

Schools of Librarianship and Continuing Education in Britain (part 2)

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On-Site Courses

The schools have also been providing courses tailored to the requirements of individual libraries, training cooperatives, and professional groups, usually for a fee. In 1970 Leeds Polytechnic initiated its on-site course program to assist Hull City Libraries with its in-service training program, and between 1970 and 1980 Leeds provided twenty-five on-site courses for libraries in its region.¹ Liverpool and Newcastle Polytechnics also have been involved in providing on-site courses.

The College of Librarianship Wales began to offer a similar service at much the same time. Recognizing the support it receives from the profession (e.g., in arranging field work and study tours for its students) and the benefits to its staff of being in regular contact with professional practice, the College decided not to charge a fee and asks only for the travelling expenses of the staff involved. In the last ten years the College has provided eighty-three on-site courses for libraries throughout Britain. It has made a particularly significant contribution to stimulating the development of training in Wales. In a recent survey, one Welsh public library system reported that 50 percent of its in-service training activities included an element of support by the College's staff.²

The Transbinary Group commented favourably on these on-site courses and encouraged the schools to work even more closely with professional bodies and with individual employers to meet specified needs.³ This also accords with the management practices of large library systems. Generally there appears to be a move away from sending staff to attend courses offered on a speculative basis by the schools or other providers of continuing education. Bird found that "there was a noticeable interest in moving towards greater cooperation with utilization of 'outside agencies' to produce tailor-made training that would satisfy the library's own training objectives more effectively."⁴

Commissioned Short Course Work

In 1982 the Department of Education and Science (DES) launched its Professional, Industrial, and Commercial Updating (PICKUP) program to encourage universities and other tertiary institutions to market their skills more effectively, providing vocational courses, particularly short courses, that meet real needs. Employers are being encouraged to pay the full cost of the training provided for their staff, putting the emphasis on cost-effectiveness.

Government funds are available in some instances for preliminary assessments of training needs and to underwrite the development costs of training programs. Using these funds, a number of schools have developed short courses delivered

by distance-learning methods. Courses in media librarianship and educational technology and for ancillary staff in medical libraries have been developed by Leeds Polytechnic.⁵ Newcastle Polytechnic has introduced a program on statistics for librarians.⁶

The schools have already accepted numerous commissions to undertake courses for international agencies. The PICKUP initiative and the concurrent financial pressures on educational institutions are compelling the schools of librarianship to become more overtly commercial in their activities in Britain. The School of Librarianship and Information Studies at Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology, Aberdeen, has recently issued a list of ten courses it is prepared to undertake on a contract for a set fee.

One commentator has succinctly described the impact of government policies on the current scene: "Academic departments, no less than commercial enterprises, relocked in a snuggle to achieve sustainable competitive advantage."⁷ This is, however, not entirely a novelty. The schools have always been accustomed to operating in a competitive environment in the provision of short courses. As long ago as 1971 Slater reported that the library schools were responsible for only 11 of the 104 short courses on a speculative basis in Britain.⁸ Subsequently, the LISC review⁹ identified some 150 organisations providing continuing education activities in the form of short courses relevant to the needs of library and information professionals. More recently, an analysis of the events announced to take place between March and December 1988 identified 405 meetings, courses, and conferences scheduled to be held in Britain.¹⁰ Of these, less than 2 percent (six events) were sponsored by schools of librarianship and information studies.

Noragh Jones' study of public and academic librarians conducted in the mid-1970s found that attending short courses was no more common than participation in formal study for further qualifications.¹¹ Ritchie's later study found that, of those who had attended one or more short courses, more than 90 percent had had their expenses paid by their employer.¹² Konn found that at the level of junior professionals "No one appeared to favour continuing education as an imposition on non-work time."¹³ Clearly the support of the employers a fairly important factor so far as attending short courses is concerned.

International Activities

Most of the schools accept international students into courses leading to further qualifications. There are currently over 200 overseas students taking courses in Britain each year, of whom an increasing proportion are enrolling to take advanced qualifications to update their professional knowledge or to maintain their professional status in relation to more recently qualified personnel.¹⁴

Britain has also been the locale for numerous international short courses and conferences arranged by schools of librarianship at Liverpool Polytechnic, Sheffield University, Loughborough University, Leeds Polytechnic, and particularly the College of Librarianship Wales. Perhaps the best known of the College's continuing education activities is the annual International Graduate Summer School (IGSS). Less widely known is the College's work in arranging short courses in cooperation with other agencies such as F.A.O., D.S.E., and the

British Council; library schools in Ireland, Sweden, and the United States; I.F.L.A.; and national and regional library associations in France, Germany, and the United States. Altogether the College has arranged fifty-one short courses in Britain in the last ten years for groups from overseas, with a total of 1,661 participants.

Current Concerns

This is a period of rapid change in the nature of library and information services, and it might be expected that there would be a greater recognition that "professional obsolescence becomes a real and ever-present danger. Systematic continuing education provides a method of combating such obsolescence and its worrying personal consequences."¹⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the Library Association's Code of Professional Conduct, approved in 1983, requires members "to keep abreast of developments in librarianship in those branches of professional practice in which qualifications and experience entitle them to engage." The Association has also issued a policy statement on "support for staff development and training" (Library Association, 1987), which encourages employers to support the training and development of their staff and outlines a number of ways in which this could and should be done.

