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**Persistence and change:
issues for LIS educators in the first decade of the twenty first century**

Abstract:

Considers the five 'persistent issues' relating to LIS education discussed in an article by Denis Grogan in 1983, to see whether they still apply in 2000, together with two additional issues that have emerged since that date. Although the issue of professional education for librarians in an academic institution has largely been resolved, there is a continuing debate on campus-based and distance learning modes of delivery the place of competency based, National Vocational Qualifications, delivered at the workplace. The issue of control by professional bodies has moved from being a matter of debate to one of continuing dialogue. The debate over the relative importance of theory versus practice, still rages, whilst the importance of fieldwork is still regarded as central to an LIS education. The nature and content of the 'core curriculum' appear to be in a constant state of flux. The two new issues identified were: The nature and extent of the information disciplines (the relationship between librarianship, information management and knowledge management); and. The changing pattern of higher education in the UK and character of the student body (increase in numbers, modularization, and quality assessment)..

The first article to be published by *Education for Information* was an account by Denis Grogan of a number of topics that had been discussed throughout the history of LIS education, then approaching its centenary in the United States and the United Kingdom¹. He identified five fundamental and largely unresolved issues that had persisted throughout that period despite the far-reaching changes that had taken place in education and professional practice. In Grogan's analysis the persistent issues were:

1. Library School or not? Whether would-be practitioners can be more effectively and economically educated in the classroom than on the job.
2. Control by the Profession – the extent to which the professional bodies should determine the pattern of LIS education and content of the curriculum.

3. Theory versus practice – the relationship between the theoretical elements of the course to everyday practice, and the nature of the information skills and competencies required by information professionals
4. Fieldwork – the usefulness and relevance of periods of practical work as a component of an LIS education.
5. The core curriculum – whether there is an essential range of skills and subjects that should be covered adequately by all those entering the field, and if so what should those subjects be.

However, whilst the fundamental issues may have displayed a degree of persistence until the 1980s, only a decade later, another commentator was prefacing an account with the statement ‘Any discussion of the library and information education and training scene in the United Kingdom is, necessarily a discussion of change’². There have probably been more far-reaching changes to the information professions in the seventeen years since 1983 than throughout the whole of the preceding century. The same might also be said of the pattern and structure of higher education in the UK, and even the professional associations themselves are currently undergoing fundamental change. It is therefore timely to question whether these issues are still applicable at the end of the twentieth century, and will they have any relevance for the next decade? If they are no longer relevant, what are the main issues that are (or ought to be) concerning the current generation of Library School educators?

What follows, is a personal view, based upon the writer’s experience as an LIS educator since the mid 1980s, but supplemented by the opinions of colleagues. The article will consider the relevance of Grogan’s five issues in the light of recent changes, but then offer a further two

1. The nature and extent of the information disciplines.
2. The changing pattern of higher education in the UK and character of the student body.

Library School or not?

Whether ILS can only be effectively taught in a classroom might appear to have been largely resolved for new entrants to the information professions at graduate level, as the only route to do so is by means of a course at a UK university accredited by one or more of the existing professional bodies. Yet there is still a continuing debate on the place of competency based, National Vocational Qualifications, delivered at the workplace. Likewise current proposals for

the introduction two-year 'foundation degrees' to be offered by Local Further Education Colleges in consortium with professional bodies or National Training Organisations, and Higher Education Institutions is likely to change the pattern still further.

Within the University sector there is a continuing debate over the most appropriate levels for LIS education. Traditional full-time undergraduate numbers seem to be declining and a number of departments have dropped their first degree schemes, although there continues to be a healthy market for distance-learning students at this level. There is a continuing potential demand for postgraduate courses, but the cost involved, and levels of debt taken on is having an effect on many courses. As a result there have been development in new modes of delivery including part-time or distance learning masters degree courses. The next decade is also likely to see the creation of LIS courses delivered largely, or perhaps solely through the Internet, and consortia involving different partners contributing to a single degree scheme.

Control by the profession

The extent and nature of control by professional bodies has perhaps moved from being a matter of debate to one of continuing dialogue, at least in the LIS field, and both sides appear to have developed strategies for working together. The issue has been complicated by the fundamental changes in role and structure, which are currently being experienced by a number of the Professional Bodies. However accreditation by professional bodies has continued to be sought by the majority of educational institutions in the field, and withdrawal of accreditation has resulted in the withdrawal of courses and disappearance of departments. Prior to the amalgamation of the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists in April 2002, the bodies unified their accreditation procedures, which have formed the basis for a forthcoming Librarianship and Information Management Bench Mark statement for the Quality Assurance Agency. Yet the last decade has also seen a proliferation of courses with the word 'information' in their titles, none of which have sought traditional accreditation. Some of these new courses fall between traditional areas of professional concerns, and perhaps recognise emerging job markets outside the purview the existing associations?

