Never the twain shall meet? : professional and paraprofessional LIS education and training in a changing information environment

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Introduction

This paper reports on aspects of a comparative study of first level library and/or information science (LIS) qualifications offered at South African universities and technikons. The study was conducted in 2002. The qualifications that were the focus of the study included:

- the National Diploma: Library and Information Studies (ND: LIS);
- the Bachelor of Technology: Library and Information Studies (B.Tech.(LIS));
- the Post-graduate Diploma in Library and/or Information Science; and
- the Bachelor of Library and Information Science (B.Bibl.) or equivalent four-year university degree.

The study surveyed the views of employers, past students and educators in the LIS field regarding these qualifications and their relevance to the LIS services work environment. It resulted in a number of conclusions some which included:

- The study supports the view that general education as provided by a university bachelor's degree distinguishes between professional and paraprofessional LIS education and training;
- The study confirms that the university Post-graduate Diploma in Library and/or Information Science and the B.Bibl. (or equivalent four-year university degree) are established professional LIS qualifications in South Africa;
- While the technikon national diploma is generally viewed as a paraprofessional qualification, LIS services employers are not using this qualification in its paraprofessional context with paraprofessional post designations and career progressions separate from designations for clerical staff;

- The technikon B.Tech.(LIS) cannot be viewed as a professional LIS qualification as it lacks general education. Furthermore, it is a qualification in the hierarchy of paraprofessional LIS qualifications that runs parallel to the professional LIS career path and thus the B.Tech.(LIS) is not a step in the direction of LIS professionalism. It is part of an alternative career direction;
- In view of the traditional purpose of technikon education and training *vis-á-vis* university education and training, limited general education and not extended general education is necessary in the technikon LIS curriculum.

In the time allotted to me this morning, I hope to provide some of the empirical and/or philosophical bases for these conclusions. I hope to do this under the following heads:
- General education;
- Post-graduate Diploma and the B.Bibl. or equivalent four-year university degree;
- National Diploma: Library and Information Studies (ND: LIS);
- Bachelor of Technology: Library and Information Studies (B.Tech.(LIS));
- National Qualifications Framework; and
- Traditional purpose of university and technikon education and training in South Africa.

General education

Today general education, also referred to as liberal arts education, is usually provided by means of any university bachelor's degree (including one in the sciences and other disciplines) and incorporates specific subject and discipline based knowledge. The aim is to provide the individual with a broad base of knowledge.

In South Africa and internationally it has become a general trend that professional LIS education and training is established at the graduate level. There have been various arguments over the years in the literature as to why a bachelor's degree is considered to be an important part of professional LIS education and training. Shera (1972: 327-

329), believed that librarianship must draw from and be sustained by the three great branches of human knowledge, that is, the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences, which comprise the several faculties of a university. According to Shera, through an understanding of the historical development, the current state, the methodology and the critical appraisal of each of these areas, the student will acquire the wisdom and intellectual capacity required for the formation of sound judgements.

The majority of employers and educators surveyed believe that general education as provided by a university bachelor's degree is essential in the provision of an efficient LIS service in most contexts. Responses here included: "Human and social sciences and even natural sciences provide a good foundation on which professional education is built"; "Information work not only requires 'techniques' but also general and subject knowledge to deal with in-depth consultation and guidance"(Raju 2002: 178, 274). These findings correlate with the literature that has stressed the importance of general education in professional LIS education and training. It is also important to point out that both educators and employers surveyed have identified general education offered by universities as an important difference between university and technikon LIS qualifications. For some employer and educator respondents it is general education that distinguishes between professional and paraprofessional posts in an LIS service, as one educator respondent pointed out: "General education provides a clear distinction between professional and paraprofessional posts in a library and differentiates level of expertise, responsibility and accountability in these posts" (Raju 2002: 277).

