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Published in:
Globalization, Digitization, Access and Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Publication date:
2007

Citation for published version (APA):
Broady-Preston, J., & Preston, H. J. (2007). Blurring the boundaries? Information studies education and professional development in England and Wales. In *Globalization, Digitization, Access and Preservation of Cultural Heritage* (pp. 289-300). University of Sofia Press.

Blurring the Boundaries? Information Studies Education and Professional Development in England and Wales

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Размиване на граници? Информационното образование и професионалното развитие в Англия и Уейлс

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ABSTRACT

Reviewed in this paper are contemporary issues in England and Wales with regard to information studies curricula, professional development, workforce development and employability. The roles and behaviours of the key stakeholders in the process of devising suitable strategies to meet the workforce needs of the LIS profession are reviewed and evaluated, in the light of the authors' contention that professional boundaries are becoming 'blurred'. The implications of the breaking down of traditional barriers between professional and paraprofessional staff, and between differing sectors within the wider information profession, are explored in terms of their impact on future development of LIS curricula and career development.
Keywords: Information studies education; Professional development; Employability

РЕЗЮМЕ

Тази статия е посветена на актуални за Англия и Уейлс проблеми, свързани с учебните програми, професионалното развитие, развитието на работната сила и възможностите за работа в областта на информационните науки. В светлината на убеждението на автора, че границите между отделните професии все повече се „размиват", са разгледани ролите и поведението на основните участници в процеса на разработване на подходящи стратегии, за да отговорят на потребностите от работна сила в библиотечно-информационната професия. Въздействието на разчупването на традиционните граници между служителите професионалисти и помощния персонал и между отделните сектори на информационната професия в по-широк смисъл са изследвани от гледна точка на тяхното влияние върху бъдещото развитие на учебните програми по БИН и изграждането на кариера.
Ключови думи: учебни програми; информационни науки; професионално развитие; БИН; изграждане на кариера.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary developments in England and Wales are causing information studies educators to rethink their curricula and their mode of delivery. The impetus for change may be categorised as emer-

ging from several distinct but interrelated factors originating from key stakeholders in the information studies profession.

Concepts such as employability, the blurring of boundaries between traditional silos of professionalism, and Governmental strategic initiatives in both countries, are proving to be forceful drivers for change in relation to both education and professional development for the library and information services (LIS) profession. Moreover,

> the key challenge appears to be how we can offer services which meet the increasingly sophisticated needs of our clients, and cope with the perceived 'threat' of competition. Across the age spectrum, our customers expect not only to retrieve information 24/7 and in the format of their choice, but increasingly expect to have an input into the design and delivery of the information they seek (Broady-Preston, 2006a, p. 1).

O'Connor, in an editorial published earlier in 2006, offers a much more succinct and (arguably) depressing view of the current environment within which the LIS profession is operating:

> "...it is clearly the case that the public view of libraries is that they are no longer relevant in a digital age" (2006, p. 5).

The trends outlined above appear to reinforce the view that the skills and knowledge base of the LIS profession should be subject to continuous review in the light of contemporary challenges and developments. This is by no means either a novel or a particularly profound conclusion. The concept that LIS is a profession characterised by rapid change, together with the concomitant necessity to acquire new sets of skills, are ideas which have been addressed by significant numbers of commentators during the last five to six years (see for example, Ashcroft, 2004; Gorman & Corbitt, 2002; Middleton, 2003; Missingham, 2006). Missingham summarises such developments thus:

> discussion on the skills and expertise required for contemporary library LIS staff has emerged as a significant topic in library literature in recent years. The issue of the new requirements for the "librarian of the twenty-first century" has been realised within library sectors...and also within the professional associations in terms of the education required – both through library and information science education and professional development (2006, p. 257).

This paper is not another contribution to the skills/knowledge debate for the profession per se, but is rather an exploration of the relatively novel premise that the boundaries of the LIS profession are now apparently 'blurred'. 'Blurring' in this context relates to the idea that the 'hard' borders which distinguished and differentiated the LIS profession from other professions/occupations are now softening, thereby rendering legitimate questions as to the extent to which LIS may be deemed to be a unique profession (cf. Broady-Preston, 2006b; Hughes, 2003). Self-evidently, if such a state of affairs does exist, then clearly this has significant implications for both the future of professional practice, and for educational development and provision.

