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## Research priorities setting for the National Library and Archives of the Islamic republic of IRAN

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## **Introduction**

Prioritization is an ongoing procedure, not only among organizations but in various aspects of life and society. What make prioritization different is its methods and approaches adopted for each aspect. The area that is subject to prioritization is the concern of a group of individuals usually referred to as "beneficiaries". They may benefit from the results of the prioritization project or have particular expertise or command on the subjects in question which, consequently, makes priority setting of a considerable significance for them. Therefore, prioritization should be performed by those who have sufficient knowledge and insight about the related areas with great decision-making capabilities. Prioritization executives should be able to accurately identify the groups of experts and beneficiaries and prepare the ground for their efficient and planned involvement in the prioritization process; as "eliciting the public's experience or knowledge is a form of research that can be viewed as objective study of individual experience". (*Workshop on methods for setting research priorities*, 2012, p.5). Thereby, it is necessary to adopt a systematic objective approach, if possible, that seeks to achieve consensus and balance among various groups and beneficiaries. Usually, it is individuals with the necessary expertise, knowledge, and insight in the target domain that partake in the evaluation, decision-making, and prioritization of important organizational affairs.

According to the Statute law of the National Library of Iran (1990), it is an educational (scientific), research, and service institute under the direct supervision of the President (Statute law of the National Library of Iran, 1990). Additionally, it has a research and representative council titled the Deputy of Research, Planning, and Technology, whose research departments are as follows:

1. The Research and Education Administration with three research groups: Iranian and Islamic Studies, Library and Information Science Researches, and Information Technology Researches;

2. The archives Research Center with such groups as Archival Research, Maintaining Records, and Contemporary History of Iran.

In accordance with the missions and duties, the National Library and Archives of the Islamic republic of Iran (henceforth NLAI) is charged with the responsibility of playing a model and authoritative role in information discovery, collection, organization, preserving, and dissemination of national intellectual productions, in a way that the reading culture is promoted and access to resources is facilitated for today's and future generations (Statute law of the National Library of Iran, 1990).

Considering the progressive evolution in NLAI from a traditional library and information center to a digital network-based one, the following points give grounds for the need to conduct research in this area:

- Resolving existing problems and difficulties;
- Coping with new environments and modern technologies in the digital information era;
- Adopting new roles and functions; and
- Improving the quality and quantity of services and performances.

The present study being part of NLAI research strategy development project, aims at investigating and determining the relevant research areas and priorities for the adequate, concentrated, and systematic distribution of resources in conducting research.

### **Research priority setting at a glance**

Research is defined as "a process used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue" (Creswell, 2012, p. 3). The driving force behind conducting any kind of research is a "sense of curiosity" about phenomena and their causes. Babbie (2008) uses the term "human inquiry" for it and indicates in his work that "human inquiry aims at answering both "what" and "why" questions, and we pursue these goals by observing and figuring out" (p.5). More often, the existence of a "problem" or a "difficulty" creates a research "need". Such a need should be stated in the form of a "question" and specific strategies should be employed in finding answer(s) or solution(s) for it. So, in any research activity "you start with a question, collect some information, and form an answer. Although there are a few more steps in research than these, this is the overall framework for research" (Creswell, 2008, p.3). The more a research project is

grounded in genuine needs, the more realistic and practical the results would become in addressing those needs. Therefore, research needs assessment is part of the research process which precedes the specification of research topics' importance and urgency.

The role of research in the advancement of science and technology and even economic development cannot be denied. Yet, this has been subject to doubt in the field of Library and Information Science, where some have gone so far to say that "...unless research is reported in a range of journals, it is only likely to have an impact on a limited segment of the LIS society" (McNicol, 2002). Nevertheless, it seems obvious that "to be able to encounter the modern information environment, embrace new functions, and resolve organizational issues, libraries need to be subject to research. Furthermore, to maintain their current status and enhance efficiency, they need to conduct pathological studies in order to determine the appropriate ways of addressing potential challenges. In general, it is necessary for research, as a reassuring element, to play an integral role in library planning and approaches"(Salary, 2005). Connaway and Powell (2010), depicting in a brief but conspectus survey the past and present status of LIS research indicate that " It is imperative that academic libraries and higher education libraries (among others) develop and carry out systematic research and develop programs", and notify the resonance of the statement of the American Library Association in 1970:" the results of research in a broad spectrum of effort extending well beyond librarianship will, in large measure, determine the future directions of the library services and the nature of the profession itself" (American Library Association, 1970, as cited in Connaway & Powell, 2010, p.13)