The literature too identifies this distinction. Froehlich (1998: 447) points out that what seems to be the basis of discrimination between professionals and paraprofessionals is that of being trained with a strong intellectual component. That is, professionals, having secured a bachelor's degree, have acquired and mastered the intellectual technologies that form the value-added processes of information work such as classification, abstracting, indexing and accessing appropriate resources. Wilson and Hermanson (1998: 482) also make reference to this difference when they point out

that the principles of librarianship only have full professional significance when they are related to a broad background knowledge of other subject matter as a librarian does not perform any of his/her skills in a vacuum and that without this academic background the application of techniques in librarianship is simply a matter of skill and training, that is, it is technical and not professional.

Paraprofessional LIS education and training, which takes place in most countries, including South Africa, at the under-graduate level, is generally located in non-university higher education institutions, and generally lacks the broad base of knowledge or general education afforded by a bachelor's degree. According to the literature as well as some employer and educator respondents in the study, it is general education that differentiates between professionals and paraprofessionals in LIS services. I would like to extend this a bit further by arguing that it is general education and the conceptual level at which professional LIS education and training is provided as opposed to the practical, hands-on level at which paraprofessional LIS education and training is provided, that differentiates between these two types of education and training. Kerkham (1988: 7-8), who was instrumental in designing the first LIS paraprofessional curriculum in this country, pointed out that while the LIS professional engages in planning, development, design, evaluation and therefore needs to be competent in skills such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis, the LIS paraprofessional engages in the application of known techniques and principles, in the organisation and supervision of systems designed by professionals and therefore needs to be competent in skills such as comprehension, application and communication. On these empirical and philosophical bases the study concludes that general education and the conceptual learning associated with it distinguishes between professional and paraprofessional LIS education and training.

The Post-graduate Diploma and the B.Bibl. or equivalent four-year university degree

The study revealed a significant number of staff members in LIS services holding these qualifications are assigned professional posts. This is not surprising as these are, according to the literature, established professional LIS qualifications in South Africa. Both employer and educator respondents indicated that posts of librarian (including subject librarian, reference librarian and senior categories of librarians such as senior librarian, branch librarian and head librarian or director) are largely the types of posts that should constitute professional job titles.

National Diploma: Library and Information Studies (ND: LIS)

Job contents provided by employers revealed that the technikon national diploma is being utilised by many LIS services employers as a qualification requirement for support positions, especially that of senior library assistant.

Both employers and educators surveyed indicated that the posts of library assistant, senior library assistant and library technician are largely the types of posts that should constitute paraprofessional job titles. Furthermore employers surveyed have indicated that they would place individuals holding the national diploma in paraprofessional entry-level posts thus reaffirming that this qualification has become established as a paraprofessional LIS qualification in South Africa as revealed by the literature and by job contents provided by employers.

However, the problem of a lack of post descriptions to accommodate the qualification pointed out by Van Aswegen (1997), still persists. Employers seem to have gradually recognised the value of this qualification in especially technically oriented areas of LIS services, but still have made no attempt to create career ladders in LIS service staff structures for paraprofessionals. Instead they continue to use designations such as library assistant and senior library assistant for which the qualification requirement

has traditionally been a matriculation senior certificate. This not only keeps salary structures for a particular category of staff who have received specific LIS education and training that distinguishes them from clerical staff, at the lowest levels in the organisation, but also demonstrates a lack of clarity among LIS services employers that the technikon national diploma is a paraprofessional qualification with a distinct career path for the holder of the qualification.

LIS professional bodies in the United States, Canada and Australia officially recognise library technicians as LIS paraprofessional staff with a distinct career structure in LIS services. LIASA can, by similar action, influence the way employers view this category of staff. It could, for example, create a membership category for paraprofessionals as has happened in Australia. Diplomates too can help themselves out of this situation by organising themselves into structures such as paraprofessional interest groups, staff associations or even unions that can be used to lobby for career ladders in LIS services as their counterparts have done with much success in the United States, Canada and especially Australia.

Bachelor of Technology: Library and Information Studies (B.Tech.(LIS))

While the literature points out that there is uncertainty regarding whether the B.Tech.(LIS) should be regarded as a professional LIS qualification, findings in the survey of employers point to a trend towards the acceptance by some LIS services employers of the B.Tech.(LIS) as a professional LIS qualification warranting the designation of the job title librarian. However, the large percentage of employers surveyed (67.1%) that indicated that they did not have staff members with the B.Tech.(LIS) qualification points to the uncertainty referred to in the literature regarding this qualification. It would seem that many LIS services employers are not employing these graduates, as they are unsure about how to view this four-year technikon degree qualification *vis-á-vis* the four-year university LIS qualifications.

