“JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE A LICENSE DOESN’T MEAN YOU KNOW HOW TO DRIVE!” Tackling the gap between LIS qualification and professional capacity

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Abstract

The role of the Staff Training and Development Committee of the Durban University of Technology Library is to facilitate both general and specific on-the-job-training for all library staff. The members of this Committee have been involved in training and development of library staff; LIS students and also other library professionals for many years. This exposure has highlighted a number of challenges both within the DUT Library and the LIS sector workplace, generally.

One of major concerns is that the gap between academic qualification and professional skills needed in the workplace is increasing; this can be attributed to the pace at which academic librarianship is evolving and the failure of the library school curricula to adjust appropriately. Further, as in the case of the DUT, the high turnover of library professionals in recent years has necessitated an environment of continuous training and retraining.

This paper deliberates the preparedness of LIS professionals entering the workplace and considers the burden placed on institutions to train, retrain and develop these professionals. It takes a pragmatic approach, with the authors offering a number of recommendations that could steer libraries away from being ‘on-the-job training centres’ to become learning organisations. This could be achieved through collaboration with the South African professional body LIASA, and library schools.

Citing the example of Singapore’s PDS (Professional Development Scheme) certification point system – and the Australian professional body ALIA’s Professional Development scheme for recognition and licensing of librarians – and the need for carefully monitored and mentored post-graduate internships in the workplace – this paper could serve as the basis for a formal proposal to research and overhaul the approach to determining the bases for recognising professionals and professionalism within the sector. The issue of the individual’s commitment to investing in their own professional development, whilst touched on, is another topic that merits a separate paper entirely….and research in its own right!

Keywords:

Professional librarian, Continuing professional development and education, CPD, CPE, Staff training and development, Certification, Internship
1. Introduction

The role of the Staff Training and Development Committee (ST&DC) of the Durban University of Technology Library is to facilitate both general and specific on-the-job-training for all library staff. For many years the members of this Committee have been involved in training and development of the Library’s staff, of library and information science (LIS) students during work-integrated learning in the Library and also in the training and development of other library professionals, e.g. through contributions at regional and national workshops. This exposure has assisted in highlighting a number of challenges in the DUT Library, which the authors believe are probably symptomatic of the gap that exists between LIS qualification and LIS proficiency and professional preparedness for the workplace. Furthermore, the nature of this apparent gap would suggest that these challenges are not unique to DUT Library and are likely to be more widespread in the LIS sector workplace in general.

In an effort to bring attention to these challenges, the authors will share some DUT Library experiences and insights as well as associated concerns emanating from these. It is hoped this will contribute towards further discussion and remedial action in order to address these serious training issues confronting not only libraries, as employers... but also newly qualified librarians as potential employment seekers.

The authors recognise the role that interventions such as the work integrated learning programme play in providing LIS Diploma students with opportunities for valid library experience. The lack of similar formalised programmes for those completing LIS degrees; for those that have LIS qualifications but are not in professional posts; and for those who are in professional posts but who do not possess ‘adequate’ professional experience, will be the focus of this paper.

2. Definitions and key concepts

The section will look at key definitions and related concepts in staff training and development, in particular those relating to professional librarianship in an academic library.

There is no generally accepted definition of professional librarian. This could be a reflection of the dynamic nature of librarianship, and the diversity of library service. The Oxford Dictionary Online (2013) refers to a professional as relating to or belonging to a profession ... a person engaged or qualified in a profession ... a person competent or skilled in a particular activity”. A study by Sam Wiggins and Laura Williams (2010) on “perceptions of professionalism in the LIS sector” will be adopted for this paper. They concluded that “a librarian is professional when they have the qualifications, experience, and an underlying professional attitude”.

In the South African higher education context, employers require a minimum of M + 4 level qualifications on the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) scale for professional posts (some LIS positions in the private sector may opt for lower qualifications for professional posts), and there is an abundance of qualified library staff in the job market. The central issue in this paper relates to the professional experience and job readiness factors required by employers. “Show me your education, experience, and skills, but don’t waste my time with minutia!” as Forrestal advises in an entry Hit the ground running on her blog for librarian job-hunters (2013).

