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The role of professional body accreditation in Library & Information Science education in the UK

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Abstract:

This paper first describes the accreditation instrument currently used by the Chartered Institute of Information Professionals (CILIP), then considers some aspects of the future relationship between this professional body and Library & Information Science (LIS) education and training in the UK. A convergence of interests between CILIP and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is discussed, notably with reference to subject benchmarking and the need to expand the traditional boundaries of LIS in order to encompass the interests of the archives, records management and museum communities. The paper also considers the impact on the information profession of certain aspects of Government policy in Higher Education, including lifelong learning and the expansion in CPD. The paper concludes with reference to a scoping exercise to be undertaken by CILIP in order to redefine professional territory and establish a new accreditation instrument.

Introduction

Within the broad spectrum of academic subjects the delivery of those with a strong vocational orientation is often subject to some degree of oversight by a professional body. Library and information Science (LIS) is one such subject, although the professional accreditation of courses in this discipline has been limited to the UK, USA and Australia (Enser & Wood, 1999).

In the UK, two professional bodies - the Library Association (LA) and the Institute of Information Scientists (IIS) - separately equipped themselves with accreditation instruments designed to assist in the recruitment of quality-assured graduates into their registers of members. These instruments provided a conceptual map of the subject discipline against which the content of each submitted course could be compared. They also offered a framework for assessing aspects of course delivery and management. University teaching departments in LIS have generally been keen to submit themselves to such external scrutiny, because accredited status contributes to the marketability of a course and its graduates. An historical review of LIS professional education in the UK may be found in (Wood, 1997).

Recognising their common purpose in terms of course accreditation, the LA and IIS cooperated ever more closely in this aspect of their affairs, finally merging their accreditation operations under the umbrella of a Joint Accreditation Administration (JAA) in 1999. With the merger of the two parent bodies in the formation of the Chartered Institute of Information Professionals (CILIP) in 2002 the JAA has become the Accreditation Board of CILIP, reporting to the Professional Development Committee. The terms of reference of the Accreditation Board are:

- To manage all matters relating to applications for approval of courses for the purpose of admission to the Register
- To apply the *Procedures for the Accreditation of Courses* as approved by Council
- To assess courses submitted for approval and make decisions on their acceptability
- To conduct such enquiry as may be necessary to determine the suitability of overseas qualifications for approval
- To advise the Professional Development Committee on any matters relating to the approval of courses including the regulations governing their acceptability.

CILIP accreditation – current practice

CILIP has inherited an accreditation instrument which enables peer reviewers to assess a course in terms of current and developing practice in LIS, and the fostering of appropriate knowledge and skills for entry into the information profession. This instrument incorporates a Course Accreditation Checklist which draws heavily on the former IIS Criteria for Information Science. These criteria identify five subject divisions, the scope of which is defined in Figure 1 below.

A. Information Generation, Communication & Utilisation

The processes and techniques whereby information resources are created, analysed, evaluated, moderated and manipulated in order to meet the requirements of defined user populations

B. Information Management and Organisational Context

The application of techniques for planning, implementing, evaluating, analysing and developing library and information products and services within the context of the organisation's culture, aims and objectives. The impact of information systems on the structures and procedures of organisations.

C. Information Systems & Information & Communication Technologies

The availability and functionality of manual and electronic information systems and information and communications technologies insofar as they apply to the principles and practices of information management. The application of techniques to identify, analyse, specify, implement and evaluate appropriate systems.

D. Information Environment & Policy

The dynamics of information flow in society, in (and between) nations, governments and the information and media industries

E. Management and Transferable Skills

Principles and techniques associated with business and institutional management, together with transferable skills of literacy and numeracy

Fig. 1. Extract from the Criteria for Assessment of Courses Accreditation Checklist (The Library Association, 1999)

Although not prescriptive of course content, CILIP does hold to the view that all students should receive instruction in research methods, and must demonstrate their ability to use these methods through the successful completion of a substantial piece of individual work in the form of a project or dissertation. CILIP has also inherited from the LA and IIS a requirement that all students have appropriate practical experience, either as a pre-requisite for admission or as an integrated component of the course in the form of a placement.