Job contents provided by employers revealed just two or three instances where the B.Tech.(LIS) is made a qualification requirement for specific posts in LIS services. Job contents provided also revealed that the two or three LIS services that indicated this qualification as a requirement for a professional position appear to be technikon libraries that could possibly be supporting technikon qualifications. It remains to be seen if this spreads to other types of LIS services such as university libraries and public libraries. However, when LIS services employers surveyed were asked in what type of entry-level post they would place individuals holding the B.Tech.(LIS), the majority of respondents indicated that they would place them in professional entry-level posts. I view uncertainties regarding the B.Tech.(LIS) reflected in the literature and uncertainties and inconsistencies regarding this qualification in the findings among employers surveyed, as being the result of a general lack of clarity, especially among employers, on the issue that professionalism and paraprofessionalism are parallel career paths. Kerkham (1988: 8), a pioneer of the concept of LIS paraprofessionalism in South Africa, was very clear that paraprofessionalism in LIS services should be seen as a "parallel career option" and not "*per se* a step in the direction of professionalism". I believe that because of the lack of career ladders for paraprofessionals in LIS services as already discussed, B.Tech.(LIS) graduates are pushing for professional status and equivalence of the B.Tech.(LIS) qualification with the four-year university qualifications which are, in terms of the literature and international trends, established professional LIS qualifications.

I would like to suggest that employers should use the natural downshifting of roles resulting largely from advancing technology, as opportunities to establish paraprofessional post designations and career progressions in their organisations. For example, a general trend reflected in the literature is that many tasks traditionally reserved for professionals, that is, librarians, are now being done by paraprofessionals. This is particularly so in those areas of librarianship and information work, for example cataloguing, circulation, acquisitions and periodicals, that have become more technical, especially with the use of technology, with less need for the interpretive skills of a librarian. Systems librarianship and information work, where IT

aspects dominate, is yet another area to which the technikon trained graduate is well suited.

Hence the study concludes that the technikon B.Tech.(LIS) cannot be viewed as a professional LIS qualification as it is a qualification in the hierarchy of paraprofessional LIS qualifications that runs parallel to the professional LIS career path. Furthermore, it lacks general education.

Wilson and Hermanson (1998) make the useful suggestion that students, while still at LIS education and training institutions, should be taught the fundamental difference between professionalism and paraprofessionalism in the LIS services context, so that in the work environment both would be aware of each other's strength and roles and the nature of their working relationship. However, it is also important that an education system should allow for articulation between professionalism and paraprofesionalism giving one the opportunity to satisfy certain requirements before 'crossing over' to LIS professionalism if one so desires.

<u>National Qualifications Framework</u>

And indeed there have been attempts in the South African higher education system to house all higher education qualifications in a single co-ordinated framework so that such articulation can be facilitated. However, it is important to understand that the 2001 New Academic Policy document from the Council on Higher Education (Council on Higher Education 2001: 37-38) points out that that the pegging of two qualifications at the same NQF level does not mean that they are equal or even equivalent. It simply means that the programmes leading to these qualifications engage with comparable levels of complexity of learning. This is why the concept of horizontal and diagonal articulation (refer to *Appendix*) is necessary to facilitate articulation between programmes and qualifications that may differ widely in nature and scope. In such cases further learning might be required before a learner's exit learning articulates with the entry requirement of a target programme, and vertical

progression on the framework may be resumed. This concept has important implications for the articulation of LIS programmes between university and technikon education and training that have different foci (the former a practical focus and the latter a conceptual focus).

Thus while, for example, the B.Tech.(LIS) and the B.Bibl./B.Inf. may be pegged at NQF level 8, PG1 (refer to *Appendix*), they are not necessarily equivalent. They may differ in nature and scope and articulation requirements may apply. However, one needs to bear in mind when applying LIS qualifications to this framework that education and training structures such as the proposed higher education framework are very much in a state of transition. In fact we are currently awaiting the release of a new academic policy document now that the last one has gone through its consultative process and changes and adjustments have been suggested by various interested groups and individuals.