In addition to academic settings, numerous organizations view research as part of their plan and responsibility in improving production and service, and allocate human and financial resources for this purpose. At any rate, resources are limited and it is logical that they be devoted to research subjects with higher priorities. The need for prioritization is not eliminated in developed or rich countries: "economic development does not obviate the need for determining priorities, although it might change its paradigms and patterns" (Mohammadi, 2008, p.12). If research topics are developed and prioritized based on general policies across organizational, regional, or national levels, and if resource

allocation is made in line with such policies, not only unmethodical and repetitious research works will be avoided, but the results can be used to resolve issues and prevent potential crises. Some even believe that "many organizations often don't realize they lack clear set of priorities until they are in the middle of a crisis" (Duttweiler, 2011). Research priorities can be determined at the macro and national or the organizational level; in any event, they should comply with national policies. The upward synthesis of national research priorities to the global level being quite achievable, "requires not only that individual countries weigh carefully the resources they direct at key national problems, but also that they be well informed about the international research effort"(Council on Health Research for Development, 1997).

The constant review of priorities and priority setting mechanisms is vital, as research priorities are subject to change over time. Such a change is the result of adopting a dynamic approach and embracing change within organizations.

It should be noted that, in most countries, research prioritization in the field of hygiene and healthcare is more common than in other scientific or technological fields. To facilitate and accelerate prioritization and with the aim of providing maximum efficiency and objectivity, efficient models have been developed by international organizations and offered to responsible organizations and institutions in the field of hygiene and healthcare research<sup>1</sup>.

In Iran, the high-priority scientific and technological areas have been specified by macro-level policies in the *Comprehensive national scientific map* ratified in 2010. The Supreme Council of Science, Research and Technology determines the research priorities of different fields by its related commissions and notifies the state administrative bodies and research centers of its decisions<sup>2</sup>. The Public Libraries Institution (IranPL) has published its research priorities in 2013<sup>3</sup>. The research priorities of the Organization of

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<sup>1</sup> See for Example: <http://www.cohred.org/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.atf.gov.ir/](http://www.atf.gov.ir/)

<sup>3</sup> IranPL research priorities can be found at: [http://www.google.com/url?url=http://www.iranpl.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx%3FID%3D6c04cb2b-8765-4366-9a89-aff7e843ee3a&rct=j&frm=1&q=&esrc=s&sa=U&ved=0CBYQFjAAahUKEwj85JGf8NLIahWEXRoKHeAzC1w&usg=AFQjCNHGEoxQPCD8F\\_9CPJ\\_ZsP1kQUN9Aw](http://www.google.com/url?url=http://www.iranpl.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx%3FID%3D6c04cb2b-8765-4366-9a89-aff7e843ee3a&rct=j&frm=1&q=&esrc=s&sa=U&ved=0CBYQFjAAahUKEwj85JGf8NLIahWEXRoKHeAzC1w&usg=AFQjCNHGEoxQPCD8F_9CPJ_ZsP1kQUN9Aw)

Libraries, Museums, and Document Center of Astane Qudse Razavi can also be retrieved from its website<sup>4</sup>.

In their study, Hall & Brazier (2010) have investigated library and information science research coalition strategies for the promotion of research in the field of library and information science research and have enumerated the research priorities in the specified domain from the perspective of coalition (Hall & Brazier, 2010).

The Young Adult Services Association (YALSA)(2011) has identified the following priority areas for 2012-2016: impact of libraries on young adults, young adult reading and resources, information seeking behaviors and needs of young adults, and informal and formal learning environments and young adults (The Young Adult Services Association, 2011).