Aspiring library professionals would do well to heed the caution expressed by Cooke (2012, p. 5) that learning and education do not cease with the attainment of a library science qualification – that is only the beginning. Cooke goes on to refer to the well-known definition provided by Weingard (1999, p. 201) of continuing professional education (CPE) as “Education that takes place once professional qualification is achieved, with the intent of maintaining competence and/or learning new skills” and also a statement by that same source “Continuing professional education is no longer an option, it is a
requirement for professional practice”. In most occupations, the responsibility for professional development lies with the individual.

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) provides a useful definition of professional development that highlights the importance of the individual’s responsibility: “Professional development demonstrates the individual practitioner’s personal commitment of time and effort to ensure excellence in performance throughout his or her career…..Professional development includes many learning experiences - within and outside the workplace - which aim to increase knowledge, develop library and information skills and attributes and broaden the range of vocational competencies”. These learning experiences include formal education (post first qualification), formal training courses, informal learning activities, mentoring, workplace learning, seminars, presentations, and research and service activities.

The authors identify with the three key activities of the Singapore Professional Development Scheme (PDS) for practicing professional librarians. The point certification system was implemented in 2009, and librarians are classified as ‘practicing professionals’ if they attain a combination of expertise development, industry development, and self-development activities in a given period. This system however applies to librarians who are already in professional positions.

A core component of the PDS scheme is the participation of the library professional body. Equally important, is the commitment from employers towards continuous professional development. Unfortunately, without an accredited certification programme for librarians in South Africa, employers will face great difficulty in trying to shift the responsibility for professional development to the individual. Broady-Preston (2009) refers to the “dichotomy between the perspectives of the individual and those of the employer with regard to responsibility for CPD and benefits of this activity” and explores this in relation to the 2004 UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) CPD Framework document and subsequent Certification Scheme, under the heading Responsibility and Benefits.

Varlejs (2008) who has been instrumental in driving IFLA’s CPD project, has stated that “The Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning (CPDWL) section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has developed and approved a statement that can be used by institutions and individuals to assess and improve the quality of staff development programs, association or other organizational continuing education, and personal learning efforts”. The Statement includes ten (10) CPD Principles and Best Practices, each of which has been subjected to literature review and discussion. The introductory preamble clearly states that the basic principle involved is recognising that responsibility for continuing education and professional development is shared by individuals and their employers, along with LIS professional associations and education programmes. These Best Practices provide substantial guidelines for any staff training and development plans.

3. Staff training and development – a strategic advantage

A supportive climate is essential for the success of any staff training and development initiative. The DUT Library prides itself in being able to create a number of opportunities for staff to engage in expertise development, industry development and self-development activities. The development of staff is one of the Library’s key strategic drivers. This is evident in the Library Strategic Plan for 2012-2014, “to invest in Library human capital by encouraging and setting expectations for professional development training, continuing education and skills development opportunities”. It is the role of the ST&D C (a sub-committee of Library Management) to implement a training programme that delivers appropriate interventions for all library staff.
A participative process that involves library staff facilitates the development of a Departmental Skills Plan which responds directly to skills needs of individual staff members and also to generic training needs of all staff. This Plan is funded by the Library’s staff training fund and supplemented by the DUT Skills Levy Fund. A number of factors are used to determine which training interventions are held in any given year. These include the costs of training, availability of trainers, and the training that is available via the central Skills Fund. For specialised training interventions, an expert trainer is sourced to develop a customised training session for library staff. Expert trainers from the Library and DUT community are also used for training sessions, depending on the nature of the training. A cascading roll-out or train-the-trainer approach is favoured for interventions that impact on a large number of staff. A separate fund is also available for library staff to attend various conferences and workshops held during the year, for professional development purposes.