Traditional purpose of university and technikon education and training in South Africa

Traditionally in this country technikons have focused on technological and vocational preparation and universities on general education and lifelong learning. In the words of the Department of National Education (1988: 22-33), "The technikon concentrates on…training in and practice of technology…and…the specific side of the spectrum of vocational preparation. The university concentrates on… training in and practice of science…and…mainly the general side of the spectrum of vocational preparation." There have been suggestions for technikon LIS education and training to incorporate general education in the form of scholarly subjects as general education provides the basis of good service.

The inclusion of scholarly subjects into the technikon curriculum, in my opinion, leads to a duplication of programmes, that is, universities and technikons offering the same type of programmes. The former has some general education, in the form of

languages, Human Studies, Literature Studies, etc. but not to the extent of university LIS education and training. The study suggests that perhaps in view of the traditional difference between university and technikon education and training, it is only limited general education that is necessary in the technikon curriculum. In-depth general education involving subject-based knowledge is not necessary at the paraprofessional level of training. In fact one of the employer respondents in the study warned that "aspirations of matching university curricula may cause technikon qualifications to end up falling between the cracks", lacking both their current competitive advantage of technical competence and a broad-based education (Raju 2002: 317).

The South African Education Ministry too in its *National plan for higher education* comments that technikons are currently contributing significantly to the human resource needs of the country. For this reason the Ministry proposes to continue to recognise, in the short-to-medium term, "the broad function and mission of universities and technikons as two types of institutions offering different kinds of higher education programmes" (Ministry of Education 2001: 51-52). This position of the Ministry reiterates the need to maintain the two different types of education and training, that is, both university and technikon education and training each have a role to play in South African economy and society. The study therefore argues that in view of the difference in the purposes of university and technikon education and training, it is not necessary to incorporate in-depth general education into the technikon LIS curriculum but limited general education is necessary as general education does enhance delivery of service in the LIS services environment.

Conclusion

I hope that my presentation this morning has provided some of the empirical and philosophical bases for why the 'twain shall not meet' in LIS professional and paraprofessional education and training in this changing information environment.

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A Qualifications Framework for Higher Education

NQF Levels	HE Sub-levels	(Cumulative minimum totals) & minimum credits per qualification	General — Vertical articulation		Articulation — Horizontal & diagonal articulation	Career-focused — Vertical articulation	
8	PG 4	(1020) 360	Doctor of Philosophy (360 @ PG4)			Doctor of Philosophy, Professional Doctorate (360 @ PG4)	
8	PG 3	(660) 180	Research Master's Degree (120 @ PG3)	Structured Master's Degree (60 @ PG3)		Research Master's Degree (120 @ PG3)	Structured Master's Degree (60 @ PG3)
8	PG 2	(600) 180/ 120		Master's Diploma (120 @ PG2)	Master's Certificate (72 @ PG2) (articulation credits)	Master's Diploma (120 @ PG2)	Professional Master's Degree (180 @ PG2)
8	PG 1	(480) 480/ 120	Bachelor Honours Degree (120 @ PG1)	General Postgraduate Diploma (120 @ PG1)	Postgraduate Certificate (72 @ PG1) (articulation credits)	Advanced Career-focused Bachelor's Degree, [e.g.B Tech] (120 @ PG1)	Career-focused Postgraduate Diploma (120 @ PG1)
7		(360) 360/ 120	General Bachelor's Degree (120 @ 7)		Graduate Certificate (72 @ 7) (articulation credits)	Career-focused Bachelor's Degree (120 @ 7)	
6		(240) 240	General Diploma (90 @ 6)		(articulation credits)	Career-focused Diploma (90 @ 6)	
5		(120) 120			Foundation Certificate (72 @ 5)	Career-focused Certificate (72 @ 5)	
4		(120) 120	FETC (72 @ 4)		Bridging Certificate (72 @ 4)	FETC (72 @ 4)	

(Council on Higher Education 2001: 30)