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PRACTICUMS AS PART OF STUDY PROGRAMMES IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES

ABSTRACT

In Library and Information Science (LIS) courses, practicums serve as a specific bond between theory on the one hand and practical work and the profession on the other. In seeking to prepare graduates for the profession and for professional work, LIS programmes use practicums as a model to enhance the library school curriculum. During the traditional LIS practicum, one already makes use of the many advantages online tools provide, building online portfolios or keeping student work diaries online while undertaking the practical part of one's practicum. This enables easy and constant communication among all three stakeholders: host institutions, educational institutions, and students. Whilst it is important to engage actively with industry to provide students with opportunities to participate in 'experiential learning' and in building practical skills and knowledge, it is also important to ensure this is done in a systematic manner, and with a genuine desire on the part of the employers for a collaborative partnership. Striking similarities regarding practicums and placements between geographically distant countries such as Australia and Slovenia, and the opinions and attitudes that all three stakeholders – students, host institutions and educational institutions – share, indicates that traditional practicums, undertaken in a physical workplace, are still a key component of an LIS education.

Keywords: *practicum, library and information science, study programs, Australia, Slovenia*

PRAKTIKUM KOT DEL ŠTUDIJSKIH PROGRAMOV NA PODROČJU BIBLIO-TEKARSKE IN INFORMACIJSKE ZNANOSTI – POVZETEK

V visokošolskih programih s področja bibliotekarstva in informacijske znanosti praktikum služi kot posebna vez med teorijo na eni strani ter praktičnim delom in stroko na drugi strani. Pri pripravi diplomantov za poklic in strokovno delo ti programi uporabljajo koncept praktikuma kot modela za iz-boljšanje. Tudi pri klasičnem praktikumu so izkoriščene številne prednosti, ki jih zagotavljajo spletna orodja, kot sta na primer izgradnja spletnih portfeljev ali vodenje spletnih dnevnikov dela, medtem ko študent opravlja praktični del praktikuma. To omogoča enostavno in neprekinjeno komunikacijo med vsemi udeleženci procesa – ustanovami gostiteljicami prakse, izobraževalnim ustanovami in študenti.

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Čeprav je pomembno zagotoviti študentom, da med prakso aktivno sodelujejo v »izkustvenem učenju« in vzpostavljajo praktične spretnosti in znanja, je pomembno tudi to, da je to izvedeno na sistematičen način in ob iskreni želji po sodelovalnem partnerstvu s strani delodajalcev. Presenetljive podobnosti glede izpeljave praktikuma in namestitve študentov med geografsko tako oddaljenimi državami, kot sta Avstralija in Slovenija, ter mnenj in stališč vseh treh udeležencev procesa – študentov, ustanov gostiteljic prakse ter izobraževalnih ustanov – kaže, da je tradicionalni praktikum, ki se izvaja v fizični obliki in na delovnem mestu, še vedno ključni sestavni del izobraževanja s področja bibliotekarstva in informacijske znanosti.

Ključne besede: *praktikum, bibliotekarska in informacijska znanost, študijski programi, Avstralija, Slovenija*

INTRODUCTION

A practicum is usually defined as a course in which theory is put into practice, seen as an opportunity for students to apply their theoretical knowledge in practice. As future professionals, and in undertaking a practicum, students have a chance to gain expertise and build their confidence through practical training and experience. Sometimes referred to as fieldwork or service learning, work-integrated learning, or different forms of internships, practicums combined with coursework are a common feature of many graduate and postgraduate programs. This concept of combining some level of practical experience with academic learning is widely accepted within a broad range of professional disciplines.

Similar to academic coursework, the practicum must be designed to ensure an authentic learning experience: one which will encourage both reflective, and suitably forward, thinking from students from across a range of programs, including those preparing for public services or undertaking business management programmes (Robertson, Junek and Lockstone-Binney, 2012). In addition, it is common for Library and Information Science (LIS) programmes to require students to undertake some form of practicum as part of their studies in order to build a better understanding of the connection between theory and professional practice.

Library and Information Science (LIS) education has a long history that originates in the 19th century. The period prior to the founding of so-called 'Library Schools' was marked by apprenticeship and in-service training classes. These influenced the development of more formal programmes with the first library schools functioning, in many respects, similarly to the apprenticeship programmes that preceded them (Lynch, 2008). This changed as a professional training programme that required a broad, general education evolved into the LIS education programmes that we see today. Such programmes now include a more research-oriented approach, culminating in the PhD degree now widely available in the LIS field.