The DUT Library Management supports the development of its library staff by investing time and resources into a structured training programme. A number of other factors contribute to the success of the programme:

- A growing number of professionals are recognised for their leadership role in the library profession, and involvement in the training and development of other librarians – these include Cataloguing Librarians, IT Librarians and Subject Librarians;
- There is a general enthusiasm from the library staff regarding learning opportunities;
- The diversity of skills among the professional staff provides opportunities for sharing of these skills and knowledge;
- A number of library staff have been selected to attend LIS development programmes such as the Carnegie Leadership Academy.

The DUT Library is well positioned to deliver training interventions that develop its professional staff. However the growing number of qualified librarians in the workplace without the appropriate professional experience makes this an overwhelming task; new strategies need to be developed to capacitate these individuals to the accepted level.

4. DUT Library - challenges

In attempting to address the gap between skills provided by an LIS qualification and the professional skills needed in the workplace, the authors have encountered an assortment of challenges usually requiring considerable investment of library resources in order to adequately address them. In instances where qualified librarians has benefitted from intensive CPD in the form of education and training, the challenges are not as great, although the extent of benefit has been found to depend largely on the individual’s commitment to CPD and their enthusiastic embrace of the opportunities provided for this.

Further, as in the case of the DUT, the high turnover of library professional staff in recent years [8 in the last 4 years] has inevitably necessitated an environment of continuous training and retraining, as we seek to fill vacant posts with suitable appointments. This on-going process places a costly burden on the institution – as staff and resources are side-tracked away from their core functions into fulfilling these added responsibilities of bringing new staff “up to speed” and this extends beyond the standard induction training of new staff to familiarise them with practices and procedures.

A sizable investment, very often one-on-one, is needed to equip the new appointee to actually function according to the skills set for which they were employed in the first instance. This investment of human and other capital can prove quite considerable, depending on the nature and extent of training required. And whilst an institution might embrace the principles of being a “learning
organisation” – and DUT certainly does, the extent of the training posed by these particular challenges far exceeds this kind of “learning”.....and therein lies a very real concern.

Another major challenge in the DUT Library: there are a number of staff who possess library qualifications but are not employed in professional positions. In 2011, three library staff who completed Bachelor of Technology qualifications in LIS, but who had limited exposure to professional librarian experience, found employment elsewhere in the LIS sector. This was as a direct result of not having had the professional experience required for professional posts available in the DUT Library. This situation is likely to recur; currently twenty one (21) library staff are studying towards higher degrees. Two staff have already completed appropriate qualifications for professional positions, and ten (10) other staff will complete Bachelor of Technology or Bachelor of Information Science or Honours degrees in LIS by the end of 2014. This presents a huge challenge to the Library, but at the same time providing an opportunity for the Library to introduce innovative solutions that will benefit both the individuals concerned, and the Library: a mechanism that will give these librarians ‘in waiting’ exposure to and recognition for the appropriate experience relevant to the professional capacity needed. Such a solution could have the spin-off potential also, to impact and benefit the LIS professional landscape as a whole.

In reflecting on these challenges posed by the everyday realities, common threads of concern have emerged – the following are some examples and they are quite likely to have a familiar ring to others also involved in training and development in the profession:

- LIS qualifications do not in themselves a librarian make!
- Neither do these “professional qualifications” equip someone to fill a “professional” library post
- Graduates and diplomates sometimes over estimate their capabilities and this can therefore lead to over advertising as well
- Dealing with the “un-teachable teaching librarian” who has the “I’ve been there, done that, have the t-shirt” know-it-all attitude is a particular challenge
- Leaping from one qualification to the next gathering “licenses” but no “driving skills” is common practice among the younger generation of librarians
- The concept of “Qualified Librarian” can be confused with “Professional Librarian"
- The notion of the need for taking responsibility for one’s continuing education and professional development is often lacking
- Library staff frequently bemoan the fact that insufficient opportunities for professional skills development in the workplace are not provided by their institutions

5. Interventions Incorporated at DUT!

A number of initiatives have been implemented in the DUT Library to curtail this gap between LIS qualification and professional experience. Some of these initiatives were informally constructed and managed, and this therefore limits any opportunity for measurement or evaluation. The interventions that have had desirable results will be discussed and using components from these examples, a new scheme for the DUT context will be proposed.

