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# Career Development in African Librarianship

PAUL STURGES

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## ABSTRACT

African librarians need to embrace enormous changes in technology and in social and economic circumstances during the course of their careers, but the methods that the profession should use to renew itself are not clear. At present the emphasis is on the possession of diplomas and degrees, but there is no special reason to believe that adding a second (master's) degree to a bachelor's in LIS appreciably increases the professional expertise of an individual library worker. Furthermore, the PhD (now increasingly sought) is a research degree and of debatable relevance for most kinds of higher library posts. It is argued in this paper that continuing professional development (CPD) is more capable of delivering the necessary new skills and professional orientation. The profession, through its library associations, needs to discuss the problems of career development with policymakers; persuade employers to modify their qualification-based appointment and promotion requirements; and encourage and support professional associations in providing more CPD opportunities.

## INTRODUCTION

A career in librarianship in Africa has never been an easy option. The distinctive features of African society and the problems associated with development have always demanded imagination and willingness to innovate from those who work with information. The difficulty has grown, not diminished, with the massive changes now experienced in the global information economy. Computerization of library functions during the 1970s and '80s and responses to the availability of information via the internet during the 1990s and 2000s demand a very different profession from that of the previous decades of the twentieth century. It is fair to

say that African librarians must be willing to embrace change during the course of their careers at least as much as, and probably more than, their counterparts in the industrialized countries. Yet, even if we accept this as true, there is still a great deal of room for discussion and dispute over just what methods the profession should use to change and renew itself.

This paper will address the ways in which a librarian can build a successful career in Africa: with success defined first as contributing to the provision of high-quality and appropriate service to users; and second as the obtaining of prestigious and well-rewarded posts. The route to both of these goals should be the same: the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that form the basis of professional expertise. In pursuing the question as to how librarians acquire professional expertise, the paper will build on three main sources. These are: first, insights acquired from personal involvement with African librarianship as a teacher, researcher, writer, and curriculum advisor during the last thirty years (most recently as a consultant and facilitator for a program of curriculum-development workshops provided by INASP); second, a reading of relevant literature, with some attention paid to less formal sources, such as blog content; and third, the information about educational and training programs on institutional websites. In summary, this paper contains facts, but it is based to a significant extent on opinions, particularly those of the author. Although the title refers to Africa, most of the content applies more specifically to Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa, and does so in a way that leaves enormous scope for exceptions, variations, and possibly even misrepresentations to be identified. The author accepts the risk.

### CAREER DEVELOPMENT: THE BACKGROUND

The first thing we need to note is that policies and ideas on the career development of library and information science (LIS) professionals in Africa have been a matter of considerable confusion. To explain this, one must turn to the history of LIS education and training in Africa. A collection of essays on different countries, such as that of Wise (2000), or a shorter though more contentious treatment of the history and issues by Sturges, Burnett, and Dick (in press) provide background and arguments. To put the problem succinctly, one can say that while institutions depend on the experience and know-how of their staff for their effectiveness, these aspects often seem to have been taken for granted and neglected as criteria for professional advancement. A systemic disconnection between effectiveness and reward has arguably undermined the profession ever since independent African countries took the responsibility for their own public services from colonial administrations. During this period, now more than half-a-century long in most cases, promotion criteria have focused on certificates, diplomas, and degrees. There is a clear assumption that different qualification levels relate to identifiable levels of responsibility

and the posts and gradings that attach to them. This has virtues: a well-educated profession should be an alert and adaptable profession; and appointment on the basis of independently certified qualifications reduces the scope for corrupt hiring and promotion processes. However, over the years, this has led to an assumption that professionals regularly need new LIS degrees to update their knowledge and establish their worthiness for promotion.