Since the mid-1990s, the curriculum has been changing dramatically. The names of courses have changed and programmes have been renamed from simply library studies

degrees to include a focus on information science, data management, and related digital technologies as exemplified by the iSchool movement and the terminology many of those schools have adopted. Despite these changes, programmes for the profession have in general kept a base in professional practice – broadly defined –, as they had from the beginning, this base being the practicum or a similar field-based experience. It can be argued that this has become increasingly important as many library education programmes traditionally placed in schools within research universities either close or move away from a professional perspective to a more broadly defined study of information management with less emphasis on its application. Emphasising this, IFLA (*the leading international body in the library and information field)*, in their education guidelines for Professional Library/Information Educational Programmes (Smith, Hallam and Ghosh, 2012) specifically highlight the role of the practicum, internship or fieldwork and its importance in preparing hands-on professionals for the workforce. Under these guidelines, good LIS programmes (taken generically to include a wide range of information management courses) should incorporate appropriate means to allow students to appreciate the interplay between professional theories and their application in professional practice in a practical way. The value of such authentic practical activities, undertaken in a placement environment, cannot be overestimated.

In most programs, including LIS courses, practicums serve as a specific bond between theory and research on the one hand, with practical work and the profession on the other. In seeking to prepare graduates for the profession and for professional work, LIS programmes must balance a student's exposure to research methods and theoretical models with applied research undertaken within the field. In addition, using practicums as a model for enhancing the library school curriculum shifts the focus away from traditional academic learning methods (classes, readings, assignments) and encourages educators to view the library school experience from an entirely different perspective, with very positive results reported by both students and practitioners (Bilodeau and Carson, 2015).

Yet it is often an uneasy relationship. Ball (2008) has analysed the trend in LIS education in North America, which shows a certain rift/divide between those librarians working in libraries and similar institutions who value practice and those educators who operate in classrooms and emphasise theory. This has led to a decline in LIS programmes in North America offering the practicum as a mandatory component of their curriculum, something which has not yet happened in many other countries. Bird, Chu and Oguz (2015) report that internships are still required by most LIS programmes worldwide, with the majority of countries surveyed reporting that it was a required part of their study programmes.

TRIANGLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to the general purpose of bonding classroom theory with professional practice, practicums also have other objectives. Generally we see *the triangle of stakeholders* participating in the practicum as all having their own objectives.

The main objectives for the *student* are:
- to acquire knowledge and insight into ways in which his or her knowledge and analytical skills can be applied in practice; to select and apply appropriate research methods;
- to develop personal and interpersonal competencies, and entrepreneurial and management attitudes and skills, including the ability to work in a team;
- to become aware of the professional world and its infrastructure;
- to acquire positive professional ethics;
- to gain an awareness of his or her capabilities;
- to learn how to learn from experience and
- to increase his or her employability by acquiring this knowledge and these skills and providing evidence of this experience.

The main objectives for *host institutions* are:
- to benefit from the stimulating effect of having a student with a new perspective, asking questions;
- to benefit from a source for information about new trends and developments;
- to use the placement/internship as a selection tool for vacancies;
- to benefit from having an extra person with problem-solving skills to take on some of the workload and
- above all to help foster successful professional development for staff by managing the practicum process.

The main objectives for the *educational institution* are:
- - to foster interaction between teaching staff and practitioners;
- - to obtain material for case studies and encourage joint research projects;
- - to attract guest lecturers by establishing connections with the profession and
- - to provide a stimulus for the innovation of courses.

(Espelt, Južnič and Van der Molen, 2005).

As the profession has evolved and become more technologically sophisticated and the organisations in which professionals work have become more complex, maintaining this bond between academia and the profession is crucial to ensuring that education and practical work remain connected.

Making the practicum compulsory provides an opportunity for all students, even those who do have relevant work experience, to try something new and broaden their knowledge of the profession as a whole. For students with little or no experience, this placement opportunity may be seen as an essential part of the learning process, providing the context to help consolidate their academic education. For those with experience, it can be an opportunity to participate in a different aspect of the field, broadening their knowledge and experience, and expanding potential employment opportunities. It also enables students as future LIS professionals to make a gentle entry to the field and to network with their future colleagues.

