

# Subject indexing in the Portuguese polytechnic libraries: a simplified model...to make it possible

## Introduction

Academic libraries have been adapting to technological improvements, but are still working based on the traditional documentation techniques of cataloguing and indexing. The use of the library catalog (OPAC) is nowadays competing with sophisticated technological resources, and improving its performance is a challenging task for librarians.

The research about subject access in these catalogs has demonstrated that inadequate indexing policies have negative influence on the way users search the catalogs, and that consistent subject indexes contribute to a more efficient information retrieval.



Searching by subject in bibliographic catalogs must be a successful experience for library users!

## Objectives

The main objective is to evidence the existing difficulties in subject indexing. It is a required and increasingly demanding task that is not proportional to professional specialization (the normative instruments and tools that support the process are diffuse and hard to use for many professionals in the area).

To achieve that goal, we wanted (first) to ascertain the indexing practice in the Portuguese polytechnic libraries (**is there a consistent use of adequate standards or rules?**)

Secondly we wanted to verify the quality of subject indexes in the bibliographic catalogs of five libraries (**is there a systematic terminology control? what characteristics are revealed in the subject headings?**)

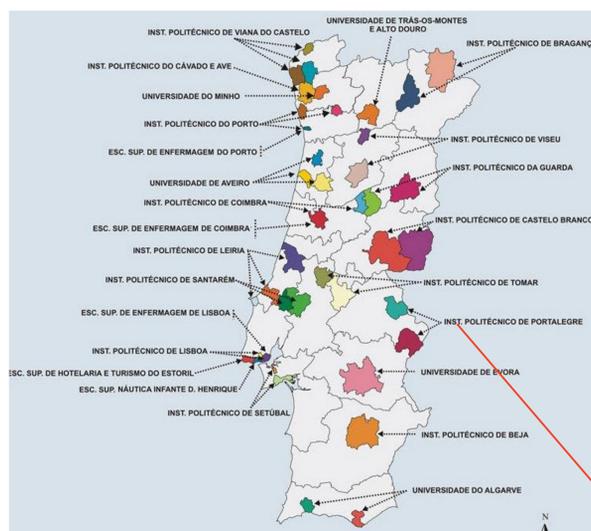
These observations enable us to demonstrate that inadequate indexing procedures (in the first level) conduct to inconsistent subject indexes (in the second level).

So, for the professionals who feel more difficulties in the indexing process, and trying to ease up a complex task, we propose the use of a simplified method, representing the three essential phases of the process ...**indexing is possible!**

## Methods

The research was divided in two distinct parts: the first one to identify the use of indexing instruments in the Portuguese polytechnic libraries, and the second one to analyze the catalogs' subject indexes in a group of libraries (Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre).

The methodology was developed according to the defined levels of observation (1st) inquiry to the institutions, (2nd) analysis of a representative sample of bibliographic records, to identify characteristics in the subject fields (UNIMARC format, subject headings syntax and terminology).



**1st level**  
Identify the use of indexing standards and tools  
(Portuguese polytechnic libraries)

**2nd level**  
Analyze the quality of subject indexes in five catalogs



## Results

### 1st Level – (all libraries)

In the majority of polytechnic libraries the subject indexing process is not carried out according to the appropriate standards and rules (89% don't use them);

The Portuguese indexing system SIPORbase is hardly used (4%), as well as the Portuguese standards NP 3715 and NP 4036.

*These standards correspond respectively to ISO 5963 (Methods for examining documents, determining their subjects, and selecting indexing terms) and to ISO 2788 (Guidelines for the establishment and development of monolingual thesauri).*

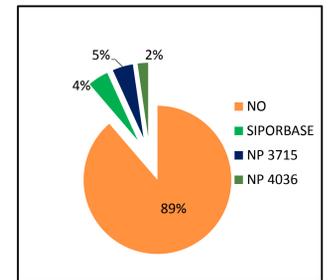


Fig.2: Use of standards and rules

### 2nd Level – (five catalogs)

In what concerns the characteristics of subject indexes in bibliographic records, the results show a great percentage (46%) of uncontrolled terms;

Although the UNIMARC errors (3%), as well as the subject headings syntax errors (4%) are not relevant, these results are influenced by the predominance of non-subdivided subject headings, what gives them the characteristic of being too generic, that is, the "principle of specific entry" is not accomplished (44%).

Main variables	(five catalogs' average)
Uncontrolled terminology	46%
UNIMARC format errors	3%
Subject heading syntax errors	4%
No application of the specific entry principle	44%

Fig.3: Characteristics of subject indexes

So, the main evidenced characteristics revealed the **different procedures in indexing**, both the use of uncontrolled terms (natural language), or of descriptors (from various sources), and the use of pre-coordinated headings. Considering the project of a virtual collective catalog, we may say this is a weakness.

## Conclusions

Subject indexing is developed without orientation in most polytechnic libraries, and the results in the two levels of observation are interrelated; we can associate an **inadequate normative utilization** with the quality of indexing and the **lack of terminology control**, thus giving evidence to **existing difficulties in basic principles** such as the identification and representation of concepts;

Such observations reinforce the central point of our research: **orientation in the indexing process is needed**, and uncontrolled vocabulary doesn't help the consistency of subject indexes;

The type of problems detected in the study case may well occur in the other libraries of the polytechnic system. As a consolidation of our research, we propose the use of a simplified indexing methodology, intending to serve as a guide or an inspiration for others facing difficulties in the process of document indexing.

## Proposal: simplified methodology - ISN model

Getting **in touch** with the basic principles and steps in indexing is possible. A simplified indexing model may help to develop the task.

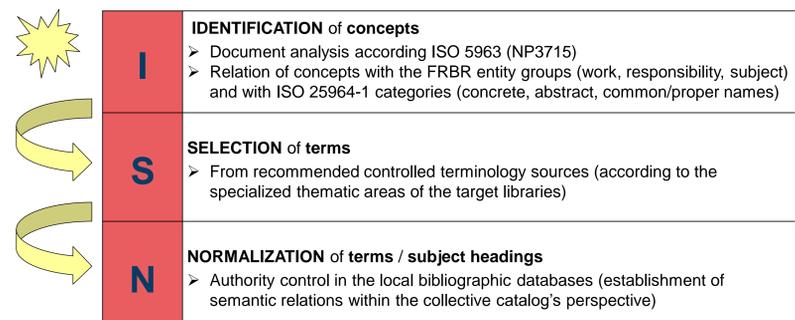


Fig.4: The three basic phases in the indexing process



See our fliers for more detailed information!

## References

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