In addition to course content, professional accreditation is concerned with the context in which a course is offered. Attention is given to the focus of the host department and the expertise, experience and professional engagement of the staff is evaluated. Visiting panel members converse with a small sample of students and assess the calibre of student cohorts as evidenced by output measurements and graduate employment data. Panel members also seek evidence of institutional support, and expect to meet senior representatives of the university from whom assurances are sought regarding a continuing commitment to the subject discipline, and to the allocation of human and physical resources sufficient to deliver the course in future.

CILIP accreditation – considerations for future practice

In recent years the twin functions of conceptual mapping of the LIS discipline and assessment of quality-assured course delivery have brought the JAA, and now CILIP onto a convergent path with the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The JAA responded to the QAA consultation on National Qualifications Frameworks, supporting the QAA's intention that these frameworks should "enable professional bodies to gauge their contribution to professional formation" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 1999).

In a consultative document on quality assurance in Higher Education published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) the possibility was raised of accreditation visit reports being made available for QAA review, and shared visits to institutions conducted by QAA and professional body panels (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001). The JAA

broadly supported the proposals contained in the consultative document, whilst drawing back from shared visits since the procedures involved in external subject review were so unlike those of the JAA. The 'lighter touch' by which QAA inspection may be characterised in future might bring the possibility of collaboration with QAA onto CILIP's agenda, however.

Meanwhile, the QAA has published *subject benchmarks* in a wide range of subjects. Their function is to act as reference points which help define the nature of awards in the subject. Members of expert groups charged with subject benchmarking were asked to envisage "a map of the territory – the subject territory - bounded by a set of co-ordinates. Within the boundaries defined by the benchmarking exercise, any awards which carry the subject in their title or are included in the programme leading to the award can be legitimately located." (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000)

The QAA emphasised that subject benchmarking is not tantamount to the creation of a national curriculum: "rather it is an exercise to provide the means of acknowledging differences and diversity of programmes within agreed limits set by the subject community itself." (*ibid.*)

Benchmarking groups were also asked to specify the graduate attributes, professional capabilities and minimum expectations of performance of an award holder in their subject disciplines. The core elements of the benchmark for Librarianship and Information Management are reproduced in Figure 2 below. It is interesting to note the recognition given by QAA to the term 'information management', a subject descriptor which has steadily gained in favour in the UK during the last twenty years. The marketing advantage of this term has come to be appreciated in countries with a more traditional approach to LIS education, furthermore (Chu, 2001).

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1. The processes and techniques whereby information is created, captured, analysed, evaluated, moderated and managed in a variety of media and formats in the service of defined user populations.
 2. The application of techniques for planning, implementing, evaluating, analysing and developing library, archive and information products, services and systems within the context of organisational culture, objectives and client base, professional statutory and ethical frameworks, and national and international legislation and regulations.
 3. The broad concepts and theories of information systems and information and communication technologies insofar as they apply to the principles and practices of information management.
 4. The dynamics of information flow in society, in and between nations, governments, organisations and individuals.

Figure 2. Core elements of the discipline of Librarianship and Information Management (from Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000)

Universities in the UK have now entered a regime of regular assessment by the QAA. To this end, the subject benchmarks are prescriptive of the learning outcomes expected at different levels

of study, and most aspects of course delivery and management are the subject of systematic reporting and evaluation.

It seems clear that adherence to QAA's evaluative framework will become – indeed, may already have become – the primary driver in curriculum management in the UK. The QAA, when assessing a university's delivery of the Librarianship & Information Management discipline, has different objectives from those of CILIP when the latter conducts an accreditation visit in the same discipline. In practice, a university's preparation for assessment by either body will tend to converge to a common set of documentation. In such a scenario is there a continuing need for CILIP to employ a distinct accreditation instrument?

The relationship between CILIP and the QAA in the context of curriculum development will be an issue which CILIP's Accreditation Board and Professional Development Committee will wish to address early in the life of the new chartered institute. We will need to bring to our deliberations an awareness of the Bologna Declaration: signed in 1999 by the Education Ministers of 29 European countries – including the UK - it includes among its objectives the adoption of a pan-European system of comparable, credit-based degrees and the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance. (The text of the Declaration is available at: <http://www.ntb.ch/SEFI/bolognadec.html>).

