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The Long and Winding Road

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For some years now, staff in the Library Association Professional Qualifications Department have noticed that, while a proportion of candidates for Associateship of the LA complete the necessary requirements fairly quickly after registering, a significant number follow a quite different pattern. Some take several years to complete; some have still to submit several years after registration; and a number drop out of the registration process completely.

The reasons for such patterns of progression and non-progression were unknown, but it was thought that finance and the possibility of enhanced career progression were significant factors. Supervisors of candidates also seemed to be uncertain as to whether there were particular characteristics that would make a candidate more likely to succeed.

With this in mind, the School of Information and Media at The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen recently conducted a study on behalf of the LA. This aimed to examine the factors that have an impact upon the length of time taken to achieve Associateship, and to gather attitudinal data on the benefits of the qualification, barriers to successful completion, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

The major element of the research was a questionnaire-based survey of four distinct groups:

- those individuals who achieved Associateship during the period March 1998 to March 1999;
- candidates who had registered for Associateship in 1995 but who had not yet submitted their applications;
- individuals who had defaulted or resigned as Associateship candidates during 1999;
- current Associateship supervisors.

A series of brief, follow-up telephone interviews was also conducted with candidates who had not yet completed the Associateship process or who had withdrawn from the process completely.

Overall, the response rate of the questionnaire survey was a valid 38.3% (153 respondents). However, the results may be biased in favour of recently elected Associates (58% response rate) and supervisors (51%) rather than candidates who had not yet completed (30%) and those who had dropped out (14%), who, not surprisingly, were less enthusiastic about completing the questionnaire.

The respondent group reflected a representative sample of the research target, coming from a range of employment sectors, with the academic and public library sectors predominant. The respondents were almost equally split between those that had an undergraduate Librarianship and Information Studies (LIS) qualification (44.4%) and those with a postgraduate LIS qualification (49.7%).

Factors affecting completion of the Associateship process

Readers should be reminded that there are currently two routes available to Associateship candidates: Route A, where candidates must complete at least one year of supervised professional training approved by the LA; and Route B, where candidates can apply for Associateship after completing 2 years' work experience without direct supervision and without following an LA-approved training programme. However, the study found that the choice of route had little impact upon the successful completion of the Chartership process.

For the majority (62.1%) of the recently elected Associates, completion of the process had taken less than two years, although there remained a significant minority of 37.9% who had taken over two years to complete successfully. For those respondents who had not yet completed or who had defaulted, a combination of factors had affected their progress, the most significant of which were: conflicting pressures; lack of time; loss of interest; and poor supervision (see Table 1). These data would suggest that it is not the infrastructure that requires attention, but rather that the benefits of Associateship should be promoted to candidates and employers.

Table 1: Factors affecting completion of the Chartership process

Factor	Not submitted (30 respondents)		Defaulted/ resigned (14 respondents)		Total (44 respondents)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Conflicting pressures	20	66.7	8	57.1	28	63.6
Lack of time	16	53.3	8	57.1	24	54.5
Loss of interest	16	53.3	8	57.1	24	54.5
Poor supervision	13	43.3	5	35.7	18	40.9
Lack of support	10	33.3	6	42.9	16	36.4
Change of career direction	8	26.7	5	35.7	13	29.5
Unclear guidelines	5	16.7	5	35.7	10	22.7
Insufficient information	7	23.3	1	7.1	8	18.2
Career break	3	10.0	2	14.3	5	11.4

There is no time limit attached to completion of the Associateship process, and respondents were generally uncertain as to whether or not this was advantageous. The exception was the group of supervisors, who tended to feel that the lack of a deadline led to decreased motivation (76.5%) and encouraged procrastination (92.3%). Given the supervisors' wider experience, this is a significant finding.

Candidate support

When questioned about the LA's Associateship Regulations and Notes of Guidance, most respondents felt that these were satisfactory, although almost a third felt that they were difficult to understand. Further open comments found fault with the tone taken and the lack of

guidance offered in specific, individual approaches. Other forms of support from the Professional Qualifications Department, such as Associateship workshop events and the telephone enquiry service, elicited criticism during the telephone interviews with the not-yet-complete and withdrawn candidates. Such comment would suggest that a more responsive and 'friendly' service might be provided.

The quality of support provided by the candidate's supervisor would appear to have a material impact upon success. Satisfaction with supervision was significantly higher amongst those recently elected (72.7%) than amongst those not yet submitted (38.9%); and of those respondents who had no supervisor, 48.1% had yet to complete their application or had withdrawn completely. Candidates appreciated regular supervisory meetings with an expert, experienced and interested supervisor.

Those candidates who had still to submit or who had resigned tended to have received less support from their employers, while those that had successfully completed reported more positive experiences. It is perhaps fair to say that employers might also be influential in addressing the problems identified as barriers to completion, such as conflicting pressures and lack of time.

While the vast majority (91.5%) of respondents were aware of the existence of the LA CPD Framework, just 25.4% had actually used it to support their Associateship progression, while almost 20% had found it inappropriate to their needs. Clearly, further exploration is needed to investigate how the Framework might be tailored to fit better with professionals' requirements.

Respondents were not familiar with the detail of the new support scheme for Route B candidates, developed by the Professional Qualifications Department and the Personnel Training and Education Group of the LA. Unsurprisingly, Route B respondents were particularly positive about the idea of this innovation, with 75% believing this would prove beneficial in overcoming the common problem of isolation. Interestingly, a number of respondents felt that a pool of mentors should also be made available to those Route A candidates, who were not being effectively supported by their supervisors.