To summarize, the existence of a specific department dedicated to research within NLAI makes it unique compared to other similar organizations around the world. This seems to account for the lack of a detailed related literature in terms of conducted research.

## **Methodology**

Due to the application of various data collection and analysis methods, mixed methods of research have been used to conduct this research . To explain underlying values, criteria, and topic ranges, necessary information was obtained through documents such as the "Statute law of the National Library of Iran" and its "strategic plan (2012- 2025)", the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology documentation, and in particular, the Supreme Council thereof, and the *Conspectus National Scientific Map*, ratified in 2010 . Research topics were produced by a group of experts, called Delphi panel, using the Delphi method and purposive sampling which is based on utilizing expert opinion and knowledge. The Delphi panel was selected by taking the following points into account:

- Complete command over problems, and scientific and research needs of NLAI;

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<sup>4</sup> Research priorities Organization of the Libraries, Museums, and Document Center of Astane Qudse Razavi can be retrieved from: <http://library.aqr.ir/Portal/home/?news/436734/479438/479442/Research-Priorities>

- Experimental and theoretical knowledge and expertise on the scientific and operational areas of NLAI;
- Having a foresight of their area of expertise.

Generally, a Delphi panel does not exceed 12 individuals and "the sample size in Delphi studies has been researcher and situation specific, and more often than not, convenience samples have been chosen dependent on availability of experts and resources" (Alkins, Tolson, and Cole, 2005). The Delphi panel in this research consisted of 46 individuals, as will be explained hereafter, who produced a total of 496 research topics. The special structure of the NLAI, i.e. the integration of two completely distinct organizations: National Archive and National Library, with similarities and differences in *raison d'être*, objectives, and duties, is a source of some important distinctions in the two organizations' employee specialized orientations and expert knowledge. The integration of the two organizations was mainly done to combine their respective support units in providing administrative, financial, and logistic services. In other words, each organization functions independently according to its respective statutes. Therefore, the producing and determining research priorities for the entire organization had its own difficulties, one of which was the accurate selection of experts. Accordingly, to maintain the comprehensive nature of the collected data, any of the organization experts who were believed to play a positive role in collecting useful information were added to the Delphi panel. In general, experts had at least one of the following characteristics:

- A Bachelor's degree or above;
- A managerial, or consultative role in NLAI;
- A pivotal role in any of the specialized or executive processes of NLAI.

In case a number of experts exhibited almost the same level of knowledge and expertise, only one of them was selected based on our expectations (which were in turn according to published scientific background and the researchers' understanding of each individual) of who was more eloquent in conveying concepts or intellectual thoughts.

The ABC prioritization system was employed in priority setting process. However, two general categories of "important and urgent" and "important without urgency" were used for the classification of topics. It was assumed that whatever came to the mind of an

expert as a research problem , could necessarily be regarded as a topic for doing research, and it is the research urgency or lack thereof that distinguished a topic from another. It was also assumed that there were some fascinating topics that lacked urgency. Moreover, due to a lack of sufficient information on the part of experts regarding financial or human resources, the "feasibility" criteria could not be applied in practice.

Given the strategic plan of NLAI in "developing the national network of documented knowledge through the development of national standards and protocols, virtual infrastructure, strategic partnerships, and service quality enhancement , with the aim of turning into a national knowledge hub, it needs to solidify its specialized and research foundations and strengthen its "position of authority" by the ceaseless improvement of its "internal cohesion" in order to achieve the aforementioned overarching goals"(Faize, 2012, p.19). On this basis, the panel members were, consequently, asked to classify their intended research topics into two general categories of "important and urgent" and "important without urgency" by taking the "internal cohesion" and "maintaining the position of authority" criteria into account.

First, 496 research topics have been included in a prioritization management system that was designed on a Sharepoint 2007 platform, using also Microsoft Excell 2007 for the management and process of the collected data. After merging, refining, and classifying the topics using content analysis, a list of 74 research topics was provided. The stated list was presented to the executive council of NLAI, comprising 23 of NLAI senior managers who were also members of the panel. Their feedbacks were obtained, leading to the elimination and modification of two of the original topics. To find out the first 5 priorities from the "important and urgent" category, the experts were then asked to rank the urgent topics with a scale of 1 to 5 (1: the lower rank, signifying lesser importance and urgency, and 5: the higher rank, signifying higher importance and urgency) in the system. The average score of each research priority given by the experts was calculated and so its rank was determined.

