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Emerging professional issues

How well is the information profession placed to take a strategic role in tackling information literacy issues? This was one of the critical issues facing the profession raised delegates at the latest Employer's Forum, hosted by the Information Management School at London Metropolitan University.

The Employer's Forums have become an annual event at London Metropolitan. Intended to increase professional input into our teaching provision, and facilitate communication between employers and academics, they are an important opportunity for reflection on wider professional issues. The latest was held on May 12th, in the eighth-floor boardroom of London Metropolitan's Tower building, with stunning views over North London as an imposing backdrop. Delegates attended from commercial, academic, public, and governmental information services, as well as workforce development personnel from CILIP and the MLA. The theme of the event was increasing collaboration between the LIS academic community, and professional practice.

The demographic time bomb

Amongst delegates there was the perception of a demographic time bomb within the information profession. This manifested itself within individual information services as a current problem with entire cohorts of staff approaching retirement concurrently. In the light of this, succession management within information service was identified as a key issue. Institutionally embedded skills, knowledge and experience are threatened by simultaneous departures, and this is compounded by a lack of in-house replacements. Retention of tacit knowledge was a central concern in the management of succession and change.

However, there was a broader anxiety that the profession itself is aging, and that it is becoming increasing difficult to attract young recruits. Aligned with this is a change in the graduate marketplace, with an increase in graduate debt brought about by tuition fees. This has impacted on the career choices of graduates presented by a profession that, whether through reputation or practice, is not recognised for its financial reward. The impact of impending undergraduate top-up tuition fees on graduate recruitment into the information profession will therefore require ongoing monitoring.

Change management

Change more generally was identified as an increasing characteristic of information work, and change management as an emerging core competency of

the professional. This has manifested itself is in the increasing importance of "managing the digital environment", as one delegate expressed it. Digital information, and digital resources are playing a greater role in information work. This is reflected in the development of specialised information management qualifications, such as the M.Sc. in Digital Information Management at London Metropolitan, itself developed to reflect changes to the profession highlighted at the 2004 Employer's Forum.

The challenge to the profession in the emergence of digital media was identified as not just a technological issue, but also one of adequate staffing. The digital environment has created a demand for new skills sets, and a new emphasis on digital information management issues, including managing distributed access, licensing of resources, and digital archiving, as well as promoting digital services. The management of copyright awareness amongst staff and end users was also raised; the easy reproduction of digital materials, and the proliferation of digital resources have added to concerns about copyright compliance.

These developments register themselves in a demand for higher-level skills and competencies in information services staff. With the transition to digital resources, many of the procedures traditionally performed by paraprofessional staff have disappeared. One example given was the trend towards entirely electronic journal provision. In this development, traditional functions, such as managing circulation and checking-in procedures have given way to higher-level professional engagement with licensing, deployment and delivery of user training. This has impacted on staffing requirements within information services, resulting in what was described as a "re-professionalisation" of information work.

This change has been greatest within technological and scientific subject areas, and within the commercial, independent and governmental information sectors. Although the same issues are emerging within traditional library settings, it is fair to say that non-typical information services have already been confronted with issues that the wider information profession will be facing in the near future.

Developing information literacy

However, it is not just in the emergence of new technologies and new media that change management has become a growing concern. Wider developments in have created a new set of core skills demanded of library and information graduates. In particular, the growing role of information professionals as mediator between resource and user has created a requirement for presentation and training skills. Underpinning this is a desire for the profession to engage with, and understand the learning process, in order to facilitate the development of information literacy amongst users.

This reflects a growing concern with the information literacy of end-users, not only in the public and academic library sector, but also in commercial and governmental libraries. There was a clear demand for information professionals to be able to interpret information literacy needs, and deliver information literacy training alongside training for specific products. Just as importantly, information professionals should be able to evaluate the information skills of their clients, and deliver information to them in the most appropriate form, essentially repackaging information.

These concerns incorporate a wider socio-political issue, which is at the heart of the professional ethos of Librarianship and the Information Profession. As access to information becomes an ever more critical aspect of social inclusion, the Librarian as facilitator in the development of information literacy competencies was recognised. Making information available can not be considered the limit of responsibility for enabling access to information amongst socially disadvantaged groups; taking a pro-active role by engaging with wider information literacy provision was seen as equally important.

Professional engagement

Along with the divergence in information resources has come a convergence of those professions with an interest in managing information. The dividing lines between libraries, archives, museums and other heritage organisations are becoming increasingly blurred. This is particularly true with the development of digital resources, which frequently, as in the case of digitisation projects, cross the boundaries of traditionally distinct professions. Several of the delegates managed teams consisting of librarians, archivists, and curators, and experienced this trend particularly strongly.

The issue was felt to be one of professional engagement with related professions, and in particular recognition of the culture, language, and practices of allied professions.

Alongside the heritage sector, there was also a desire to see more understanding of Information Technology practices within information professionals. There was a recognition that generic IT skills are often not suited to the needs of the Information Profession, and that the issue was really one of conflicting professional cultures, rather than increased IT competencies per se. Thus an understanding of the culture and language of the IT world in order to facilitate effective liaison, was considered the critical factor.

This was conceptualised as a "meeting in the middle" of information professionals and allied professional groups; a finding of common ground between professional groups in the provision of information services.

Emerging graduates

The issues raised at the forum converged in a desire for graduates with a flexible attitude to their professional role, and an ability to understand of the needs of a variety of stakeholders. There was a desire to see graduates equipped not only with core competencies, such as classification, user needs analysis, and management skills, but also with real analytical insight. The ability to "stand-back" from problems, and take a dispassionate view of issues was regarded as of critical importance. This points to a growing demand for high-level analytical and evaluative skills within the information profession, and a growing demand for flexible graduates who are able to take on diverse tasks and adopt innovative ideas into the future.

Over recent years, the Employer's Forums have demonstrated themselves to be a vital contribution to the information and knowledge management educational provision at London Metropolitan, and the development of ever-closer ties between London Metropolitan and the wider profession. We are very grateful for the insights and experience volunteered by delegates at the forum.