There are, however, a number of problems that need to be solved in relation to continuing education activities in British schools of librarianship. Schools strongly committed to continuing education are constrained not only by shortages of key skills but also by reduced staffing levels. The Staff-Student Ratio (SSR) is an important element in the allocation of resources to and within higher education institutions in Britain. Even before the schools were subjected to recent financial pressures, Davinson was concerned that "the SSR count is based on full-time equivalent students and tends to presume full-time students. Part-time study, short courses, [and] research activity yield low SSR returns Such activities are self-inflicted wounds."¹⁶ To provide the opportunity for research and continuing education activities, he was able at that time to introduce a formula for the allocation of staff time to full-time courses that effectively diverted up to 25 percent of the school's staff time into the other activities they wished to develop. Declining staff numbers make this increasingly difficult for any school to do without damaging the main teaching programs. The growth in student numbers has been reduced by the accident of a falling birth rate and in some institutions by government-imposed target numbers. Staff-student ratios, hitherto at 1:10 or better, are also the subject of a new government target of about 1:12 to be achieved by 1990, and the number of staff teaching in the schools has been significantly reduced, in some cases by two-thirds.

The 1980s saw the increasing incorporation of aspects of Information Technology in the schools' curriculum. The pedagogic and resource problems arising from the need to reflect such current professional developments have been exacerbated by the quite severe financial pressures placed on higher education by successive governments. Finance for the necessary equipment has been difficult to secure, and this inhibits the schools' ability not only to teach courses leading to professional qualifications but also to provide relevant continuing education activities.

The present government is committed to reducing public expenditure and to compelling educational institutions to raise their income by more effective marketing. The schools of librarianship may have limited scope for contributing to institutional income, but they are unlikely to be completely exempt from a requirement to do so. Meadows has recently provided public confirmation of the schools' present position: "Traditionally the academic departments of library and information studies have provided courses with a 'public service' element. Now they are under increasing pressure to at least break even on their course finances."¹⁷ Leeds Polytechnic faces an institutional target, to be achieved by 1992, of raising 20 percent of its income from continuing education and consultancy work. Sheffield University has set each department a cash target for 1988-89. Four other schools, replying to the survey, mentioned that such developments were under consideration or were imminent.

Given the constraints on their resources and the pressure to raise income, the schools are unlikely to wish to commit themselves to major developments unless they can see some probability of a realistic return for their efforts. The attitudes of the profession toward participation in continuing education in general, and particularly those activities that the schools seem best equipped to offer, do not appear to be encouraging. Funds for continuing education appear limited. Konn summarized the situation: "Lip service has been paid to the idea of continuing education by the profession for decades. Yet, in the United Kingdom, interest in the practical implementation of the concept has been spasmodic and of career significance to a very small proportion of libraries."¹⁸

The enrolments on courses leading to further qualifications are relatively small and may be in decline. The heavy investment of staff time required to establish distance-learning programs suggests that this will be approached with great caution. Recent legislation appears, moreover, to have reduced the potential value to institutions of recruiting distance-learning students. Greater use of modular courses and facilities for credit accumulation and transfer seems likely to be the way ahead, at least for those schools located in the major metropolitan areas, where there are potentially substantial numbers of students able to attend part-time classes.

The government's funding for higher education in Britain provides subsidies for institutions teaching part-time courses leading to degrees and higher degrees but generally not for short courses, even of an advanced nature. There are substantial competitors already established in the short courses field. It seems inevitable that the schools will generally offer short courses only if they can do so in close cooperation with professional bodies or with individual employers to meet specified needs, thus assuring the market for their product.

Present government policy is compelling the schools to become more businesslike in their approach to continuing education activities. The context in which the schools now operate and the priorities they must attach to continuing education have been accepted. "Two obvious reasons for courses are because of a need for training in a particular topic, and in order to make money. Subsidiary reasons also exist, such as the need to satisfy outsiders (and maybe yourself) that your institution is doing something useful."¹⁹

Financial pressures to maximize income may be tempered by professional integrity. There can be no doubt, however, that greater use will be made of marketing techniques to develop an economically viable continuing education program. Until recently it was fair comment to observe that "too little market research is carried out before provision is made." ²⁰ When resources are scarce, however, decisions on the use of those resources must be based on an objective investigation. It is therefore significant that eight of the thirteen schools that responded to the survey had recently conducted their own market research in their immediate catchment area, and four had undertaken research into specific sectors of the professional community throughout the United Kingdom. Most, however, had been concerned primarily to identify needs and suitable venues. Only three had examined attitudes towards changes and assessed the level of funds available. Only three had assessed attitudes towards different methods for delivering continuing education, and only one had examined attitudes toward different providers of continuing education. Nonetheless, most of those schools that had undertaken market research surveys and implemented continuing education activities as a result of their findings expressed themselves well pleased with the outcome in terms of the success of their activities.

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