Supporting skills development – LTSN-ICS

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Abstract:

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The Learning and Teaching Support Network Centre for Information and Computer Sciences (LTSN-ICS) was created by the United Kingdom (UK) funding bodies for higher education (HE) to support teaching and learning within the discipline of library and information science (LIS).

Part of its current work is centred on key skills. The LTSN-ICS is attempting to define those subject specific key skills to enable them to support the development of those same skills for professionals engaged in LIS. (There appears currently to be no other similar network in the world that is engaged in delivering best practice to promote the enhancement of skills for future LIS professionals).

The LTSN-ICS through its network of contacts, its activities and publications is enhancing the competencies of academics to enable them to deliver graduates of the future that have the core key skills that are requisite to be an effective library and information professional. This includes the ability to discern the differing needs of the client base. The LTSN-ICS is in the process of trying to aid this through involvement in projects such as RAPID that look at the personal development planning (PDP) of students and measures their levels of competence for a pre-determined skill set.

This last core key skill that must be acquired by library and information professionals to enable them to deal with the information needs of their clients. Clients may have very different cultural traditions that may lead them to search for information in a particular fashion. Their very perception of "what

information is" may be entirely different from that of other clients. It is important therefore that information professionals can both understand and accommodate this to fulfil the users information needs. Many information science modules look at the needs of users for the retrieval of information and it is imperative that in the changing face of information work that the needs of the user are not overlooked.

Supporting the development of teaching and learning for academics in the UK in turn supports the development of the skill set required by graduates for employment in the wider concept of library and information work. The skills that they emerge with at the end of their chosen programme of study determines their employability. The LTSN-ICS aims to provide support for academics to achieve this.

The paper will look at the work in the UK conducted by the LTSN-ICS and will draw some international comparisons to determine the level of activity on a global scale in comparison to the LTSN in the UK.

Preparation for entry into the information professions has always been a mixture of academic study and practical training. The proportions of the two vary greatly, both between countries and over periods of time, but the need to have some combination is universally recognised. There is probably general agreement about the broad scope of the academic curriculum, and therefore about the knowledge and understanding which the new entrant to the profession needs to acquire. Rather less consideration has been given to the skills which are needed if s/he is to function effectively. Some skill acquisition is part of the formal educational process; typically for example, an LIS student will learn how to catalogue, how to search for information and so on. There is, however, probably less general agreement on the full scope of the set of skills which is the essential pre-condition of effective professional practice. Although there is a growing literature, as indicated by Ward[1], Farmer and Campbell[2], Buttlar and Du Mont[3], and Elkin and Wilson[4], there is a need for a clear statement of the skill set, and for benchmarks against which a professional practitioner can judge both his/her competency and his/her need for further training and skill acquisition. This paper reports on an attempt to develop such a statement in the context of a project which will allow practitioners to chart their own professional development within a clear and objective framework.

This work has been undertaken by the Learning and Teaching Support Network for Information and Computer Sciences (LTSN-ICS)[5] which was established at the beginning of the year 2000 by the UK HE funding bodies, as one of 24 such centres covering a wide range of disciplines from art to zoology. The overall aim of the LTSN programme is:

> "To provide, through a coherent and integrated network of subject specific and generic centres, high quality information, expertise, and resources on good and innovative learning and teaching practices, and to effectively promote and transfer such practices to enhance learning and teaching activity in UK higher education."

The Library and Information Science arm of LTSN-ICS is based at Loughborough University. It is responsible for promoting quality information, resources and expertise in library and information science (LIS). It is addressing its strategic aims by creating networks and establishing contacts within the discipline to ensure that information disseminated to the community reaches as wide an audience as possible. As more people become involved, the more likely it is that sufficient impact can be made to promote further advances in learning and teaching within LIS.

Other countries have adopted schmes that address the need to promote teaching and learning activity within higher education (HE). In Autumn 2000 Sweden established the Council for the Renewal of Higher Education[6] to support activities that were concerned with pedagogical innovation in HE. It is also charged with collecting and disseminating information on activities related to HE in Sweden and abroad. Similarly

the Australian Universities Teaching Committee[7] was created in the year 2000 to promote excellence and collaboration in university teaching and learning. Again it provides grants and awards and provides some useful links. It does not aim, however, to provide a subject-based approach to learning and teaching. It does not support HE by providing a subject focus to their activities. The LTSN on the other hand is engaging with institutions by supporting them at the subject level as this is believed to be the best way to spread good practice, as borne out in HEFCE's review of previous initiatives.[8]

There appears to be no other corresponding network in the world that is currently engaged in delivering best practice to promote the enhancement of skills for future LIS professionals. This is not to say that there are not others engaged in the process of delivering best practice to the LIS sector. The AASL (American Association of School Librarians)[9], for example, is promoting the building of partnerships for learning to promote standards for information literacy for students. This includes learning and teaching as well as access and delivery of programmes to students. Interestingly we see the emphasis is on schools, not HE, and it is centred on information literacy not the teaching of LIS. ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center)[10] provides access to resources on library science education, including discussion groups, Internet resources, useful organizations and also offer access to some articles via their Clearinghouse on Information and Technology. Despite its usefulness it does not promote the sharing of good practice by bringing academics together. It is simply an access point for information, although invaluable and indispensable. The Internet Library for Librarians[11], which is actually provided by a commercial company, claims to be the "the most popular Internet Information site for librarians since 1994". Whether or not this claim is justified, there is certainly a wealth of resources available from this site. It is not, however, designed primarily for the LIS academic market, but for practitioners. These resources, and others on a lesser scale, provide access to important materials, but nothing has yet been attempted to provide resources to support learning and teaching for LIS academics, students, and newly graduated professionals. The LTSN-ICS is attempting to do precisely this, and to make the results available to the HE community and across the traditional dividing line between education and training.