Most students prize this opportunity for practical experience and the development of their professional competencies. This is similar across other similar professions (Makovec,

Mažgon, & Radovan, 2013). Research reveals generally highly positive responses toward a placement or internship, or field experience (Juznic and Pymm, 2011). To further explore how these experiences complement and intersect with classroom experiences, researchers have used interviews and reports from students after their placements in libraries. For example, research on Canadian Library and Information Science students revealed that field experiences are important for connecting classroom learning to practice and helped to illuminate the realities of librarianship. On the one hand, it clarified students' understanding of concepts and principles they had learned in the classroom, while on the other, students felt that they only really learned about how to be librarians through the experiences during their placements (Hoffmann and Berg, 2014) and (Bilodeau and Carson, 2015). In another study in the USA, both practicum students and host academic libraries tend to view practical placements as highly beneficial (Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel, 2011).

Some studies have been undertaken with former students' reflecting on their practicum. An online survey was administered to entry-level cataloguers with less than ten years of experience working in major US research libraries. The majority of respondents felt the practicum had been a valuable part of their education and should be formally required within the library science curriculum (Damasco and McGurr, 2008).

It should also be noted that a substantial amount has been written about the role of the industry placement and internships in preparing students for the Library and Information Studies (LIS) workforce, focusing on the outcomes for the student. Yet there appeared to have been less examination of the role and perceptions of the host organisations that enable such programmes to function by providing the workplace, training programme, and supervision. The benefits that may accrue for the host would make giving a student a placement more than just a professional obligation; this may also offer real value to the employer.

Practicums provide an excellent opportunity for LIS educators to reassess and align their curricula with current practice and trends. However, it is not surprising that this is the least researched side of the triangle. This can be explained by considering two fundamental reasons. Firstly, the concept of practicums is so deeply embedded in the notion of what the LIS curriculum should contain that researching its objectives may be seen as of little relevance – they are obvious. The other reason might be that the complex self-reflection needed for such research is not easy to attain.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The widespread inclusion of obligatory placement/internship in LIS study programmes and curricula also makes this area interesting for comparative studies, part of the field of comparative librarianship. Comparative librarianship has a very long tradition in LIS research and it is gaining new stimuli in recent times due to expanding internationalisation, which refers to international or cross-national studies in librarianship and seeks to connect different areas in order to distinguish and understand underlying similarities and

differences and to arrive at valid insights and generalisations applicable more widely than locally focused research (Lor, 2015). Much of what is explored in a comparative way may also be relevant to non-comparative research in the broader field.

The great similarity between practicum organisation in main institutions in two countries providing LIS programmes, Australia and Slovenia, the Bachelor of Information Studies in Charles Sturt University (CSU), Wagga Wagga and the Bachelor of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, stimulated a comparative study that drew a parallel between students' and host institutions' opinions and attitudes toward placement. In both countries, undergraduate students undertake a three week placement towards the end of their classroom studies. In this way, they should all, at least, have a good general understanding of the basic functions of the LIS profession and terminology, and be able to function usefully in the workplace itself. The aim is to ensure that when students undertake their placement, they have the appropriate background to enable them to build on their classroom skills, integrating that learning with what will be required in the workplace. As the 2005 survey of European LIS curricula noted, "The Bachelor level should aim at producing competent candidates for practical work in all kinds of documentary institutions or organisations" (Estivill *et al.*, 2005, pp. 21–24), indicating the importance of that workplace experience. The authors go on to comment on the labour market orientation of such programmes and the need to facilitate internships and placements.

In Slovenia, at the University of Ljubljana, all students undertake their placement in a three-week block at the beginning of the sixth semester, the last semester in their three years of undergraduate study. The placement coordinator within the department maintains a database of potential host institutions, potential mentors, and potential themes. In Australia, at CSU, the placement is offered towards the end of a student's studies, and staggered throughout that year. As in Slovenia, the final choice of host organisation follows discussion with the placements officer and the student's academic advisor. Organisations hosting students include traditional public, school, college and university libraries, as well as a small number of special libraries, archives, and state libraries and related institutions. In both countries, host organisations have always completed a standard feedback form at the end of the placement, which focuses primarily on that particular student and their aptitude, behaviour, etc., rather than on the organisation and its experience of being a host.