As mentioned above, data collection and processing were performed and managed in a system developed using Excel and SharePoint. This system made it possible to establish



systematic facilitated communications with the Delphi panel and maintain the related documents and can be utilized and enhanced for future revisions and prioritizations.

### **Final analysis**

"Important and urgent research priorities" that are presented in Table 1 according to their ranking indicate the need-orientedness of topics that have taken on developmental aspects as well based on the national obligations of NLAI. Topic analysis suggests that overcoming deficiencies and the enhancement of existing performances and tools are deemed as essential components of realizing new paradigms in the field of library and information science by the panel members: media, digital tools, cyberspace, and interactive spaces play a fundamental role in these paradigms.

The diversity of duties and multiplicity of executive units which are attributes of the organizational chart due to the integration of National Library and National Archives organizations are reflected in the topics. The diversity of topics along with their comprehensiveness can be considered as correct decision-making with respect to experts' number and type of expertise for priority formulation and generation. While this category or priorities are focused on the main functions and missions of NLAI, "important and without urgency" research priorities, presented in Table 2, indicate the need-orientedness of topics as well, mostly concentrate on comparative evaluations and studies, secondary functions of NLAI, and more general subjects that are part of the field of library and information science.

**Table 1. Important and urgent research priorities**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Important and urgent research priorities</b>
1	Development and establishment of a comprehensive national archives and records governance system
2	Development of a national plan for electronic libraries
3	Development of a strategic plan, requirements, and action plan for national digital archives
4	Development of national electronic archives and records evaluation indices based on standard models

5	Compiling policies, guidelines, and style guides related to maintain and enhancing the position of authority of NLAI
6	Monitoring and implementation of new technologies for long-term resource preservation
7	Development of reference works and manuals related to functional areas of NLAI
8	Functional and technical requirements for a national archives management system.
9	Creating Iran's online national union catalog: feasibility study
10	Manuscripts researches, editing, and publishing
11	Strategic approaches to creating a nationwide information system
12	Editing the national bibliography
13	Development of digital preservation strategy with an emphasis on data migration models
14	Performance evaluation of RASA (the NLAI comprehensive library system) software and ways of improving it
15	Study of technical and legal challenges in ways of attracting and acquiring financial resources and supports for NLAI
16	Preliminary researches for development and implementation of a National Digital Object Identifier system
17	Compiling digital collection development policies of NLAI
18	Effectiveness evaluation of the current organizational structure and regulations of NLAI and drawing out necessary updates to cover emerging changes and needs
19	Study of visibility and status of NLAI in mass media and cyberspace
20	Research effectiveness evaluation model for NLAI
21	Design and development of a national portal for archival, and library and information science researches
22	Content modeling for national digital library
23	The role of NLAI in nationwide promoting and protecting copyright and intellectual property with special emphasis on the area of digital contents
24	Field research for identifying and selecting valuable works to be registered in international Memory of the World lists
25	Technical and legal issues of remote access to resources of NLAI
26	The development of intra-organizational documents, policies, and style guides related to functional areas of NLAI
27	NLAI staff educational needs assessment
28	Historical and pathological reviews of NLAI in different managerial domains: persistent improvement strategies and model