At the same time, continuing professional development (CPD) has been comparatively neglected. Definitions of CPD generally describe it as the systematic maintenance, improvement, and broadening of knowledge and skills. It is closely connected with the concept of lifelong learning and covers the broadest range of technical and professional topics that might be relevant to a career. CPD can be structured or unstructured. Examples of structured CPD activities include participating in courses, seminars, lectures, conferences, workshops, and web-based seminars or e-learning; unstructured CPD activities include reading materials like web content, newspaper and magazine articles, videos, and private study. In effect, CPD gives a name to what any committed professional does without thinking twice about it. Good employing institutions accept a responsibility to facilitate their employees' CPD. Professional associations provide structures that help in an individual's planning of activities, and in many cases will accredit the learning evidenced by the activities. The IFLA Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning (CPDWL) section takes an important lead, and its documentation on CPD principles and best practice is a good starting point for understanding how CPD can be encouraged and facilitated. The intention of this paper is to clarify the relationship between education and training, and in particular the role of CPD, with the aim of drawing lessons for African government ministries and agencies, employers, professional associations, educational institutions, professional trainers, and, not least, individual library and information workers.

### TRAINING AND EDUCATION

A considerable part of the problem with career development in African LIS stems from a common confusion over the distinction between *training* and *education* that is particularly prevalent in Africa. If we look first at training, it takes various forms. There is basic training that instructs someone in how to work within the set of existing practices of an institution. This is important, but existing practices can be quirky, and plenty of libraries have trained their employees in strange and nontransferable routines. In some cases, an eager school-leaver might obtain great basic training in a library, but in other cases get an induction into the weird and wonderful mindset of an eccentric chief librarian. Then, there is generic training provided at the college level for existing and potential library employees.

These college (and university) programs are at the subdegree level and usually last for one or two academic years and reward successful students with certificates or diplomas; they provide greater breadth of knowledge than in-house training and set library praxis (acquisitions, cataloging, care of materials, and so on) in a certain amount of context. Such programs were the first types of formal teaching of librarianship in most African countries in the years after library education was debated at the Ibadan Seminar on Public Libraries in 1953 (UNESCO, 1954). These programs' temporary dominance of the scene created a body of competent library workers, who quite quickly began to feel that their contribution should be recognized through promotion and better pay.

At the same time, graduates in various subjects were being recruited and sent for postgraduate diploma and masters' degree courses in Europe and North America. Later, during the late 1980s and '90s, bachelors' degrees in LIS were offered by increasing numbers of African universities. These graduates and postgraduates filled the middle and senior ranks in libraries, placed over the heads of their locally trained colleagues and reinforcing the distinction between trained and educated librarians. Although one can sympathize with the hundreds of highly competent and ambitious library clerks and assistants, it is true that these graduates were educated in the profession *in a way that they were not*. Yet, the university programs that were, and should be, structured to provide education have been referred to over and over again as "training." Why does this happen? Employers must take most of the responsibility for this confusion. There is a tendency for them to complain that the new graduates they employ are a problem because they are not trained in LIS practice (meaning *their own* particular set of practices). Graduates in LIS are indeed not trained until they join a library's staff, and it should not be expected that they will be trained before they are recruited. That said, the education of graduates can be expected to enable them to be quickly and easily trained in the practices of their employing institutions; they should also be able to contribute a critique that will result in the improvement of those practices. Because employers insist on talking as if people with degrees in LIS should come to them trained as well as educated, they devalue both training and education. What is more, as will be argued below, they undermine the significance of CPD.

### QUALIFICATION-BASED CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The confusion between *training* and *education* has further dimensions. Staff, both trained and formally educated, face the rigid, qualification-based employment structures common in African institutions. Qualifications equal promotion, but experience and know-how sometimes seem to equal virtually nothing. Ambitious, experienced, and well-trained junior staff members, even if their training has been college-based, are obliged

to look to a bachelor's degree program in LIS to "qualify" them for promotion. One might think that if the college-trained staff had had access to systems of well-structured and monitored CPD, they could perhaps be treated as serious candidates for more senior posts. However, it is necessary to admit that the systems are so rigid that even exposure to good CPD would be unlikely to budge them. The actual situation is that ambitious library workers who might have a one-year certificate and/or a two-year diploma face a three- or four-degree program (if they can get access the finances to enroll). The sheer length and expense of such study is problem enough, but additionally, the content of any LIS bachelor's degree renders it unsuitable as a further qualification for certificate or diploma holders. Trained staff who have certificates and diplomas are too familiar with basic LIS content, both practically and academically, for further study in the subject to be appropriate. What they need most is to study some quite different subjects to stimulate their minds and broaden their horizons. If they wish to study further, they should be encouraged to take a program in a different discipline.