5.1 Growing from within – opportunities

5.1.1 The trainee programme for Cataloguers

The allotting of trainee posts or internships in certain professions is a norm. This expedites the skilling of individuals rendering them ‘ready’ for the work environment. This is harder to achieve in higher education libraries sector due to rigid structures and bureaucratic human resource policies.
In 2006, the DUT Library Management took a landmark decision to introduce trainee positions in the Library. Two posts were available for Cataloguing Librarians and Library Management submitted a motivation to University executive management for potential candidates to be sourced from existing library staff who had completed their library qualifications but were not in possession of the requisite three years of appropriate professional experience.

The motivation was approved and after advertising internally and conducting interviews, two staff were selected and thereby afforded the opportunity to participate in a formal specialised training programme that would equip them with the relevant skills for these posts. The programme was designed to maximise learning: practice was followed by a formal assessment of completed tasks, and then finally on the job competence was mentored and monitored by expert staff. After six months, the two incumbents were competing favourably alongside their cataloguer colleagues and enjoying the benefits of the elevated job grade assigned to these professional posts. Unfortunately, similar development opportunities have not yet filtered through to other professional posts in the Library.

5.1.2 Two tier information services

To meet the service demands of students, and to create a more student-centred library service, Library Management proposed the development of two tier system for the Information Services team. The rationale behind this move was to increase the number of staff in the information services team. Furthermore, the Subject Librarians involved in information literacy training would be able to increase their efforts in integrating information literacy into their respective programmes, and support would be provided to the Subject Librarians to perform other equally important roles of collection development and reference queries.

In a pilot project driven by Library Management, and facilitated by ST&DC, three library staff were selected to complete a formal training programme that included relevant aspects of professional librarianship. A pre-assessment of each individual’s skills informed the content and duration of the programme. The programme ran for nine months, and periodic assessments were completed to assess new skills learnt. Although the two tier approach did not surface in the intended format, this programme has the ingredients for a successful professional development programme. These include a supporting infrastructure, relevant and customised training interventions, opportunities for practice, and willing participants.

5.1.3 Information Desk capacity building initiative

The creation of an Information Desk formed part of the Library’s collective response to develop towards a more student centred service. Feedback received via student surveys and ‘suggestion boxes’ provided support for a dedicated Information Desk which would serve as a “first port of call” to handle first level student queries, including reference queries. Library staff from the Circulation team were given an opportunity to develop the new skills needed to function effectively at the Information Desk. This was a novel approach to professional development, however competing demands in the Library meant a less structured programme, and eventually these information desk functions were absorbed into the workflow of the Circulation team, in particular those involved in front desk duties.

This section has captured some of the initiatives that have afforded staff the opportunities to be exposed to new or additional professional skills. What is lacking is a form of certification system that would allow for these individual opportunities to be counted, and used as credits to offset the professional experience requirement in most job adverts. The following section will look focus on qualified librarians holding professional positions in the Library.
5.2 Filling the gap

There is an assumption and a justifiable expectation that those staff in professional posts such as that of Subject Librarian already possess basic professional skills; that therefore the focus of ST&DC interventions for professional staff should be on continuing professional development. For these professional posts, the Library employs individuals who have a library qualification, and a minimum of three years’ professional library experience. During the process of conducting a skills audit in the Library, gaps in professional experience became apparent, forcing the Library to consider corrective action. The skills audit or skills needs assessment carried out by the DUT Library ST&DC identified:

- Individuals that lack basic professional skills
- Individuals who need specific training interventions
- Generic training interventions for library professionals

Implementing corrective action for (a) is a daunting task to say the least, especially as new appointees in professional posts are ‘expected to hit the ground running’ with minimum induction and orientation to the library setup. A training programme for these individuals could prove to be intensive (as described in 5.1.2), and could even be regarded as an internship. Content could be designed using already existing models and guidelines as benchmarks, e.g. Association of College and Research Libraries Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians & Coordinators (2007) and 23 Things for Professional Development (2013) that was originally conceived by a Public Library in North Carolina to encourage and facilitate the acquisition of Web 2.0 skills and technologies by librarians.

