overview of this university's complex library system.

Library of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development

The middle of the planned program, November 26th, was reserved for a visit to the library of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. This experience proved crucial for understanding the specific nuances of working within highly specialized, elite research environments, where the library transcends its role as a traditional service and becomes an equal partner in the process of scientific production.

The discussions focused on advanced Research Data Management (RDM) services, with a particular emphasis on the practical implementation of FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable), which ensure that scientific results are easily searchable and reusable. We discussed in detail sophisticated methods for optimizing research impact through citation tracking and complex bibliometric analyses, as well as the strategic support the library provides to scientists in selecting appropriate channels for Open Access publishing.

During the meeting, we exchanged experiences from Serbia, presenting the current state of scientific publishing and the development of capital projects such as the national portal eNauka—a generator of institutional repositories that is of vital importance for the visibility of our science. Our host, Sebastian Nix (Head of Library), introduced us to the architectural concept of the library and its transformation plans. Due to the decreased need for acquiring printed materials, the space is being adapted to meet the modern needs of researchers, becoming a hybrid venue for work, online meetings, and collaboration. The visit concluded with a broader insight into the functioning of the entire Max Planck Institute network, providing us with a valuable overview of the integration of top-tier science and supporting information infrastructure.

Library of the Institute for Advanced Study

On the fourth day of our study trip, November 27, we visited the library of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Wiko), an institution that operates on a model diametrically opposed to mass university systems. This "microcosm" of highly personalized support provides a unique insight into how a library can become a key partner in high-level scientific research. Our host was colleague Michael Dominik Hagel, head of the library, who, along with his team, serves a group of approximately 50 residential fellows staying at the Institute.

In this specific environment, the librarian does not act merely as an intermediary for information retrieval, but as a proactive "information concierge." For an interdisciplinary community of world-renowned researchers, the librarian conducts in-depth bibliographic research and resolves the most complex requests for material procurement. The system is designed so that the library takes full responsibility for the logistics of knowledge: from locating and delivering literature from any part of the world and accessing rare manuscripts in remote archives, to providing the latest digital resources.

This model of intensive, absolutely user-focused librarianship represents the very pinnacle of the profession. Within it, the quality of interaction and the depth of research support are valued above all quantitative parameters and statistics. The visit provided us with a valuable case study on the invaluable human aspect of librarianship in an era of universal automation, reminding us that a personalized approach remains irreplaceable in the process of creating top-tier science.

University Library of Technische Universität

The final day of the program, November 28th, was spent at the University Library of the Technical University of Berlin (TU Berlin). This facility follows a modern architectural and functional concept similar to the first two libraries we visited in Berlin. It is a relatively modern building, primarily designed to accommodate a large number of users, mostly STEM students. At first glance, it is evident that the space is designed much more simply compared to the Humboldt University Library or the Philological Library, which allows librarians to adapt the environment to changing service needs with greater ease and flexibility. The interior is carefully balanced—ranging from spacious reading rooms for traditional work with printed materials to specialized zones for individual and group study, as well as soundproof booths for video meetings.

It is particularly noteworthy that the TU Berlin library still offers 24/7 access to its users. In contrast, the Humboldt University Library discontinued this practice, partly for reasons of energy efficiency and partly due to the assessment that night-time operation was not strictly necessary to that extent. During the visit, we were introduced in detail to the advanced automated loan and return systems, which significantly reduce the workload for staff and speed up user throughput. The conclusion of the visit was that libraries of the future must play a dual role: remaining the primary hub for gathering and in-person work by offering adequate physical space, while simultaneously serving as an efficient digital service available to users at all times.

Conclusion

The study visit to leading scientific and library institutions in Berlin provided a comprehensive insight into the contemporary European standards defining the role of the library within the modern educational and scientific ecosystem. The visit allowed for a direct comparison with the current state of librarianship in Serbia. It goes without saying that Berlin's libraries are ahead of those in Serbia in this regard, primarily in terms of spatial and organizational capacities.

Through tours of major university systems (Humboldt, FU Berlin, TU Berlin) and elite research institutes (Max Planck, Wiko), it was confirmed that successful library practice today is founded upon: architectural flexibility, digital transformation, and personalized support for the research community—effectively putting the needs of the user and the community first.

The trend of centralizing smaller collections into unified, efficient systems is accompanied by innovations in spatial organization. Libraries are being transformed from traditional reading rooms into hybrid spaces for collaboration, online meetings, and a seamless transition from analog to digital workflows.

At the service level, the emphasis is placed on Open Science and FAIR principles, where the library becomes an equal partner in the process of scientific production. It achieves this by providing support in research data management, bibliometric analysis, and digital humanities. Finally, the experiences from Berlin indicate that libraries of the future must play a dual role: remaining a primary hub for physical gathering and work, while simultaneously functioning as an efficient and accessible digital service at all times.

P.S. I would like to thank Bibliothek & Information International for the unique opportunity to learn about the work of libraries in Berlin. Thanks to this initiative, we met phenomenal colleagues in all five (or rather, six) libraries, who proved to be excellent hosts, both during the formal part of the visit and during our informal gatherings.

8th January 2026, Belgrade

Bojan Kundačina