Moreover, boundaries are not only 'blurred' potentially between differing professions, but also in terms of the traditional 'hard' divide separating professional practice from paraprofessional work. The debate as to the requisite skills and knowledge expected of those employed at these levels is ongoing, and has to be viewed in the wider context of workforce development, composition and issues in relation to diversity and expansion of the workforce.

Exploration of the validity of the above arguments is examined within the context of education and professional development in England and Wales, as this is the framework with which the authors are most familiar. However, credence is lent to the argument that such an exploration has wider significance by

a review of recent international events, including the 2006 Asia Pacific conference for example, which addressed similar themes (Ghosh, 2006).

EMPLOYABILITY

An appropriate starting point for a review of current trends and issues with regard to the premise outlined above is to explore key ideas and concepts, such as 'employability' and 'professionalism'. The contemporary focus on the concept of 'employability' stems in the UK from the connection between higher education and the economy, together with governmental pressures to ensure their investment in human capital delivers the appropriate skills in the workforce to enable them to compete in the global knowledge economy (see HM Treasury, 2000). As Brown et al remark:

> The recent policy emphasis on employability rests on the assumption that the economic welfare of individuals and the competitive advantage of nations have come to depend on the knowledge, skills and enterprise of the workforce. Those with degree-level qualifications are seen to play a particularly important role in managing the 'knowledge-driven' economy of the future (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003, p. 107).

The importance of the need to develop employability skills has not only been recognised and acknowledged within the UK, but also internationally. In a 2003 case study of employability in the USA, the author observed:

> businesses need highly trained employees with academic, technical and social skills to meet the demands of ever-changing technology, global competition and increasing social diversity (Zinser, 2003, p. 2).

Before examining issues in relation to employability in the LIS sector, it is useful to define the term. As with many such terms, there appears to be a range of differing definitions, which Watts (2006) groups into three distinct categories, distinguishing between those focusing on 'immediate employment', the second group focusing on 'immediate employability', and the third, those which focus on 'sustainable employability' (pp. 8-9). His classification clearly makes the distinction between 'employability' and 'employment', a core distinction borne out by a number of commentators, including one of the key writers in this field, Yorke, who stated, "Employability…should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a 'graduate job' (which is subject to influences in the environment, a major influence being the state of the economy)" (2006, p. 7). Furthermore, "The word 'employability'…implies ability to be employed in a 'graduate job', something rather different from actually being employed" (Knight & Yorke, 2006, p. 3). As acknowledged by Watts (2006), many of the early definitions in his categories two and three were focused strongly on the acquisition of skills, regardless as to how such skills were categorised (p. 7). Fallows and Steven, for example, defined employability as "skills necessary for employment and for life as a responsible citizen, transferable skills, key skills, common skills and core skills" (2000, p. 8). This approach has been criticised widely for being too limiting (Knight and Yorke, 2003; 2006), and encouraging the misapplication of the concept, viz:

> Although the literature offers a range of definitions of 'employability', many policy-makers have recently used the term as shorthand for 'the individual's employability skills and attributes'…this 'narrow' usage can lead to a 'hollowing out' of the concept of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p. 197).

The definition most often quoted is that of Yorke, who defines employability as:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (quoted in Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

Lest it be thought that the above contradicts earlier cited criticism of a purely skills based definition, Yorke elaborates by stating categorically that "'Skills' and 'knowledge' should not be construed in narrow terms" (ibid).

IMMEDIATE AND SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY

Watts' (2006) differentiation between 'immediate' and 'sustainable' employability leads naturally into a consideration of concepts of lifelong learning, career development and a concomitant focus on CPD within professions. In distinguishing between these two concepts, Watts categorises 'immediate employability' in terms of "Students' possession of the attributes to obtain a 'graduate job'…[including] a strong focus on 'work readiness': in other words, their ability to cope with the demands of the workplace without requiring additional training to do so" (2006, p. 7). As Mason et al (2003) note, this is an all too common demand from employers, and one which resonates amongst LIS educators. Moreover, as Hesketh (2000) indicates, whilst complaints concerning the quality of graduates in general are of lengthy origin, nonetheless evidence to support this assertion is somewhat uneven. The USEM model devised by Knight and Yorke (2003), depicts sustainable employability "as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence) and reflectiveness (or metacognition)" (quoted in Knight and Yorke, 2006, p. 5).

