LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION AT SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY IN OMAN: PREPARING INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS FOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT ROLES

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Abstract

Around the world, Library and Information Science (LIS) Education is being transformed in order to keep pace with evolving user requirements and technological changes. The literature indicates, however, that LIS departments in many developing countries may not be adequately prepared to exploit the new opportunities. Despite the challenges of being located in a developing country in the Middle East, the LIS department at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) aims not only to deliver outstanding education in information studies but also to play a leading role in the development of Omani society and the wider region by providing highly-skilled leaders and managers of information services. This article examines the trends in LIS education, especially in Asia, and discusses the current provision and future objectives of LIS education at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman in the context of these broader developments, focusing in particular on the role of the LIS department in preparing graduates for leadership and management roles in information services. Finally, the article provides an overall assessment of LIS education at SQU identifies some opportunities and risks, which the University's LIS Department is likely to face in the years ahead.

Trends in LIS education in Asia

Library and Information Science has undergone significant transformations in recent decades in order to keep pace with technological developments and associated changes in user requirements,

especially the increased use of web-based search engines and other electronic resources. In line with global trends (e.g. see Juznic & Badovinac, 2005; Ocholla & Bothma, 2007), many library schools within Asia changed their names in the 1980s and 1990s, incorporating "information" or "information science" to reflect these changes, or even dropping the word "library" altogether (see Miwa, 2006), though the changes have not been uniformly supported throughout the profession (see Chu, 2001; Gorman, 2004). An important consideration for LIS schools has been to ensure that their graduates are well-equipped to compete in the jobs market, which increasingly requires high levels of IT skills (Lin, 2004; Miwa, 2006, Ocholla & Bothma, 2007; Varalakshmi, 2007). Additionally there has been a need to address recruitment difficulties by attracting a wider range of students (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006; Chaudhry, 2007).

Reflecting these name changes there has been an expansion of the teaching content in LIS to cover areas such as digital information systems, new media and knowledge management, a development which has been observed in China (Tang, 1999; Chu, 2001); Taiwan, Korea and Malaysia (Miwa, 2006), Singapore (Khoo, 2004; Chaudhry, 2007) and Thailand (Miwa, 2006; Chaudhry, 2007). However, in other countries such as India, traditional aspects of LIS such as cataloguing and classification reportedly still dominate curricula, and it has been argued that courses are not delivering education and training which meet the needs of modern society (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006). Moreover, some less-developed Asian countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives still reportedly lag way behind in LIS, lacking their own teaching facilities and depending on other countries to training their library professionals (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006).

Countries which have made relatively little progress in effectively transforming their LIS education, like India (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006) and Vietnam (Tran & Gorman, 1999) are often hampered by limited resources, out of date teaching methods, poor infrastructure such as inadequate internet connectivity, low levels of support from the parent authorities, a weak research base and a failure to adequately integrate course content with the needs of the wider society (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006). A threat to the profession in some countries has been the development of parallel information services, such as Community Information Centers (Singh & Wijetunge, 2006).

Where Library Associations exist, these often play a leading role in the transformation of LIS departments and in progressing issues such as professional accreditation. For example, the Library

Association of China is reported to have organized many conferences on digital information management (Lin, 2004), the Library Association of Singapore has established a Standards and Professional Committee to develop accreditation and professional standards (Khoo, 2004), and the Thai Library Association (TLA) plays a role in the continuing education and professional development of LIS professionals, although it does not provide accreditation (Premsmit, 2004). Work is reportedly continuing to take forward proposals for a regional accreditation scheme for southeast Asia, put forward at the CONSAL Conference held in 2003 in Brunei (Majid and Chaudhry, 2003, cited in Chaudhry, 2007).

Another global trend in LIS in recent years has been increasing regional and international collaboration on knowledge exchange and developing agreed standards (Chaudhry, 2007). In general, this has proceeded informally, and has encountered some barriers due to political and cultural differences between countries (Abdullahi & Kajberg, 2004; Virkus, 2007). The World Library and Information Congress held in Seoul in 2006 called for increased co-ordination of LIS education activities in Asia in order to promote the community's relationships and to lift the level of LIS standards" (Lin & Wang, 2006). In general, however, regional collaboration is less advanced within Asia than in North America and Europe although individual LIS schools such as Nanyang Technological University in Singapore have incorporated the promotion of regional co-operation and the provision of regional training into their mission statements and objectives (Khoo, 2004).

More generally, global developments and the associated changes within LIS require a significant change in attitudes and practices on the part of library and information specialists (Abdullahi, 2007; Shafique, 2007) so that they can fulfill an important new social role in improving equality of information access and ease of use, particularly in the developing countries of Asia (Tang, 1999; Singh & Wijetunge, 2006).

Information on developments in LIS within the countries of the Middle East is notably absent from the literature. The remainder of this article provides an overview of what the LIS Department at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman is doing to provide LIS education and training and develop LIS leadership skills to help support the development of Oman and the wider Middle Eastern region. This is critically examined within the context of the wider global and Asian trends in LIS discussed above.

LIS Department at Sultan Qaboos University

Departmental Mission and Objectives

The Department of Library and Information Science, located within the College of Arts and Social Sciences is considered to be one of the most dynamic Departments within Sultan Qaboos University. Established in 1987, its current vision is to be "an outstanding and innovative academic department serving the Omani society in the field of information with leadership at the local and regional levels" (Sultan Qaboos University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, 2008, p. 3). More specifically, its Departmental Mission is to provide "outstanding education in Library and Information Science with a rich diversity of skills in order to contribute to the community's prosperity through professional services and research, as well to prepare graduates for life-long learning and to be able to carry out information practice with competence" (Sultan Qaboos University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, 2008, p. 3). However, the objectives of the Department span much more than the provision of professional LIS training, they also include for example the promotion of research, continuing education and knowledge exchange within the LIS community, both in Oman and in the wider region, through the organization of seminars, conferences, and scientific meetings.