The university community with which the LA and IIS engaged for accreditation purposes was restricted to those departments of LIS (latterly seventeen) which operate in consort as the British Association for Information and Library Education and Research (BAILER). The BAILER community cannot claim sole rights of passage across the conceptual landscape identified in the QAA benchmark for Library & Information Management, however. The CILIP Accreditation Board anticipates taking a more proactive stance in the evolution of relationships with a wider community of education and training providers within the information profession.

In this context it is interesting to note the remit of the Information Services National Training Organisation, which is cast in terms of education, training and skills provision, not just for library & information services, but also for archives and records management. The creation of Re:source, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, provides further evidence of broadening, cross-sectoral perceptions of the information profession.

The view has been expressed elsewhere that, because there is now such a heavy emphasis on computer-based and Web-enabled information *delivery*, the LIS community is fighting against a misapprehension that the generation, organisation and presentation of information *content* must be the special preserve of those educated in computer studies and trained in applications development. If the response of LIS educators is to continue to focus almost exclusively on libraries and text-based resources we risk finding ourselves increasingly out of touch with, and sidelined from, the management of our digitally integrated knowledge resources and recorded collective memory. (Enser, 2001).

To these considerations must be added some dynamics of higher education in the UK which challenge professional bodies like CILIP in their course accreditation role. One of the longest

standing such challenges is the widespread adoption of modularised and unitised programmes of study. In some cases the title of the final award, e.g., BSc Information & Library Management or BA Information Studies, acts as an umbrella term for a variety of subject pathways by which a student might navigate towards graduate status. At issue here is the tension between enhanced student choice and flexible attendance modes, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the systematic accumulation of a coherent body of knowledge. Accreditation panels are understandably suspicious of professionally oriented, modular courses of the ‘pic n’ mix’ variety!

Lifelong learning has become a significant plank in educational and social policy in the UK, and one which resonates with the information profession, on whose shoulders rests a professional responsibility to support such a policy by providing effective access to learning resources. The nature of that responsibility has been articulated by a task group which was set up to advise the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media & Sport, and for Education & Employment, on the ways in which co-operation between the education and public library sectors can be stimulated and improved to support lifelong learning within a ‘learner-empowered environment’. (Library & Information Commission, 2000) Among the task group’s recommendations is one which calls for the Departments for Culture, Media & Sport, and for Education & Employment, to collaborate in the training of teachers to guide people towards appropriate information resources, and in the training of librarians to advise people on available learning resources.

The dynamism endowed on the information profession by rapid advances in information and communication technologies demands that the information professional engages in lifelong learning in order regularly to refresh his/her knowledge and skills, furthermore. In the words of a recent LA report: “The library and information ‘profession’ itself now encompasses a much wider set of skills and perspectives that need to be understood and incorporated into the picture of a knowledge driven economy, in which librarians and information specialists are themselves lifelong learners.” (The Library Association, 2001)

The issue of ‘re-licensing’ is on the CILIP agenda, therefore. Continuing Professional Education (CPE) will assume a higher profile, and the interesting question for CILIP, and the information profession at large, is whether the broad sweep of CPE activity across both public and private sector organisations, including the Information Services National Training Organisation, should be subject to accreditation.

Conclusion

One is left with the prospect of a greatly expanded scale of professional education and training activity in LIS. Government policy regarding widening participation in Higher Education may be expected to add its own contribution, whilst the intention to operationalise that policy with the assistance of e-universities and foundation degrees has both procedural and policy implications for CILIP in its accreditation role.

The issues raised in this paper are among those with which CILIP’s Accreditation Board and Professional Development Committee will be engaging during the transitional period which marks the first two years of the new chartered institute’s existence. Prominent among the concerns of CILIP, and the Accreditation Board in particular, will be a scoping exercise to

redefine professional territory and establish a new accreditation instrument. CILIP looks forward to working with the Higher Education and professional training and practitioner constituencies in the pursuit of that exercise.

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