6. Recommendations

6.1 A review of recruitment practices

In recent years, and largely as a result of previous experiences in the DUT Library, a pre-requisite for all professional librarian posts in the DUT Library is the completion of a skills test or skills assessment. For cataloguing posts, incumbents are taken through a series of practical exercises, which are a key determinant of success. Unfortunately, this level of skills interrogation does not apply to the other professional posts advertised in the Library. For Subject Librarian posts, the only skills assessed are presentation skills including, to some extent, an assessment of the information gathering skills involved therein. A broader and more substantial approach to skills testing for Subject Librarians is needed at the interview stage, so that gaps in professional experience are identified early, and appropriate decisions made.

6.2 Qualifications + opportunity for experience = a ‘shelf ready’ Librarian

The DUT Library faces an ethical dilemma! A minimum of ten (10) library staff currently studying, will have obtained LIS qualifications by the end of 2014. These staff, the majority of whom have been working in DUT Library for over five years, fail to meet the criteria for employment in professional posts at DUT due to lack of professional experience. The authors have described successful programmes aimed at providing opportunities for professional experience, however a structured approach is needed that will formally address this issue.

In the absence of a national certification system and post graduate internships, the DUT Library ST&DC proposes a concept for an in-house certification programme for all those staff who have qualifications in LIS, but are occupying non-professional posts in the Library. This programme would operate similarly to that of ALIA certification scheme and Singapore’s PDS however the points system
would reward completion of suitably relevant activities, and facilitate articulation towards possible acceptance into a development post. A commitment is needed from DUT Library Management to:

- nominate the next vacant professional post as a ‘development post’, and agree to a system of creating ‘development posts’ in the future
- be the host of the certification system, and set criteria for awarding of points
- set the criteria for the selection of candidates for the development post
- create the necessary infrastructure for these activities

The DUT Library is well positioned to handle such a programme as a number of the professional staff are considered “experts” in the field of Cataloguing, IT and Information Literacy. These experts could be supported by guest lecturers from the DUT LIS Department when necessary, in a programme designed and determined in conjunction with the Department. A formal proposal for this collaborative initiative is to be submitted to Library Management.

6.3 Professional body involvement in collaborative solutions

Perhaps the time is ripe for formal research and discussions on this topic leading, hopefully, to recommendations that could steer libraries towards becoming learning organisations, not in isolation but in collaboration not only with existing library schools, but also with the South African professional body LIASA, the Library and Information Association of South Africa. LIASA, through its professional development arm, the Centre for Information Career Development (CiCD) funded by the Carnegie Corporation, already plays an important role in offering courses and workshops for librarians, however besides certain programmes, these are usually done ad hoc and often do not travel to all centres. This exacerbates the gap in the LIS sector in terms of professional development opportunities in some regions.

Drawing on the experiences of Singapore’s PDS (Professional Development Scheme) certification point system – and the Australian professional body ALIA’s Professional Development scheme for recognition and licensing of librarians – as well as guidelines from IFLA initiatives, the library workforce in this country could certainly benefit from carefully monitored and mentored post-graduate internships in the workplace and opportunities for continued professional development and workplace learning.

7. Conclusion

The paper highlighted issues affecting the DUT Library in terms of staff training and development, especially the professional development of librarians. The plight of qualified library staff who have had no professional experience or limited opportunities to gain professional experience; and those qualified professional staff who have gaps in their professional skills or experience was discussed, and a possible solution that could work in the DUT context was shared. This paper will be expanded to include views of the professional librarians at the DUT in terms of professionalism, and CPD. Whilst, CPD was touched on, it is an issue that needs a broader approach, and the involvement of a number of stakeholders, in particular, the Library professional body, LIASA.
8. References


The following unpublished DUT Library documents were also consulted:

DUT Library Staff Training & Development Committee Minutes.

DUT Library Strategic Plan: 2012- 2014.