The above represents a move away from a focus on skills required to obtain a first post, and towards the ability to remain employable for life, whereby understanding becomes a richer concept than knowledge; in skills, the emphasis is on skilful practice and the effective use of skills; efficacy includes self-belief and the development of personal qualities, and metacognition, the ability to reflect on skills and learning.

EMPLOYABILITY IN THE LIS PROFESSION

As indicated earlier, changes to the skills and knowledge base of the LIS profession, and by extension, to LIS education, are developments which have received much attention in the professional press (see also Stephens & Hamblin, 2006). A 2004 study examined some perceived gaps between employer expectations and the skills/knowledge base of graduates from LIS programmes in UK universities in the commercial sector (Blankson-Hemans & Hibberd, 2004). More recently, a two year partnership research project, based at Loughborough, and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)'s Fund for the Development of Learning and Teaching is addressing the perceived skills gap in the library and information management sector (LIMES, 2005). The project, entitled LIMES (Library and Information Employability Skills), has the stated aim of enhancing:

the provision of skills-based teaching materials in the LIM discipline and to help students document these key skills with the intention of improving the future employability of information professionals and librarians in the UK (Stephens & Hamblin, 2006, p. 220).

The LIMES project, whilst including the word 'employability' in the project title, nevertheless, appears to omit the provision of a working definition of the phrase in publications emanating from the project, together with any discussion as to possible interpretations of the term (see for example, Hamblin, 2005; LIMES, 2005; Stephens & Hamblin, 2006). This may result from the proposed practical outcomes of this project, namely to supply a database of teaching materials freely available to LIS Departments to enhance the employability of their graduates (LIMES, 2005). Nonetheless, it is a somewhat curious omission. However, it is apparent from their publications that the underlying premise of this project

is that of a skills-based definition of the term (ibid). Furthermore, contributions to the debate from the perspective of the professional associations and employers again emphasise the necessity for graduates of LIS programmes to possess the skills required to meet the demands of the workplace, without necessitating the provision of additional training in order to do so (cf. Fisher et al, 2005).

EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A key extension to the general debate with regard to sustainable employability is the relationship between concepts of career development and those of strategies to enhance employability. Harvey et al (2002) offer a threefold foci on employability, with the third focus being the development of self-promotional and career management skills. However, as Watts remarks:

> Much of the now-extensive literature on employability…pays little attention to the conceptual work on career development or to the work that has been done on career development learning (2006, p. 8).

Discussions with regard to this relationship focus primarily on the implications of career development within the UK university framework, in particular the respective roles and responsibilities of academic departments and careers services in inculcating career self-management principles (op.cit., pp. 9-18). Nonetheless, whilst such a debate may not be perceived as directly relevant to the development of the LIS profession per se, it does, however, resonate with contemporary discussions on facilitating lifelong learning and CPD within the profession. Roberts (2006) suggests that such developments are vital to address the employability issues identified above, especially those in relation to immediate employability, viz:

> This study also discovered a view among many service managers in Wales that the initial training provided by academic departments in library studies and cognate subjects is becoming redundant very rapidly in the workplace due to the pace of change, and that the future pattern of training and continuing professional development should place greater emphasis on training in the workplace and in post. This is another issue that merits the attention of academic trainers (2006, p. 16).

PROFESSIONALISM AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

One core aspect of the discussions thus far is the implicit assumption that concepts of employability are concerned solely with the development of graduates. In attempting to apply these concepts to the LIS arena, this would appear to uncover a potential dichotomy. The entire basis of what constitutes professional roles, skills, and education in LIS is seemingly being challenged. Notwithstanding such developments, there is clear evidence of the desire to maintain the status of LIS as a profession, as demonstrated by this recent statement by the Chair of CILIP Council, namely:

> If we value our status as professionals we must also value the accoutrements of professionalism in ourselves and those around us…When recruiting we need to discriminate in favour of candidates who have taken the trouble to become professionally qualified, and who have subsequently worked at their professional life and accomplishments (McSean, 2006, p. 13).

