



### **Professional Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The UCRG contribution to the Umbrella track on 'Our Professional Future' was organised in collaboration with PTEG as a panel discussion on the current state and future direction of professional education for library and information work. The event offered an opportunity for employers, educators, students, consultants and others to exchange views on the relevance and value of academic programmes and professional qualifications against a backdrop of job cuts in most sectors and ongoing debate on the subject on the letters pages of *Library & Information Update*.

The session was chaired by Sheila Corrall, Head of Information Studies at Sheffield and Chair of BAILER, the British Association for Information & Library Education and Research. The panel of Linda Ferguson (NHS NW), Veronica Kennard (Rothschild), Ayub Khan (Warwickshire) and Sharon Palmer (Leeds University) brought together senior practitioners from the academic, corporate, health and public sectors, with expertise in business and finance, equality and diversity, personnel and training, in addition to extensive experience of professional organisations and specialist groups.

The debate centred on four questions, which had been shared with panel members in advance: How important is professional education for LIS? What is the value of an academic qualification in LIS? Do current programmes meet professional needs? and How must education evolve or change for the future? Panel members took turns in leading the discussion on each question and the chair then invited comments and questions from the audience, which generated a very lively and stimulating debate.

Employer requirements for LIS qualifications varied between sectors. In academia and the NHS, a degree (preferably postgraduate) was seen as an essential way of gaining credibility, putting staff on an equal footing with postgraduates, doctors and other professionals. In public libraries and corporate settings, employers preferred to have a mix in their teams, recognising that posts in areas such as marketing or web design needed different specialist expertise, but regarding LIS degrees as desirable in most cases. However, they all agreed about the inherent value of a professional education, highlighting three important things that LIS graduates gained as a result: an understanding of the theory, key concepts and core principles underpinning professional practice, providing the foundation for later training in the workplace; broadened horizons, through exposure to different perspectives and interactions with different information practitioners and different types of library/information services; and finally, a propensity to question things and the capacity for reflective practice.

In identifying gaps and weaknesses in provision, the panel acknowledged that programmes varied, particularly in coverage of specialist areas and that some topics were sector-specific (e.g. children's services, reader development and local studies). A few points were specific to the profession, such as the need for better coverage of cataloguing and classification and to get the emphasis right in promoting technology. Most of the areas identified were generic concerns, with several issues interestingly clustered around service delivery, with perceived weaknesses related to marketing, evaluating services and a real understanding of customer service.



Other skills gaps mentioned covered both 'hard' and 'soft' areas, including strategic thinking, business planning, numeracy, influencing and advocacy skills. Comments from the audience reinforced the need for students to develop a sound understanding of management fundamentals (which 'should be embedded in all modules') and the mindset of working within organisations, to ensure services were aligned to organisation needs.

For the future, there were clear messages about the need for more flexible provision, notably a demand for distance learning and modular qualifications; a need for the education sector to get more involved in CPD, rather than making the profession rely on CILIP; and the need for more collaboration between employers and educators, including a suggestion that employers needed to be more proactive here, for example, suggesting projects for students and providing graduate trainee schemes. The trend towards competency-based interviews in the public sector was also seen as signalling the need for more explicit linking of curricula with workplace practices. Some examples of existing courses tailored to the needs of local employers in Brighton and Bristol were mentioned in this context.

Altogether, the session was very successful in stimulating a valuable and timely debate around our professional future and giving everyone plenty to reflect on later.

Sheila Corrall  
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