Theory versus practice

The debate over the relative importance of theory versus practice, particularly in terms of the skills and competencies required by information professionals, still rages, and is likely always to do so. Many LIS educators would argue that the conceptual framework within which skills operate ought to be the primary focus of education. Yet, employers and the governments are frequently seeking employability and a competency based education. Exactly what skills will be required in the twenty-first century, and how will they be acquired has been the subject of some research and discussion³. It is clear that no-one skill set will equip an individual at all stages of their career, and developments in the last twenty years have demonstrated how quickly some technical skills can become outdated. Likewise educators should not lose sight of the need for their courses also to:

equip graduates with a range of enterprise *skills*, transferable skills, including interpersonal communication, teamwork, report writing skills, numeracy, computer literacy, time management and so on⁴.

Grogan's use of the word 'librarianship' to cover a range of information skills and concepts, which now usually form part of information management, now seems dated. The term has been largely dropped from LIS curricula, although it does still feature in the *Benchmark Statement for Librarianship and Information Management* that will shortly be issued by the Library Association. I have heard academic colleagues refer in jest to it as the 'L--- word', which must never be spoken. Yet most of the basic concepts, and many of the skills themselves have not hitherto changed, merely the environment in which they are now required to operate. The fundamental skills required for the accumulation, storage, organization, retrieval and transmission of information, are equally applicable whether that information is stored in printed books or on the World Wide Web. Likewise the skills required to operate successfully as an intermediary between an information seeker and an information system, or indeed to design systems that enable the user to find the information themselves, or indeed the management skills required to make best use of human and financial resources have not changed in the last two decades, and (in my opinion) are unlikely to do so in the next. To seek to give traditional skills and concepts trendy new names and dress them up in new packaging is merely a marketing exercise

Yet there is a growing body of opinion that says, that identifies a range of ‘new’ skills and concepts that will be required by the information professionals in the twenty first century, to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a ‘knowledge-based economy’. These are often grouped together within the newly coined phrase of ‘knowledge management’, which is defined as ‘a process which seeks to make best use of intellectual capital through understanding of individual knowledge, application of that knowledge and the ways in which existing knowledge is transformed and evolves⁵. Other LIS educators (myself included) would question whether knowledge management truly represents new skills and concepts so much as a repackaging of aspects of what has always been encompassed within the discipline of information management. Yet several LIS schools are beginning to offer modules in knowledge management, and on 15 March 2000 the Robert Gordon University launched a Centre for Knowledge Management.

Fieldwork

This in another aspect of the ‘theory versus practice debate’. As many LIS courses have tended to move towards the theoretical discussion of concepts, so the role of fieldwork has remained a means of providing the necessary practical context for the studies. The recently revised accreditation requirements document agreed between the Library Association and Institute of Information Scientists continues to insist that either fieldwork or a pre-course attachment are essential components in any course, although the educators often find increasing difficulty in providing their students with meaningful and useful placements.

The ‘core curriculum’

The nature and content of the ‘core curriculum’ have always been matters of debate and appear still to be in a constant state of flux. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as LIS ‘is a far from stable discipline’⁶. One of the advantages and yet the dangers of the benchmarking approach is the tendency to fix a discipline for five years at a time. Five years ago aspects of the Internet were beginning to feature in several LIS courses, now it is a pervasive component almost throughout the curriculum. The impact of Information and Communications Technology on professional practice, on the modes of delivery of education has been one of the main drivers of curriculum change in LIS education throughout the nineties and there is no prospect that this will

abate in the next century. We have not yet experienced the full implications of the ICT revolution – and indeed may still be at the beginning of the whole process.

The move of many courses from and Information Studies to an Information Management focus over the last decade was partly a response to secure higher levels of funding associated with the later subject but has also tended to bring other areas into the core curriculum – such as Systems analysis and design, organisational theory, marketing⁷. Likewise the growing numbers of masters level postgraduate qualifications, which include a dissertation element, have necessitated the provision of courses in research methodology.