This is not the whole extent of the problem. There are significant numbers of LIS professionals who have two or more formal qualifications in the subject, and there are universities that offer qualifications at a number of different levels with the intention that students can take more than one program. This leads to the subdivision of LIS content into basic modules, advanced modules, and specialized modules, which inevitably results in repetition of material that could be comfortably mastered at a student's first exposure to it. The simple truth is that one- or two-year's study, at whatever level, will enable a good student to cover all that should be necessary to enter into a successful career-track in the LIS world. Studying more than one program in LIS is at its best ineffective and at its worst damaging to imagination and independent thinking. Yet, this is perpetuated by the structural barriers in the staffing regulations of institutions that reserve professional posts for bachelors' degree holders and more senior posts for the holders of masters' degrees and even doctorates.

What is vital is that those completing a degree in LIS, at whatever level, have some substantial knowledge of other subject areas. Non-LIS content should be, and indeed generally is, part of a bachelors' degree. The problem spreads to masters' degrees in LIS when bachelors' degree holders in LIS are obliged or encouraged to enroll for masters' degrees. Students taking LIS masters' programs should be graduates of another discipline—any other discipline. Their masters' program will allow them a fairly short though entirely adequate time to learn the basics of LIS, and even to specialize a bit. When a LIS undergraduate degree holder feels the need for a further program of study, it should be in a different discipline. The library and information world does not need professionals whose educational background has been more or less totally confined to a narrow and re-

petitive study of LIS; the sector calls for outward-looking and imaginative professionals who understand and also have a qualification in another subject. Information and communication technology, as in the University of Pretoria's two-year Masters in Information Technology (reported by Dick [2012]), adult education, and business administration are particularly appropriate. In summary, we would argue that the possession of more than one LIS degree is not a good basis for an individual's professional growth in the library and information sector; it is not training and not progressive educationally.

### THE LIS PHD

The PhD in LIS deserves special attention in this context. Many graduates of all subjects harbor a desire for doctoral study. This is admirable if it represents their personal desire for intellectual fulfillment and possibly an academic career; in fact, what we have in many cases is a vague personal desire to become known as "doctor," compounded by a structural demand for PhDs at the top of the profession. Many employers, particularly in national and academic libraries, now set the holding of a doctorate as a major requirement for the more senior posts, particularly that of director. This encourages professionals to desire the PhD itself, rather than being eager for the distinctive type of study that such a program should involve. With this in mind, it is worth examining in a bit more detail the doctorates in LIS careers. The story begins during the 1920s and '30s in the United States, when PhD programs in LIS were first offered. The classic account of these early years is by Danton (1959) in which he made a case for the PhD based on the evidence of those already awarded. He regarded several of the existing theses as significant contributions to knowledge and argued that the research skills the new doctors had learned had often been used in further research. He was also able to point to the benefits for the teaching of LIS in universities from having staff members with doctorates. On the other hand, he drew attention to some research that had not proved useful, and also to the lack of innovation in the doctoral programs. One could certainly read Danton as being positive about the PhD, although in a distinctly cautious way.

The problem of justifying the PhD has persisted. One of the most persuasive treatments of the question is a 2004 conference paper by Macaulay. Central to his case is that even if the PhD does not necessarily involve research that changes the profession, it does enhance the skills of the researcher. He regards doctoral programs as producing successful candidates with very high levels of research skills and information literacy. This is very much a *training*, as opposed to an education line of argument, and one might question the value for money involved in a minimum of three years of full-time study to enhance the professional skills of people who have already had one, and very probably two long periods of academic

study in LIS. But even if the investment looks economically questionable, a flow of highly skilled and qualified people into the top ranks of the profession seems good in its own right. There is some scope for doubt about this because the classic mode of the PhD is purely a research degree, which could be seen to foster a rather impractical, academic attitude, one arguably capable of unfitting professionals for administrative or management posts. Similar lines of argument were part of the substance of a fairly recent debate in the blogosphere, which is linked to the name of Jeff Trzeciak, who was university librarian at McMaster University in Canada from 2006 to 2012.

