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UNESCO and human resource development for the 'Information Society'

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The emergence of the 'Information Society' appears to present a unique opportunity for libraries and information services to assert a new and more significant position for themselves in society. However, to be well equipped to seize these opportunities, the information profession needs to re-examine the range of its knowledge, skills and attitudes.ⁱ This has been the topic of much debate in the industrialised countries, not least because the pattern of development in the different kinds of library and information services has quite evidently been uneven as a consequence of their financial circumstances and the perception of their distinct missions. In the developing countries these differences are exaggerated by the prevailing circumstances: not only less money for investment, but also in many cases a shortage of manpower with any professional education. Nonetheless UNESCO has continually attempted to ensure that colleagues in these countries do not remain unaware of the developments in professional practice which lay ahead of them, and to motivate them to prepare the necessary educational response.

Its activities have included supporting the establishment of regional Schools of Librarianship during the 1970s in the West Indies and the Philippines, and providing regional models for the development of information science programmes during the 1980s in Latin America (Venezuela) and Africa (Nigeria and Ethiopia).ⁱⁱ Through its support for the educational work of the relevant international Non-Governmental Organisations (IFLA, FID and ICA), UNESCO has also helped to identify the range of international provision for education in the fieldⁱⁱⁱ, and provided further opportunities for interchange between teachers in the field and stimuli for curricular development.^{iv} In addition to missions by UNESCO staff and other experts to specific countries or institutions, projects have addressed issues such as the techniques of conducting manpower studies to underpin curriculum development,^v and guidelines to assist the development of teaching in subjects of emerging importance such as marketing.^{vi}

More recently it has been continuing, with the collaboration of the NGOs and independently, to support regional meetings of teachers in the field in the Arab World^{vii}, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union^{viii}, and in Latin America¹, with the aim of identifying their needs for assistance and establishing regional associations of Schools as a basis for mutual support. The intention of SLISNET^{ix}, an experimental international network of Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences, launched in 1995, is that the exchange of advice and

¹ A new regional association, EDIBCIC - *asociación de EDucação e Investigación en Bibliotecología, archivología, y Ciencia de la información y documentación de Iberoamerica y el Caribe* was proposed during the 3rd Conference of teachers and researchers in Librarianship, Archive Studies and Information Science in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Puerto Rico in 1997, and formally established during the 4th Conference held in Maracaibo, Venezuela, 20 to 24 April 1998.

information between Schools is expected to be facilitated by communication through the Internet.^x The shifts in UNESCO's approach to developing professional education in the information field appear to have been driven by the organisation's overall budgetary problems, and by internal priorities which seem to have reduced the central allocation of funds for education-related activities. It is perhaps also fair to note that this may well be a result of external priorities also - since UNESCO is driven to a large extent by the expressed views of the representatives of member states. Much of the initiative for development now rests with the NGOs (who can still bid for UNESCO contributions towards the cost of specific projects) and with the UNESCO regional officials based in Latin America and Asia and the Pacific and responsible for work in the Information and Informatics field. Because of budgetary constraints, there appears to have been no regional official with specialist expertise responsible for Information work based in Africa for many years.

One of the most recent of the UNESCO regional conferences for teachers of library and information sciences took place in Bangkok in 1997.^{xi} This was a follow up to meetings in Beijing (1995) and Manila (1996) organised by the Information and Informatics Unit of the UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific within the framework of its ASTINFO programme. The meeting was attended by participants from the developed and developing countries in the region and a couple of international experts. A wide range of papers were presented: some described current efforts in the region; others raised issues already familiar in the advanced, industrialised countries. Several of these papers are reprinted, by permission of UNESCO and the authors, in this issue of *'Education for Information'*. As usual, the participants made a variety of recommendations addressed to UNESCO, other funding agencies, and the international NGOs. One of these was for the production of curricular guidelines to stimulate discussion in the Schools in the region, and this project has since attracted the support of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, which had been a major sponsor of the Bangkok meeting.

The authors of these guidelines^{xii} bring to their compilation a distinguished record of experience as teachers in the field and in the region. Nick Moore, the principal editor of the guidelines, is well known as an independent consultant and researcher into manpower issues, and at various times has been Head of the School of Librarianship and Information Studies in Birmingham Polytechnic and the British Council's principal information adviser in South Asia. Maureen Henninger teaches at the University of New South Wales, and has consultancy experience in other countries in the region. Edward Lim founded the postgraduate diploma programme in the University of Malaya whilst Librarian there, before moving to a similar position in Monash University in Australia. Bob Stueart was for many years Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, and subsequently assisted in the establishment of a Masters degree programme at the Asia Institute of Technology in Bangkok.

Their aim has been to encourage a curriculum which examines the nature of information, of how it is used and managed, and of the systems, mechanisms, institutions and tools which facilitate that use. The substantial introduction revisits some of the themes of the earlier conference papers, and particularly the paradigm of Creators, Collectors, Communicators and Consolidators which Nick Moore proposed to outline the key roles of the information professional. The authors are at great pains to stress that this document is no more than a draft, and is intended to stimulate discussion. There is no doubt that they will succeed in that aim. Whilst the paradigm is undeniable, the definitions which accompany it depend on more than the local context which, as the authors emphasise, is critical in determining the depth of treatment and balance between subjects. Equally crucial is where one sees the information

professional in the context of the information industry and its key activities of content creation, delivery, and processing. Moore and his colleagues clearly see the information professional fixed in the information delivery sector. Whether the same view might be taken by a group of people whose day to day experience of professional education is based in less narrowly focused Schools is itself debatable.