Academic Programs

Currently the LIS Department offers three academic programs: the Bachelor's degree in Library and Information Science; the Master's degree in Library and Information Science, and the Higher Diploma in Medical Librarianship. The department is also planning to introduce two other programs within the next few years: a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science, and a Bachelor's degree in Archives. The content of the Department's academic programs is a far cry from traditional library science training, which focused mainly on organizational aspects of library work such as classification and archiving. Although these important information management skills are still taught, other skills taught include problem solving, critical thinking, working in teams, the use of new technology, designing information systems, databases and websites, and managing information institutions. Additionally, the Master's program has a special emphasis on training students to be highly-skilled quantitative and qualitative researchers. The more specialized Higher Diploma in Medical Libraries aims to produce world-class standard health information specialists who can make an important contribution to the medical information profession in Oman and

occupy key positions in local and regional health information institutions (Sultan Qaboos University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, 2008). In all three programs, recognition of the diversity of users and the user-centered nature of current-day information searching is reflected in the inclusion of an ethics module and training in how to communicate with different categories of users. Students are also expected to acquire life-long learning skills and an awareness and understanding of contemporary issues, especially those relating to the Middle East, and how these affect LIS. In particular, all three programs have been carefully designed to reflect the needs of the labour market for information specialists, whether in traditional libraries or information centers, or in the health sector.

Leadership and management training

One of the main characteristics of the academic programs offer in the LIS Department at SQU is their strong emphasis on developing students to occupy leadership and management roles, by focusing on such skills as critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as providing a solid grounding in a wide range of information management skills and specific training in Management of Information Institutions (Sultan Qaboos University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, 2008). Bachelor's degree program students are thus prepared to occupy "key positions in local and regional information institutions", and Master's degree graduates are expected to be able to enter senior manager positions in libraries, learning resource centers, and information centers. This element of LIS training is particularly important in a developing country such as Oman where there is still a lack of highly skilled and qualified graduates capable of entering management and leadership positions. Not only will the development of these skills help to ensure that Oman has a strong information services sector in future, but will facilitate the development of linkages between this sector and other areas of the economy and help contribute to economic growth.

The ways in which LIS graduates of the University can contribute to the wider community is well illustrated by the case of the Higher Diploma in Medical Libraries Program, which has the Mission of producing graduates who can form "a bridging link between health knowledge and the community (patients, researchers, clinicians, physicians, and others) for the purpose of enriching the quality of life, enhancing the health of the community, and connecting people with knowledge by facilitating the use of various online and off-line resources" (Sultan Qaboos University, College of Arts and Social Sciences, 2008, p. 23). The graduates of this program are expected to hold leadership skills which enable them to build health and

bioscience information resources and to develop information policies to support the health services and medical research sector, not only in the Sultanate of Oman but throughout the wider region.

Conclusions

Assessment of LIS at SQU

In terms of the published information about the LIS Department at SQU and its academic programs, this appears to represent a best practice example of LIS in Asia. It is clear that the Department has fully embraced new technology and has incorporated all forms of traditional and non-traditional information management in the training provided to its students. Moreover, the overall focus of the teaching provided reflects current-day methods of information seeking, having expanded from traditional organizational skills such as cataloging and classification to include a broad range of skills concerned with understanding and responding to the needs of a diverse range of users.

Not only does the academic content of the Department's programs reflect the needs of information-seekers, but it is also integrated with the needs of employers in the local and regional labour market, ensuring that SQU LIS graduates are well prepared to secure good jobs, whether in libraries, information centers or other institutions. Unlike some developing countries, where information centers have grown up outside the library sector, in the Sultanate of Oman, a co-coordinated information services sector including both types of organization appears to be developing. Oman's Library Association was only established in March 2007 (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2007), but it can be expected that this will help to promote and sustain the linkages between LIS specialists and their employing institutions within Oman, as well as facilitating linkages with similar Associations and with the wider LIS community in the Middle East region and further afield.

SQU thus appears to be doing a good job when considered in the context of LIS developments in the wider Asian region, at least on the basis of its stated objectives and teaching content, which reflect global trends in LIS and are well-designed to support the needs of users and the wider community. However, further research is needed to evaluate how well the Department is meeting its objectives in practice, and to assess its overall impacts. For example, there is a need to monitor employment outcomes of the Department's graduates, to collect qualitative data on their actual contributions to the Omani

community, and to evaluate the success of the Department in promoting research and information exchange among LIS professionals throughout the Middle East.

Future challenges and opportunities

Despite the commendable efforts of SQU in developing a world-class LIS department which aims to produce highly skilled information specialists, it still faces the inherent challenges of being located in a developing society, which may hinder its progress. The recent IFLA/FAIFE World Report 2007 noted that Internet access outside the university sector in Oman is only available for 41-60% of government-funded research libraries, 21-40% of school libraries and less than 20% of public libraries (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2007). Moreover, the CIA World Factbook (2008) records Oman's literacy rate as just 81.4%. Although LIS students at SQU are being trained in the latest information retrieval and management methods, therefore, the opportunities to apply these once they have graduated are relatively limited. This may be a mixed blessing for Oman – on the one hand, LIS graduates leave SQU with the knowledge and ability to help drive technological progress in its library sector and in the community more widely, but on the other hand, they may be frustrated by the limitations and decide to seek jobs in other sectors. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the Department on developing multiple personal skills, rather than just teaching practices and procedures, is extremely important, since its graduates are well equipped both to exploit the opportunities and to deal with the challenges that they are likely to face as LIS professionals in a developing society.

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