

Generic Education for Specialist Information Professionals

Michael Middleton and Dr Gillian Hallam

School of Information Systems, Queensland University of Technology

[Postprint with permission of paper published *Australian Law Librarian* 9(3), 181-194. (2001)

[ISSN: 1039-6616]]

INTRODUCTION

Librarians have been fretting over their role as information professionals for some time as a consequence of proliferating alternatives in delivery of information. Those with a sanguine outlook are readily able to identify new roles, not necessarily within libraries, using the familiar attributes of intermediation and information organisation.¹ If this can be said of librarians in general, it should apply to law librarians in particular.

Preparing for these roles has educational implications. The tendency in library and information studies (LIS) has been to offer generic approaches to the field in the expectation that graduates will adapt readily to specialities such as law librarianship. So we should preface any discussion of education for law librarianship with some comments on LIS in general.

Should we make a distinction between educating people to work in libraries and educating people to do the types of things that librarians do? These skills are no longer carried out in libraries specifically and are graced with names such as information architecture, digital reference, knowledge management or web site administration. Many courses now reflect such a lack of division. While this is not a concern to the educators, who have driven the changes, this diminution of library as place has caused anxiety to many in the profession.

In Australia, the anxiety has been compounded by a number of factors that impinge on our preparedness for entering the profession, including the fact that

¹ Griffiths, J-M. 2000, 'Provider roles: the information creator and the roles of the information professions', in *ALIA 2000: Capitalising on knowledge; the information profession in the 21st century*, Canberra, ALIA. www.cio.umich.edu/pubs/alis/provider/ (accessed 24/07/01).

schools of librarianship have been absorbed into faculties such as business, IT and social sciences. Many of these groupings lack the critical mass of academics qualified to teach a core LIS curriculum, however loosely that is defined. Their research output is often driven by wider considerations such as the focus of their research groups, so the library profession may question the relevance of such work. Further, there are concerns about the level of academic standing of candidates accepted into the courses, together with a perceived blurring between professional and paraprofessional requirements for entry into the profession.

Factors such as these threaten the quality of librarianship education in Australia. Harvey has recently commented upon some of them at more length.² Any endeavour to promote a law librarianship speciality must take these into account. Is it realistic to discuss issues of specialist education in an environment where librarianship is being subsumed into more general academic areas, and where educators struggle to establish the disciplinary basis of LIS?

BACKGROUND

This issue of generalist versus specialist training has been debated amongst law librarians: should there be courses to develop students for a future career in law librarianship, or should a LIS qualification be augmented by legal qualifications? One recent initiative to bridge the gap is the course, 'Law for non-lawyers'.³ However the actual demand for law librarians in Australia has not been quantified.

Graduates from Australian LIS courses find employment in a wide range of libraries and information centres, and there is diversity in the opportunities available. Equally so, in the more traditional law library roles, there is diversity of preparation. There are people with a law degree who may have spent some years practicing law prior to moving into law librarianship. A 1996 survey showed that 29 per cent of American law librarians had legal qualifications.⁴ On the other hand

² Harvey, Ross 2001, 'Losing the quality battle in Australian education for librarianship', *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 15-22.

³ Wallace, Helen 2000, 'A non-degree course in law for law librarians', in *Law Librarians' Symposium 2000*, Sydney, Australian Law Librarians' Group. www.allg.asn.au/~allg/page8.html (accessed 01/07/2001).

⁴ Geraci, J. & Meagher, C. 1996, October, 'AALL 1996 survey of members: summary report', *AALL Spectrum*, p. 18.

there are library staff with considerable paraprofessional experience, who complete the academic requirements to become librarians themselves, and there are many others who have joined the ranks after gaining experience in other areas of librarianship or fields of employment. It is this diversity of skills, knowledge and experience that brings so much richness to the profession.

Legal materials represent an important component of public library collections, at all levels of government, and are integral to law and parliamentary libraries. Yet much of the material does not require libraries for access. The preparation of specialists for working with it has diversified. Organisation, management and provision of access to information to meet clients' needs may take forms such as metadata provision, knowledge management, patent searching or records management. Librarianship is but one of the disciplines competing to fulfil such roles.