In the first part of the study, both surveys (Juznic and Pymm, 2011), looked at work placements from the undergraduate student's point of view. The second part of the study (Pymm and Juznic, 2014) looked at work placements from the hosting institutions' perspective.

Overall, the first survey indicated a high level of similarity among students in both countries about their expectations of the placement and its usefulness to their education. Over 80% of both cohorts reported being very positive or quite positive about doing the placement and over 80% of Australian and 90% of Slovenian students agreed or strongly agreed on the importance of the placement to their studies. This was despite a strong difference

in the work experience levels of the student body between the two countries. Thus over 80% of Australian LIS students already had more than one year of work experience in a library or related organisation, compared with only 7% of Slovenian students. Yet this factor appears to have had little overall influence. Work experience differences had only influenced students' opinion on the length of placement. The majority of Slovenian students, lacking work experience, thought that three weeks of placement was too short, while Australian students disagreed. These differences may be due to the fact that in Slovenia, students are not required to pay any tuition fees at public universities, so the great majority of students come to university directly after finishing high school. In Australia, where tuition fees do exist, the majority of LIS students were of a mature age, with a wide variety of workplace experience already under their belts.

The responses from the second survey, of the supervisor's views in the host institutions in both countries, were also strikingly similar, with both sets of hosts expressing generally highly positive feelings about their placement role and activities. For both countries, few negative issues were raised, and although placement hosts may undertake this role for different reasons, they are clearly encouraging about the end result. While they acknowledge the workload involved, for larger organisations, this was spread across a number of areas, reducing its impact on individuals and consequently, perhaps, any negative factors associated with the planning and managing of placements may have been reduced. For smaller organisations, despite the fact that the workload would fall on one or two individuals, this did not seem to counteract the overall positive view of the host institution. There was some comment about students' preparedness for their placements, which suggests that some care should be taken regarding the specific requirements that may be predicted from a placement in order to ensure students can contribute as quickly and effectively as possible.

However, there were again some differences, the main one being in responding to the question of why the host organisation would take students on placement. "Commitment to support the profession" was the clearly articulated response in Australia, but not in Slovenia. One of the possible reasons behind this difference is that in Australia, the notion of the "profession" is much older and more deeply rooted within the LIS industry. In Slovenia, due to historical reasons, this is not so; the concept of an LIS profession is not so well- established, often not even amongst librarians themselves, especially the older generation. Only the most recent changes in the Librarianship Act in Slovenia (December 2015) have required that an accredited programme or a course in LIS be a necessary requirement for entering the profession.

CONCLUSIONS

Will classical on-site practicums, placements, and internships change in the future? It seems unlikely, at least for the near future. A survey about internships in LIS education that was conducted internationally has found that despite the increasing use of online

tools to offer LIS education, there is a decided lack of institutional support for virtual internships (Bird, Chu, Oguz, 2015). These authors feel that more attention should be paid to the opportunities given by online education and to the possibilities of virtual internships. One advantage suggested is that these can be offered internationally, perhaps improving their quality. It should also be called into question, however, how any form of virtual internship as part of the professional education can assist students in their exposure to fellow professionals, their day-to-day activities, and the challenges of an institutional environment. Can students fully participate in such activities virtually and appreciate that connection between theory and practice which can be readily achieved in the traditional, in-person manner? Virtual internships might be especially interesting for some new fields of LIS work, such as data curation (Franks and Oliver, 2012), but it seems that the traditional approach is still the preferred option for any mainstream LIS degree student.

In the traditional LIS practicum, one already makes use of the many advantages online tools provide. One of the most important of these is building online portfolios or keeping student work diaries online while undertaking the practical part of the practicum. This enables easy and constant communication among all three stakeholders: host institutions, educational institutions, and students.

Whilst it is important to engage actively with industry to provide students with opportunities to participate in 'experiential learning', and to build practical skills and knowledge, it is also important to ensure this is done in a systematic manner based upon educational and pedagogical foundations, and a genuine desire on part of the employer for a collaborative partnership. Striking similarities regarding practicums and placements between geographically distant countries such as Australia and Slovenia, and the opinions and attitudes that all three stakeholders – students, host institutions, and educational institutions – share, indicates that the traditional practicum, undertaken in a physical workplace, is still a key component of an LIS education.

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