Thus, there is little evidence in the professional literature that the professional status of LIS is being questioned per se (see Broady-Preston, 2006a), but rather it is the requirement for information professionals to be graduates that is under review. Clear evidence exists from a variety of sources of moves to break down traditional entrance barriers to the profession by opening up opportunities for professional recognition to non-graduate entrants. The national development agency for museums, archives and libraries in England, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), which advises the UK government on policies and priorities for the sector, stated categorically that:

More work needs to be done to attract non-graduates into the sector through vocational routes such as NVQs, Young Apprenticeships and Adult Apprenticeships (for those over 24). MLA will work with the Sector Skills Councils, Regional Agencies, Professional Associations and Learning and Skills Councils to develop and promote these pathways in the sector (2004, p, 16).

This view is reinforced by the newly published Roberts' workforce development study for Wales, funded by the Welsh equivalent of MLA, CyMAL, the aim of which was:

> To obtain evidence concerning the current and likely issues surrounding the workforce in public libraries in Wales, identifying any significant trends, issues and problems in the key areas of initial training, recruitment, retention, turnover, career progression, development opportunities, utilisation and succession planning (Roberts, 2006, p. 2).

Recommendation 4 of this report, in particular, reinforces the ideas outlined above, viz:

> The workforce strategy …should relate closely to Welsh Assembly Government strategies for the whole workforce in Wales, to the work of national organisations, and to those pertinent initiatives of professional and sector skills organisations…Such an approach should actively promote the value of an extended range of recruitment and training methods already being used successfully in other sectors within the public services, such as modern apprenticeships (op. cit., p. 3).

Yet further support and credence is lent to such views by the reform of the national vocational qualification frameworks across the UK, including those for libraries, archives and information services, which is being undertaken currently by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) (New Standards 2006). LLUK is a government funded sector skills council established to be "the strategic voice of employers in the lifelong learning sector across the UK" (op.cit, p. 3). A report, outlining the outcomes of the first stage of a consultative process with employers, educators, and professional associations, with the aim of creating the third generation of vocational qualifications to meet employer's needs in the LIS sector is being circulated for comment currently (comments are invited by 30 November 2006) (ibid). Interestingly, in this context, outlined in the report:

> In response to the question of whether the skills-sets for "para-professional" staff and for new entrants to "professional" roles were different or similar with differentials in the level of competence, [is] the consensus…that all 'operational staff' require a similar skills profile, with developing levels of skill and a deeper knowledge depending on role (2006, p. 9).

Thus, there is clear evidence of interest in debating the future career pathways and qualifications structures of the profession from a variety of stakeholders, including governments and employers. However, traditionally, the custodians of professionalism are the professional associations, therefore, their views and responses to such developments should also be considered.

LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS[1] – THE CUSTODIANS OF PROFESSIONALISM?

Arguably, one group with a vested interest in the future development of the LIS profession are the professional associations. Ideas in relation to the contemporary purpose and development of library associations from a wide range of countries were explored in a special issue of the journal Library Management (2006). What emerges from a review of these papers is that there is no global consensus as to the role and purpose of such associations with regard to future professional development. Lachance acknowledges this in her review of the work of the American Special Library Association (SLA), concluding:

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[1] The term is employed here in its generic sense to cover all those professional associations whose remit includes any or all sectors of the LIS profession, whatever the title of such an association.

for SLA, the future is about learning, networking and advocacy...Other library and information associations may have different views or perspectives on the future, which can only mean great things for the profession at large (2006, p. 13).

It may be thought that the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) would provide a definitive exposition of both the role of associations and the boundaries of the profession. However, a 2006 critique of the role and purpose of IFLA, reveals that IFLA is itself grappling with fundamental issues in relation to its role and purpose in contemporary society (Lor, 2006).