In a public presentation, Trzeciak referred to his preference for appointing new staff with PhDs or IT qualifications to professional posts in the library. A minor blogstorm resulted, and the posts make useful reading. The best starting point is Dupuis (2011), who lists more than a hundred posts for and, most commonly, against Trzeciak in the first week after his presentation. Much of the outrage was because Trzeciak was not even referring to LIS PhDs, but to PhDs in other academic subjects. In effect, to many commentators he seemed to be comprehensively devaluing librarianship in favor of subject expertise. Some of the protests were simply squeals of pain from librarians who felt that they and their entire profession were being insulted. In fairness to Trzeciak, he was explicitly seeking a means to upgrade the library at McMaster that had become, in his words, a “book warehouse.” It is not necessary to agree with him to see that he might have reason to accuse formally educated and trained librarians of responsibility for a stagnant view of what a library should be in an age of swift technical change. Indeed, it could be argued that LIS programs from certificates and diplomas through to PhDs tend to perpetuate a static view of the profession. Unfair though this might be, it is a criticism that has to be answered—the quality and appropriateness of programs is a genuine issue.

On the issue of *quality*, there is something that should be said about LIS PhDs now that they are offered by universities throughout the world. Published hints as to a problem are rare, but Satija’s (2010) caustic critique of quality in the Indian subcontinent is an important exception. He describes Indian LIS research as a desert in which PhD candidates fail to identify worthwhile problems or develop hypotheses, preferring instead to review existing conditions and survey the literature. Most damaging, he accuses supervisors and examiners of colluding to pass each other’s students regardless of quality. The author’s own experience of examining PhDs from British, European, African, and South Asian universities offers some support to this view. This personal sample (with all the admitted fallibility of unsystematic data acquisition) includes some theses that have been a delight to read—well-researched, with revealing conclusions—and others that could be called “respectable.” There has also been disgustingly

bad work that is quite unfit to be examined, including one thesis (from India) that was merely a hundred pages of long quotations from irrelevant and out-of-date books. This personal sample also offers some evidence of a recessive effect on quality as directors of research and supervisors whose own PhDs were acceptable though weak go on to accept standards from their own students that are even further diluted. For example, ten or twenty years ago, the present writer examined a thesis by a doctoral candidate from a British university and passed it, but with some reservations. More recently, that same doctor in LIS, now a lecturer, has supervised a thesis that shows the same weaknesses as his own research, but amplified to worrying levels.

The conclusion is that all PhDs are not equal in quality, but distressingly they tend to be treated as if they were. Possibly in response to a perception of this, there has been a tendency for universities to weight the doctoral program very heavily with required modules from the subject area. This subverts the nature of the PhD—the only taught elements of which should be research methods modules. This kind of semitaught doctorate is only a little more than another LIS degree designed to serve the “training” needs of employing institutions. Arguably, we have a process whereby the unreasonable appointment and promotion requirements of institutions increase the demand for doctorates but undermine the standing of the degrees themselves. A side effect of the process is that many perfectly good professionals are obliged to undertake a form of higher study for which they are so unfit that it makes their lives a misery for three or more years. There is definitely a LIS PhD question here that needs addressing by the responsible government departments and agencies, libraries of all kinds, universities, and the profession itself.

### CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

It is undeniable that updating professional knowledge is imperative in the fast-changing professional environment. The contention here is that CPD has been a kind of missing link in the updating structure for the LIS profession in Africa. To recapitulate, CPD is the means by which individual professionals take responsibility for expanding and updating their knowledge and skills. They do this through a self-directed mixture of activities, such as reading professional publications; attending conferences, short courses, and workshops; getting involved with professional activities beyond their workplace; and even doing some research and writing. To assist with this process, professional associations should be expected not merely to produce publications and organize events and short courses but also to advise and mentor aspiring professionals. Unfortunately, in developing countries, professional associations are usually weak because of their small membership base and consequently unable to offer a full range of activities. This no longer needs to be the case. IFLA's Building Strong Library



Associations (BSLA) program is seeking to assist local associations to enhance their capacity. A strong library association, almost by definition, is one that promotes and supports CPD.