A more current or broader perspective than most of the authors' might suggest that there is a marked convergence between the three sectors. This is certainly reflected in the courses which are emerging from some Schools in the industrialised countries (including some in the region), and in the academic groupings within which some Schools are being placed by institutional managements. There is little evidence in this slim volume of guidelines that the authors are aware of the extent to which, or the reasons why, Schools of Library and Information Sciences are now engaged in leading the development of courses in such areas as publishing, corporate communication, computerised information systems, or knowledge management. Even though UNESCO has brought itself in step with external developments in linking the management of its former Divisions of the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme and the General Information Programme into its new Information and Informatics Division, the implications of that union (beyond the budgetary pressures and internal politics which brought it about) have yet to impact on activities such as this. Is it perhaps too much to expect that the organisational location of both these Divisions within the Communication, Information and Informatics sector (CII) of UNESCO might have taken on some significance over the years?

The guidelines attempt to place the information professional's work in the context of information and citizenship, and information as an organisational resource. No one would disagree with that, but the perspective on the organisational resource is changing, and again that does not appear to have been given due recognition in this discussion paper. There is a growing awareness that as a profession we must step beyond our traditional preoccupation with the techniques of managing information services, and help our students develop a greater understanding of the role of information as perceived by top management. Whilst we may feel that Knowledge Management is simply a matter of applying our techniques to a variety of areas of information within an organisation, progress is unlikely to be made towards coherent information provision in an organisation unless top management not only recognises the advantages, but is also willing to address the structural and political problems of implementing change. Nowhere in these guidelines does one begin to see even the slightest awareness of this crucial issue, and the need to convey an understanding of it to students.

Another problem is that, partly as a result of adopting the 4 Cs paradigm, much of the text is presented in a rather confusing manner. The authors have pointed the reader towards the need for professional education to be developed at two or three levels according to local circumstances - the paraprofessional, the bachelors degree level professional, and the professional with a postgraduate diploma or Masters degree. Each subject is presented in the context of one of the 4 Cs (with an inevitable amount of apparent repetition), and at basic, intermediate and advanced levels. These three levels are not specifically related to the three levels of qualification, but rather to the evolutionary development through which many of the courses in the region will need to go. Nowhere in the accompanying text does this appear to be explained, along with the corollary that there have to be checks to ensure that progress in one subject may need to be underpinned by developments in another area, or that some integration of knowledge may be necessary.

Perhaps the authors assumed that they were addressing experienced teachers? If that is the case, then it is surely gratuitous for each element to include guidance on teaching methods or how it should be assessed. Nonetheless, there are recommendations that subjects should be taught by lectures, seminars, practical exercises and reading (*sic!*), and assessed by essays, examinations, practical assignments, or some combination of these approaches, but there is no rationale for the choice which might help the inexperienced teacher understand why a particular teaching method or form of assessment might be useful. Indeed, it is not at all clear that the assessments are, or are intended to be, related to the learning outcomes. This is perhaps as well, since some of the learning outcomes are so carelessly expressed as to be unrealistic and unachievable in the context of an educational programme. How otherwise can the expected standards of performance be defined and evaluated if the outcomes and assessments are not matched?

In their introduction, the authors stress the importance of the teachers' knowledge, skills, and abilities. Little is said explicitly about the need for these to be continually reinforced and updated. It is particularly challenging for teachers to be confronted not only with the need to master the latest developments, but also to devise appropriate means of transmitting them to students. Nonetheless, the process of continual improvement must lie at the heart of curriculum development. Yet, for many social reasons, the application of this underlying principle of Total Quality Management to teaching is not widespread, even in some of the industrialised countries. It is, however, a strange omission from these guidelines given their implicit intention to raise standards.

The UNESCO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific is to be congratulated for its commitment in pursuing an interest in developing education, and for organising a conference which brought together a stimulating range of speakers. It is now 20 years since UNESCO last offered an overall package of guidelines for curriculum development covering the whole field of library and information science,^{xiii} although many guidelines on education and training in more specific areas have been produced (Archives, Engineers and so on). The modular curriculum for information studies prepared by Andy Large was well received,^{xiv} but it is more than 10 years since that was published for discussion. The field has moved on considerably since then.

An attempt to provide an overview is therefore most welcome, but it is clear that there are flaws in the guidelines emanating from this project. It must be said that these shortcomings derive more from a lack of input of specialist expertise from the centre than awareness, enthusiasm, and ability in the region. It is ironic that the CII Sector of UNESCO, the United Nations *Educational* organisation appears to have been down-sizing its educational activity in the information sector just as society as a whole is being transformed by the applications of information and communications technologies, and the need to develop the human resources necessary to support that development has never been greater. The case for an education specialist at UNESCO Headquarters to keep in touch with the orientation, curriculum, and teaching methods of those Schools of Library and Information Sciences at the leading edge of development, and with the resources to disseminate that awareness through UNESCO's activities in all its regions, cannot be refuted. Equally strong is the case for a regional specialist to implement the work of the Information and Informatics programme in Africa, where educational work in this field seems to have been under-represented for many years. Little is likely to change, however, unless the educational and practitioner community in both the developed and developing countries becomes more active and adept at lobbying the appropriate Ministry in their own government and their UNESCO National Commission to make representations on their behalf.

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