In the UK, MLA observed that:

The Professional Associations have key roles in:

• Reforming qualifications frameworks;
• Creating alternative routes into the profession;
• Accrediting work-based learning;
• Widening workforce composition and diversity;
• Continuing Professional Development (MLA, 2004,p. 25).

It would appear that the primary UK body, CILIP, is prepared to accept the MLA view of its roles vis-à-vis career and professional development. The Framework of Qualifications (2006c), for example, offers the potential of direct entry to the profession via the new qualification of ACLIP, a process of accrediting experiential learning, thereby offering a new career pathway for non-graduates. Prior to this development, the only clear career pathway for paraprofessionals lay in acquiring CILIP accredited degree-level qualifications such as the BSc in Information and Library Studies at Aberystwyth, offered via Distance Learning, allowing entry via an APEL[2] route (University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2006). Moreover, this same document also addresses the CPD agenda via a revalidation scheme for chartered members and fellows, providing formal recognition of ongoing CPD activity, albeit on a voluntary basis (see also Broady-Preston, 2006a). All these schemes are supported via a mentoring system, for which CILIP offers appropriate training (CILIP, 2006d).

However, a note of caution must be sounded with regard to the sustainability of such developments. Revisions to the original Framework document have been made, with more currently under discussion (CILIP, 2006c). The key changes appear to lie with regard to the scope of the monitoring and assessment system, which proved to be somewhat ambitious in resource terms.

Nonetheless, evidence of current commitment to widening access to the profession, and providing more flexible pathways may be found in the recently signed agreement between CILIP and LLUK, setting out a Memorandum of Understanding on workforce development issues. David Hunter, Chief Executive of LLUK stated:

This agreement is an opportunity both to foster the career development of existing staff but also to create opportunities that will attract growing numbers of high-calibre new entrants. The role of LLUK is to work with our employers across the four countries of the UK and the professional bodies such as CILIP to develop a top quality workforce, meeting both individual needs and those of the wider economy (CILIP, 2006e, par.6).

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[2] Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), an acronym used widely to denote a process whereby learning by experience – .i.e. working in a job – is given credit formally as an entrance qualification to courses of study.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES – DIFFERING PROFESSIONS?

Blurring of the boundaries with regard to traditional distinctions of professional and paraprofessional work, skills and knowledge, appears therefore to be a development welcomed and acknowledged by all the key stakeholders in the LIS profession, including educators. However, as indicated earlier, traditionally not only did such relatively rigid distinctions exist between concepts of professional and non-professional roles and behaviours within LIS, but also clear boundaries were maintained between the related information professions. Whilst libraries, archives and museums have acknowledged areas of commonality in the past, nonetheless, all appeared concerned to maintain the unique quality of their respective professions. An evaluative framework for assessing the role and purpose of a professional association, based on a critique of the attributes of professions, identified as a core attribute the necessity for associations to delineate a unique body of professional knowledge (Broady-Preston, 2006b). This view is apparently reinforced in the UK by CILIP, viz:

> Every professional organisation requires a knowledge base, which describes the specialist subject knowledge that practitioners are expected to acquire for current and future practice. [Our] knowledge base....establishes the unique knowledge which distinguishes library and information professionals from professionals within other domains (2006a, p.1).

Nonetheless, whilst the unique skills and knowledge base of the LIS profession are emphasised by CILIP, key areas of synergy with other professions are also highlighted (CILIP, 2006a). Moreover, LLUK, in revising the existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for staff employed in libraries, archives and information services, acknowledges the synergy between the differing sectors:

> Rather than develop three separate sets of NOS as previously, the proposal is being made by LLUK to develop one integrated set of standards that recognises different occupational contexts (libraries, archives and information services) but with a common core skill-set with additional units of competence, to be used dependant on an individual's job role (2006, p. 5).

This emphasis on identifying the skills, knowledge and behaviours held in common by the differing sectors of the wider information profession is also reinforced by MLA:

> Workforce development is one of MLA's priority cross-domain programmes. The Workforce Development Strategy has evolved through listening to the views of the sector represented by MLA...[and] many of the priority issues highlighted are common to museums, libraries and archives. The...Strategy has a cross-domain focus and can only be delivered through partnership working (2004, p. 1).