The background of constant change in the information environment impacts upon librarians in all sectors at all stages of their careers. LIS educators, needing to maintain meaningful and relevant curricula for an uncertain future, have avoided provision of training for precise vocational skills. Instead they aim for flexibility and adaptability so that students develop a thorough understanding of the principles that may apply to a variety of situations, many of which are unanticipated.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Professional influences

Most Australian universities that offer LIS courses have attempted to heed the policy of at least one professional association relating to curriculum. This may involve bodies like the Australian Society of Archivists or the Australian Computer Society, but is most likely to see the engagement of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), which provides a course recognition process.

ALIA's Board of Education has identified a range of core knowledge, skills and attitudes that are believed to provide a foundation for an effective contribution to the library and information sector.⁵ We have paraphrased them and numbered them for later reference as follows:

1. Understand the *broad context* of the information environment;
2. *Analyse information needs*, information sources and use made of information;
3. *Plan strategically* for the future of the library and information sector;
4. Develop an appropriate *infrastructure* for resource management of operations;
5. Identify the required *information sources*;
6. Organise and enable *access* to information;
7. Design, deliver and market new *information products* and services, including development of information literacy skills;
8. *Evaluate* information products and services.

The Board has also identified a set of generic professional skills that are relevant to the information professional, covering communication, information technology, management, information literacy, ethics, team relationships, critical and creative thinking, and commitment to lifelong learning.

When considering courses for recognition, ALIA determines whether they fulfil four key requirements:

- incorporate the generic and core knowledge, skills and attitudes;
- provide workplace experience;
- introduce students to electronic resources and opportunities created by information technology;

⁵ ALIA Board of Education 1998. *The knowledge and information sector: core knowledge, skills and attitudes*, Draft Policy Statement, Canberra, ALIA.
www.alia.org.au/governance/committees/boe/policites/core_knowledge.html (accessed 01/07/2001).

- provide intellectual rigorous grounding in theoretical frameworks and contribute to the development of students' critical, analytical and creative thinking.⁶

Similar approaches have been applied internationally. In the United States, where there are both special and law library associations in addition to the American Library Association, they have expressed desirable requirements in terms of competencies.

The Special Libraries Association has defined competencies as 'a combination of skills, knowledge and behaviours important for organisational success, personal performance, and career development'.⁷

Podboy reported on a discussion of the American Association of Law Librarians which considered the core competencies.⁸ Contributors acknowledged the importance of subject specific aspects such as knowledge of the legal system and profession, but other competencies were less specific to the information profession. They included communication, leadership abilities and service orientation. Other competencies were seen to support some specialised skills in the areas of research, information technology, collection care and teaching.

Generic skills and competencies

Universities in general have developed strategies to prepare graduates for change and uncertainty. In many cases these take the form of ensuring that generic attributes are embodied within courses. Curriculum developers work within agendas that specify how course content should be framed to embrace such attributes as an ability to communicate the knowledge gained, to utilise problem

⁶ ALIA Board of Education 2000, *Education policy statement 1*, adopted 1995, amended 1996 & 2000, Canberra, ALIA www.alia.org.au/governance/committees/boe/policies/entry-level.course.html (accessed 01/07/2001).

⁷ Special Libraries Association 1996, *Competencies for special librarians of the 21st century*, Special Libraries Association, Washington, DC. www.sla.org/content/SLA/professional/meaning/competency.cfm (accessed 25/06/2001).

⁸ Podboy, Alvin 2000, 'React or die: librarians must innovate to survive', *Law Technology News*. www.lawtechnews.com/july00/library_administration_p34.html (accessed 02/07/2001).

solving skills, to apply theory to practice, to exercise judgment, to adopt ethical and attitudinal values such as tolerance and integrity, to develop social skills such as the ability to work cooperatively, and to make a commitment to lifelong learning.⁹

CURRICULUM CONTENT

Danner examines in some detail the role of information professions, including required skills and competencies.¹⁰ He reports on a discussion on whether American law librarians should hold a Master of Library Science degree (MLS). It included debate about whether or not the qualification helped in the day-to-day work. He imparted the insight of a librarian who noted that her profession was not 'law librarianship' but 'librarianship', and law librarians without the MLS would only have limited career opportunities beyond law libraries:

The MLS indicate that those who have earned it are Librarians in the broadest sense, not the narrowest, and that their theoretical knowledge and practical skills and experience should be transferable to any environment.