The LTSN-ICS' website contains full details of it's activities[12]. The Centre's current work includes:

- ITALICS (Innovations in Teaching and Learning in Information and Computer Sciences) – a peer-reviewed electronic journal;
- A development fund providing support for small projects in UK HE institutions;
- An enquiry service that links the expertise of those in LIS departments;
- A programme of conferences, workshops and focus groups;
- Projects looking at aspects of teaching and learning, including plagiarism, cross-searching of interfaces and key skills.

The key skills work of the Centre is the particular concern of this paper. Key skills can be understood on two levels. There are *generic* skills which all graduates in any discipline can be expected to possess, such as skills of communication, IT use and problem-solving ability. Indeed, the possession of such skills is increasingly used as part of the definition of the very concept of 'graduateness' alongside the demonstration of having acquired a range of subject knowledge and understanding. There are also, however, subject-specific key skills, which can be argued to be particularly important in those disciplines which directly relate to professional practice, whether that be medicine, law or indeed library and information work. The LTSN-ICS is in the process of trying to develop definition of the skill set for information professionals, in the context of a project called RAPID (Recording Academic Professional and Individual Development) through which students and newly qualified professionals can examine their own personal development planning and measure their levels of competence in the subject-specific key skills.

RAPID, which had its origin in the field of building engineering,[13] has developed a recording system for students that enables them to track the level of their professional competencies in that discipline. The LTSN-ICS is engaged in trying to provide a similar system for students of LIS, and to determine if it is possible to define the skills of an information professional. To this end Isobel Beckett, the Information Officer at the LTSN-ICS at Loughborough University, has been collating data from module specifications from LIS courses in the UK and comparing them with the accreditation documents of the professional bodies (then still the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists) and from the benchmark statements from the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education[14]. The resulting draft document has been reviewed by officers of the professional body, now CILIP, members of the LTSN-ICS's own steering group, and a specially constituted focus group of academics and professional practitioners. This is to ensure that it does meet the needs of both the academic environment and the wider work environment where many skills will be developed or even acquired for the first time.

The skills set which is emerging from this process focuses around four key areas of professional practice:

- information resources
- information service and organisations management
- information systems
- policy and the broader social dimension of information work.

Each of these key areas is further divided into sub-units. Thus for Information Resources, the units are:

- Identification and analysis
- Collection and data management
- Knowledge organisation, recording and retrieval
- Evaluation

Finally, within each of these sub-units different levels of skill are defined. In Identification and Analysis for example, these are as follows:

A   I can recognise a need for information, identify appropriate resources to fit the need and begin to use simple techniques to find both print and electronic information.

B   I can understand a user's enquiry for information, match the necessary resources with the information needed and by constructing a strategy locate the required information. In doing this I recognise the need to gain relevant details from the enquirer and I understand access issues and how information from more than one source may be required.

C   I can answer a complex user enquiry by locating information using the appropriate search techniques with a clear knowledge of indexing and thesaurus construction. After accessing the necessary information I can analyse this and confirm that the information matches the need.

D   I can successfully locate and access information to satisfy a complex user query, compare information from a variety of sources identified through the use of a range of search strategies, and ensure this clearly meets the information need. I can also apply this information to a problem and within the limitations of copyright and plagiarism, organise and communicate the desired information appropriately.

A critically important element here is that the definitions are written in a way which provokes reflective analysis by the practitioner him/herself, so that s/he knows the level which has been reached and can plan

for further enhancement of professional competence. Broadly speaking, Level C is the minimum which would be expected of a professional who is in his or her first post, although Level D might well be expected in some cases for a particular specialism.

Why is this work important? The broad answer to that question is that because information work is now so pervasive, it is also very diverse. Inevitably, the formal education of information workers in the LIS departments has to take account of this diversity, and is increasingly generalised to allow students and new graduates to follow their own paths into and through the information professions. LTSN-ICS exists to support the academics who facilitate this process. The identification and definition of the key skills which are generic in information work is important in ensuring that the academic curriculum, and associated practical, training programmes (such as placements or practicums) provide new entrants with the skills which they need to complement the knowledge and understanding which has been acquired through academic study. This is why the project has been designed to incorporate the views of both those who deliver education in LIS and those who employ LIS graduates.

The long-term objective is to encourage reflective professional practice, a hallmark of any competent and committed professional. The skill set has deliberately been devised as part of the larger RAPID project which also encompasses generic key skills and personal development issues, since this is the proper context for subject-specific skills and the development of an individual's professional practice. The need for continuing professional development within the profession adds even more weight to the desirability of recording an individual's progress and enabling him or her to identify any skills gaps that might exist in their own professional skill set. Recording their skills at an early stage will prepare students for the need to record their professional development at each subsequent stage in their careers. The initial end-product will be a a set of printed proformas, which will be developed into a simple electronic package which the newly qualified professional can use to chart and record his/her professional development and identify further training needs. But the skills are common throughout the profession, and will be useable outside the immediate context for which they have been created.

We hope to bring this project to completion in the near future, and to make the results widely available in both printed and electronic formats. But of course it will never be complete; new developments, both social and technological, will create new imperatives for the profession and the demand for new skills.

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