Breaking down the barriers between the professions is demonstrated also in Wales; the organisational structure of CyMAL, for example, is by function rather than domain (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006). Moreover, this search for commonality is not unique to the library and information sector of the profession; the archives and museums sectors are equally concerned to explore cross-domain issues and working practices (Yakel, 2005). Finally, evidence exists that such developments are receiving growing examination within the wider European context (See, for example, Hedegaard, 2004).

IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMATION STUDIES EDUCATION

As outlined, these are demonstrably challenging times, not only for the LIS profession, but by extension, for educators. In the UK, the primary suppliers of formal education are university departments, euphemistically known collectively as the 'library schools'[3]. However, again as discussed earlier, not

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[3] Although only one remaining University Department in Great Britain has the word 'library' in its formal title, this is still a recognised general term encompassing all departments, whatever their designation, who provide courses in LIS accredited by CILIP.

only are educators under pressure to respond to the increasingly rapid pace of change in the profession, but are also subject themselves to a variety of externally driven factors, including the governmental requirement for a skilled workforce to meet the challenges of the knowledge age.

Thus, in future, arguably the wider employability and professionalism debate will have a direct influence on library school curricula. Traditionally, the process whereby Departments demonstrated the validity of their curricula to the profession was through seeking and acquiring formal accreditation of their degree schemes from CILIP (CILIP, 2006b). However, increasingly for such schemes to be relevant to the market, departments will need to build upon the core competencies outlined by bodies such as LLUK, and demonstrate a direct and clear career pathway to enable would-be professionals not only to possess employment skills, but also sustainable employability. Moreover, in the creation of such schemes, flexibility will be one of the key determinants of future success, together with currency and relevance.

Furthermore, many initiatives will, of necessity, be short term in order to address specific needs, and also potentially 'stand-alone' from a more traditional formal degree scheme, at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. Such stand-alone provision may be to meet specific geographical or sectoral gaps in skills provision. Roberts, for example, recommends not only that

It may be necessary to ensure that the educational establishment can offer a suitable module (or modules) in public librarianship with a Welsh emphasis (2006, p. 19), but, in addition that:

> those who have studied modules under an NVQ scheme…at various centres in Wales, and elsewhere, express a clear preference to continue their studies by that means, arguing that courses are more clearly work-related and pertinent (ibid).

Thus, he reinforces the necessity for library school curricula to become engaged more directly with vocational level education.

In terms of blurring the boundaries between the differing information professions, again, the identification of core competencies by bodies such as LLUK has implications not only for curricula design and delivery in library schools, but also with regard to the formal accreditation process by professional bodies. Currently there are a range of associations which accredit LIS courses in the UK, ranging from those with a very specific focus, such as the Society of Archivists, to those with a wider remit such as CILIP. The extent to which there will remain a uniquely identifiable set of professional skills such as those outlined in the Body of Professional Knowledge (CILIP, 2006a) is therefore open to question. Thus, if there is little that is unique to the LIS profession, not only does this call into question the existence of LIS as a profession (cf Broady-Preston, 2006b), but also the future of library schools themselves. Indeed, it may be argued that such a review process has already begun with the closure of the school at the University of Central England (ibid).

CONCLUSION

Finally, in blurring the boundaries between the professions, and by re-examining definitions of professionalism in the 21st century, there is a real danger that the LIS sector may cease to be recognised as a profession per se. In addressing the widening access agendas and facilitating sustainable employability, what has hitherto served to categorise LIS as a unique and distinct profession may indeed disappear. However, if in so doing, opportunities are created to meet both customer needs and demands in the global knowledge economy, and meaningful clear pathways for all those working in the sector, is this necessarily to be viewed as a negative development? Moreover, in meeting the challenges thus presented, the 'library schools' in England and Wales have, again, a discernible opportunity to address fully the lifelong learning and CPD agendas, in partnership with other providers, rather than providing education which may be viewed increasingly as divergent from the rapidity of change in professional practice.

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