These changes have had two effects – that of enlarging the core at the expense of some of the more specialist areas of teaching, and also of pushing many existing areas from the core to become optional or elective courses. This has had the effect of pushing a number of specialist courses out of the curriculum altogether. A number of specialist groups such as Children’s Librarians, Music Librarians, Rare Book Librarians, and Conservators have seen the teaching of their subjects virtually disappear the mainstream curriculum, which is beginning to have an impact on the recruitment of competent staff. The funding of specialist Distance Learning optional modules in music librarianship and rare book librarianship, which may either be completed as a component of a course or else as stand-alone units is one reflection of these concerns.

The nature and extent of the information disciplines

According to a draft *Benchmark statement for Librarianship and Information Management* the discipline ‘encompasses the study of information, from its generation to its exploitation, so as to enable the recording, accumulation, storage, organization, retrieval and transmission of information’ (Library Association, 2000)⁸. The term ‘information’ is understood to encompass ‘information, ideas and works of imagination, both proprietary and in the public domain.’ This definition appears to be sufficiently broadly based to encompass all forms of information resources and would have been equally applicable twenty years ago as it is today. Yet developments in ICT in the last two decades have enormously increased the quantity of information available to individuals, the range of formats in which it may be stored or delivered, and the tools available for retrieving it. Likewise a greater understanding of the nature of

information, of information seeking behaviour, and of the role and significance of both formal and informal sources of information has enormously increased the potential field of study,

Information is such a pervasive and ill-defined concept all its aspects could never be encompassed within a single academic discipline. The range of subjects and professional practices with which Information Management might legitimately interrelate is extensive and includes the humanities, physical and social sciences. Thus the potential knowledge base for an ideal information manager equipped to work in any environment is enormous and far too great for any course, or indeed individual to encompass. LIS educators have to decide whether and how they will equip their students to work in a growing range of new employment markets within the information industries. If not others will seek to do so.

The changing pattern of higher education in the UK

The one major area of concern for LIS educators in the nineties and in the next decade not recognized by Grogan is the far-reaching changes to the pattern of higher education. These have primarily resulted from an enormous increase in student numbers over the last decade without corresponding increases in staff numbers, which has inevitably affected the ways in which courses are delivered. Other changes those made to institutional structures (such as the granting of university status to institutions in the former polytechnic sector), and the introduction of modular degrees together with the adoption of a two semester teaching year. During the same time there has been an increasing 'casualisation' of teaching, and the offering of short-term contracts.⁹ Yet at the same time all lecturers have been required to develop and maintain significant research and publishing profiles and a prerequisite of keeping their posts. These factors, coupled with an increasingly distorted age-profile of the permanent teaching staff (large numbers of whom were recruited during the 1960s and 1970s and will be retiring over the next decade) appear to be storing up many problems for the future delivery of many LIS courses.

Finally there is the issue of 'Quality', which currently appears to be the single most pressing concern, and a subject of great cynicism and disillusionment among those preparing for quality assessment exercises.

Quality has always been a key concern in education, although it might be argued that the emphasis in the past has been more on the standards and levels that students are expected

to reach on a course, monitored by external examiners. It is possible to have high standards but low quality in teaching and learning¹⁰.

A Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was established in 1997 to integrate the quality assessment functions of the former Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), the Higher Education Funding Councils for England and Wales. The Agency's business is to review the performance of universities and colleges of higher education by auditing their overall academic management, and assessing the quality and standards of teaching and learning.¹¹

However, in the opinion of the writer, attempts either to raise, or at least to demonstrate quality have hitherto resulted in the imposition of complex bureaucratic structures, and pointless exercises in proving that processes have indeed been undertaken, which have been largely self-defeating. They have served to undermine individual judgment of educators, and the encouragement of excellence, in favour of ensuring that even the most shiftless and problematic students are treated with scrupulous fairness and given innumerable opportunities to redeem themselves. Thus 'quality' in a higher education has become a 'weasel word', which it is impossible for anyone to question, yet all initiatives and exercises carried out in its name seem only to reduce the time available for face-to-face contact, between educators and students and thereby undermine the learning experience.

Conclusion

LIS Education has changed profoundly in the seventeen years since *Education for Information* was first published, and that process of change will undoubtedly continue and perhaps accelerate in the next decade. Perhaps the most important change has been the universal recognition that a professional education can no longer be delivered in a single slice, and will in future be a continuing process. Knowledge and skills acquired in full-time education will have a decreasing shelf life and will need to be renewed and topped up at frequent intervals. The most that may be expected from an LIS education is to provide a point of reference for the first one or two posts and a foundation on which to build an increasing individual knowledge base and range of competencies.

David Stoker (with thanks to the many colleagues at Aberystwyth and elsewhere who gave their candid opinions and to Kate Wood, Head, Professional Qualifications, the Library Association).

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