A significant proportion of the supervisors who responded were relatively inexperienced in the role, with more than half having supervised only one or two candidates. In the majority of instances, supervisors were either solely responsible for devising the training programme or had amended an existing institutional programme. The majority of supervisors (64.7%) had not used the Supervisors' Liaison Network; although of those that had used the Network, the majority was satisfied with the assistance received.

Professional organisation membership and qualifications

The respondents were asked a number of questions relating to the perceived importance of LA membership and of gaining professional qualifications. They tended to value LA membership because of access to job vacancies information (83%), and the opportunity to become chartered (81%) and keep up to date with issues of current concern (71.9%). Joining the LA in order to become chartered was regarded as more important by the recently elected Associates

(82.8%) and supervisors (92.2%) than by those still to complete (70%) and those that had withdrawn (57.1%).

A slight majority (56.2%) felt certain that it was important for information professionals to be chartered, while 17% felt that it was unimportant and a surprisingly high 26.8% were unsure. Interestingly, the male respondents (82.4%) tended to be more convinced about its importance than the females (48.7%).

Associateship was seen as advantageous in that it conferred chartered status and professional recognition. Fewer respondents felt that it had led, or was likely to lead, to an enhanced career, a salary increase or prestige (see Table 2). In all cases, recently elected respondents and supervisors were more conscious of the potential advantages of Associateship.

Table 2: Advantages of Associateship

Advantage	Recently elected (58 resps)		Not submitted (30 resps)		Defaulted/resigned (14 resps)		Supervisors (51 resps)		Total (153 resps)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Chartered status	49	84.5	21	70.0	7	50.0	40	78.4	117	76.5
Professional recognition	36	62.1	14	46.7	1	7.1	43	84.3	94	61.4
Enhanced career	32	55.2	15	50.0	-	-	20	39.2	67	43.8
Post-nominal letters (ALA)	25	43.1	11	36.7	2	14.3	18	35.3	56	36.6
Salary increase	19	32.8	15	50.0	2	14.3	10	19.6	46	30.1
Prestige	12	20.7	5	16.7	1	7.1	6	11.8	24	15.7
No advantages	-	-	2	6.7	6	42.9	-	-	8	5.2

Some individuals felt that the process of attaining chartered status was undemanding, did not relate to professional capacity and was of less interest to employers than it had been. Indeed, surprisingly small numbers of respondents felt that their employer regarded Associateship as essential (9.8%) or very important (15.7%), while a good proportion (40.2%) felt it was not important. This finding is highly significant. Without support from employers, candidates are less likely to complete successfully.

Just under 70% of respondents believed a qualification in library and information studies to be essential or very important to their professional development; but when asked if they felt an academic LIS qualification was more important than professional recognition in terms of their development, only 38.2% believed that this was the case. Instead, a slight majority (53.9%) believed a combination of educational qualification and professional charter to be the preferred option, recognising a complementarity between the two assets.

When asked about their employers' regard for qualifications, the respondents generally believed that employers were more likely to merit academic qualifications (86.2%) rather than professional recognition (45.1%), although, interestingly, professional recognition was felt to be far more important in the public library sector (69.2%) than in academic libraries (31.5%).

Continuing Professional Development

The vast majority of respondents were interested in their personal continuing professional development (93.5%), with 85.4% believing that CPD was important for their careers. A large proportion (85%) read professional literature as part of their CPD. Between a half and two thirds attended external seminars/courses, networked with colleagues and engaged in internal training. Just over a third were involved in professional activities, such as committee work, and were members of electronic discussion lists (more commonly in the academic sector). Only small numbers were engaged in seeking further academic qualifications or professional/vocational qualifications.

A slight majority (54.2%) felt that CPD should not be compulsory, citing: their belief in the individual's freedom of choice; differing levels of personal ambition and motivation; conflicting pressures; and concerns over the penalties that might be imposed for not participating in this compulsory activity. Some suggested that a system of reward rather than a compulsory approach should be preferred. Those that believed that CPD should be compulsory (41.2%) justified their belief on the basis that CPD is essential in maintaining currency of skills and that CPD is compulsory in other professions, such as law and medicine.

When asked for their thoughts on how their employers viewed CPD, most believed that their employer saw CPD as being necessary all of the time (38.2%) or sometimes (34.3%). Only 10.8% felt that their employer regarded CPD as unnecessary. A slight majority (53.9%) of the respondents believed that CPD should be the responsibility of both the employer and the employee, while 39.2% felt that responsibility should lie solely with the employee.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the research team has made a number of recommendations:

- further research into attitudes to Associateship amongst employers should be undertaken;
- a promotional campaign should be undertaken to increase awareness of the advantages of Associateship and its role in CPD, aimed both at prospective candidates and employers;
- the mentor network should be made available to Route A candidates;
- candidates exceeding a three-year period of registration should be required to submit a progress report and schedule for completion of the Associateship process;
- LA support should seek to be more responsive to candidates' individual circumstances and to adopt a 'friendlier' tone;
- the LA CPD Framework should be revised to be more relevant to a variety of career paths;
- a mechanism for notification of poor supervision should be put in place;
- compulsory approaches to CPD should be further investigated and debate take place between the professional association, members and employers

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