29	New approaches to discovery and acquisition of documents in the field of Iranian and Islamic studies produced abroad
30	Feasibility study of document delivery services through the national digital library
31	Approaches to risk management and crisis management strategies, on the basis of models and guidelines recommended by authoritative international organizations
32	Needs assessment and development of tools and databases required by NLAI
33	Feasibility study of developing and implementing an integrated system for staff motivation, evaluation, and reward performance
34	Monitoring, foresight, and cost-effective study of implementing new information management standards and schemes in functional areas of NLAI
35	A model for assessing the effectiveness of training programs in NLAI
36	The study of digital divide between the country, the Middle-East region countries, and the developed countries, and presenting proper strategies
37	A comparative study of legal deposit in Iran and other countries with an emphasis on vulnerabilities and ways of repairing and improving weaknesses
38	Updating of strategic documents of NLAI
39	Review, modeling, and periodic documentation of the underlying processes of NLAI, using most adequate key performance indicators
40	Monitoring, needs assessment and feasibility study of new technologies and procedures in NLIA related to its functional areas
41	Archival research to compile the history on the basis of archival documents
42	Evaluation of staff performances of NLAI using international key performance indicators and standards
43	The study of the scholarly and cultural communications between NLAI and other national and international entities
44	Comparative study of the value of resources in NLAI with similar organizations at the global level and presenting strategic plans for the completion of the documentary national heritage treasures
45	Intelligent drawing out of semantic web application areas in NLAI
46	The comparative study of library and archival softwares at the global scale and providing strategies for the development of required complementary softwares and tools by NLAI, and improving the existing ones
47	Opportunity and threat analysis for NLAI in relation with national and international bodies with missions and duties similar to the missions and duties of NLAI

48	Comparative study of challenges and barriers to physical disability services of NLAI with world-class organizations involved and offer solutions
49	Feasibility study of multilateral cooperation between NLAI and other domestic organizations with similar missions and duties
50	The study of legal, administrative, and financial challenges to the establishment of a central research institute within the organization and their solutions
51	Information needs and information seeking behaviors of physical and virtual users of NLAI
52	Futures study and redefining the concepts of "book" and "library"
53	The challenges and barriers to full integration of national library and national archives and offer corrective strategies

**Table 2. Important and without urgency research priorities**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Important and without urgency research priorities</b>
1	Digital readiness assessment of NLAI and other depository and large libraries to establish national hub of knowledge
2	Compiling descriptive inventory of world important libraries, archives, and museums with the aim of establishing cultural and inter-institutional interactions
3	Feasibility study of using original archival documents in real-world exhibitions
4	Feasibility study of encouraging or requiring Iranian universities to use archival documents in their researches
5	Review of agreements signed by NLAI with other national and international institutions to provide joint research projects
6	Comparative study of physical user traffic management and the procedures of client interaction in NLAI with similar organizations around the world
7	The pathology of NLAI outsourcing activities and providing optimization strategies
8	The study of ergonomic factors on employee health in NLAI
9	The pathological study of NLAI publications and providing developmental solutions
10	Challenges and strategies of turning ideas into products in NLAI
11	The study of cost-benefits of provincial offices of NLAI
12	Satisfaction study of Physical and virtual clients of NLAI
13	The comparative study of speech to text conversion softwares to use in the NLAI oral

	history project
14	Providing a model for user interface information retrieval systems of NLAI
15	Information society development strategies with an emphasis on countrywide reading social networks
16	Investigating way to free access to information
17	Monitoring and use of science, technology, and creativity metrics in library and information science and related fields
18	Survey research on user friendly interactive system characteristics and features
19	Rethinking theoretical foundations and concepts of library and information science with a national and religious culture approach
20	The study of cost-benefits of indexing revival in NLAI
21	New methods for librarian training

## Considerations

After approval of research priorities, in order to achieve the desired results, it is necessary that the research council and managers make decisions with respect to the outsourcing or intra-organization conducting researches by NLAI researchers; and then publish the priorities officially. Getting feedback on the priorities and continuous monitoring of the conduct of approved research projects could be helpful in reviewing and updating research priorities.

Furthermore, in order to maximize the effectiveness of researches in NLAI it is necessary to investigate the following points:

- The use of research results in achieving organizational goals;
- The role and participation of both faculty members and employees of NLAI, and inter-intra-organizational researchers in the conduct of research projects as well as the extent of their effectiveness;
- Getting research topics wide level and from all stakeholders;

A one-year period is recommended to revise the research priorities. In course of the next revision of priorities, after assessing the general condition of research, evaluating its role in the development and deepening of accumulated knowledge in library and information

science as well as in archival studies, and its effectiveness in service quality enhancement at national and international levels, the team leading the project could benefit from a larger number of experts in producing research topics and setting research priorities.

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