While there has been limited help for organized private study, opportunities for independent study have also been limited. The author remembers many years ago meeting an ambitious young information worker in a remote village in Malawi who was pressing on with a distance course from the University of South Africa. The only source of light in his home by which he could read in the evenings was a Tilley lamp. Yet, he, like many others, was bravely ensuring that he benefited from the opportunities provided by what has been the most significant institution for independent learners in the continent. Today, the internet is widely available in Africa, often via mobile devices, and it is not unrealistic to speak of the wealth of publications and courses, including massive online open courses (MOOCs), that can be accessed. Providers include not only universities and colleges worldwide but also NGOs and commercial training organizations.

As examples of the range of content offered (although not to suggest that these examples are better or more appropriate than any others), we can cite LISolutions, the Education Institute, WebJunction, Sirsi Dynix, Infopeople, and many others. Again, as only an example, LISolutions offers basic IT training, courses on electronic cataloging systems, library automation, open source, digitization, information retrieval, and more advanced technical aspects. This is reasonably typical of others, which among them offer many choices, often obtainable without charge. Possibly, the pinnacle of what is on offer in Africa is the Department of Information Science, the University of Pretoria's four-week residential program for qualified librarians, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Sadly, it is only on offer to target countries (Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda). The program concentrates on current and emerging ITs, particularly those that support and enable researchers; its content includes social media, mobile technology, open scholarship and open science, digitization, cloud services, and virtual research environments.

If one compares these offerings with what appears in the brochure for a LIS degree, on the surface there might not seem to be a great deal of difference. Yet, the difference is enormous. CPD programs are accessible in a way that residential degree programs are not, and they are an agile solution to the problem of updating knowledge. Now, most CPD can be done at home. In contrast, a degree program is usually available only after months consumed by the application process, and can then be commenced only on a fixed admission date. Quite simply, by the time the content is taught, it tends to be appreciably out of date. What is more, there are considerable limits to the extent to which the content of a degree can be customized for individual students' needs. If the issue is how to produce effective and

up-to-date library and information professionals, there is no substitute for CPD. Degree programs have their place as an initial qualification for work at a professional level but all too often are treated as if they are a means of updating knowledge and skills, when, in fact, they are much more a means of measuring the academic qualities of the individual.

## CONCLUSION

We initially defined career success as, first, good effect, and second, reward. At present, employment structures pay too little attention to the good effect of a professional's work and are skewed toward the possession of diplomas and degrees. This diverts librarians into long periods of formal study, arguably at the expense of practical engagement. Certainly, it marginalizes CPD as a means of career development. It might seem that the central problem lies with the universities and colleges that provide LIS training and education. But this is not really the case because the educational institutions have obligations to respond to government policy and employer and student demands. Creating a rational and appropriate structure of LIS qualifications in response to this demand is a high priority and very much a cooperative enterprise. What the profession, through its library associations and other professional bodies, needs to do is explain the problems to policymakers; persuade employers to modify their appointment and promotion requirements; and encourage and support professional associations in providing CPD opportunities. Out of such a process should come a set of LIS qualifications that genuinely fits the needs of the profession as a whole, and the means to bring as rich a variety of CPD opportunities as possible to as many library and information workers as possible. What is more, this is not merely the best solution; because it involves much less full-time study, it is a cheaper solution.

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Paul Sturges, professor emeritus, Loughborough University and Professor Extraordinary, University of Pretoria, has traveled widely throughout the world giving lectures and conference presentations, leading workshops on intellectual freedom topics, providing consultancy, and researching. His more than 200 articles, reviews, reports, and books deal with a variety of issues in information science, with an emphasis on the developing world, a strong specialization in the ethics of information, and a recent focus on curriculum development. He was chair of the IFLA Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) committee during 2003–2009, and since 2012 has been a consultant to the Curriculum Development Project of INASP (International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications) workshops in Malawi, Vietnam, Tanzania, and Kenya. He was made Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2010 for services to libraries in the United Kingdom and overseas, and in the following year was awarded the IFLA medal.