We are inclined to this view too. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the content of the general curriculum that are of particular pertinence to law libraries. We will consider some of these below and comment upon the way that they are addressed within our own curriculum at QUT.

The Australian context

The eight ALIA core elements listed above are framed to reflect key aspects of library and information work so that graduates, whatever their ultimate employment, are able to understand the users of information and their various needs; to identify, evaluate and develop appropriate information products and services; to organise and provide access to information and knowledge; and to

⁹ University of Sydney 1993, *Generic attributes of graduates of the University of Sydney*. Available at www.usyd.edu.au/su/planning/policy/acad/102_grad.html (accessed 16/07/2001); Queensland University of Technology 2001, 'Generic attributes of QUT graduates', in *Manual of policies and procedures*, Chapter C – Teaching and Learning, Section 1.3). www.qut.edu.au/admin/mopp/C/C_01_03.html (accessed 03/07/2001).

manage the information environment and associated infrastructure. Within these elements a number have particular resonance for law librarianship.

User focus

This is addressed mainly by *information needs* (statement 2) and *information products* (statement 7).

Students are encouraged to adopt a strong user focus in their approach to library and information work. Regardless of the discipline, the user should be central to the decisions made in terms of the sources, content and systems of the information environment, so it is important for law librarians to develop an understanding of the features of a quality service. Most courses pay attention, for example, to the importance of the reference interview in determining client needs for reference and research.

The clients of law libraries represent a broad cross section of information skills: older partners in a law firm may be regarded as technophobic, clinging to the comfortable print medium, while the new Generation X lawyers thrive in the electronic information environment. This means the law librarian needs to have a wide range of skills to work with such disparate clients. Information literacy and user education are important elements of information work: users are encouraged to become more independent in their research, so it is important to educate (and subsequently re-educate) clients about the new technology applications. The law librarian can play a proactive role by anticipating clients' training needs.

Information provision

This is addressed mainly by *information sources* (statement 5) and *evaluation* (statement 8).

Provision skills developed by graduates of the LIS courses are critical to law librarians. A major component of the job is reference and research work, which demands a comprehensive knowledge of sources of information, not only within

¹⁰ Danner, Richard 1998, 'Redefining a profession', *Law Library Journal*, vol. 90, no. 3, pp. 315-356. A version of this is available at www.law.duke.edu/fac/danner/callweb.htm (accessed 25/07/01).

the field of law, but also of a broader nature to be able to respond to requests for non-legal information. The research skills of the law librarian also require the ability to draw on the more generic skills of analysis, problem solving and evaluation.

Students need to be able to understand the publishing process within the range of media available today so that they can develop skills to identify and evaluate the tools and sources that will be the most appropriate in different situations. The selection and acquisition of resources grows increasingly more complex, highlighting the need for an understanding of cooperative collection development, and document delivery initiatives.

New legal developments emerge constantly, and a thorough knowledge of the subject matter evolves as a continuing process in the work place: it cannot be taught in the classroom. However, current awareness strategies that can be incorporated into daily professional life, such as scanning journals, monitoring legal listservs and news services, can be emphasised. These approaches should prepare someone going into a law firm to be able to monitor legislative, business and industry developments, impacting on the firm and its clients.

Students should be introduced to the processes that enable them to evaluate collections and to develop collection policies that are relevant to their immediate situation. They need to understand the issues that are central to collection management so that appropriate purchasing, licensing and preservation decisions are made. Legal materials are characterised by the large number of serial publications, with an ever-increasing variety of electronic sources reflecting the dynamic and changing publishing environment. Students should be adaptable to this situation if comfortable with general principles.

Information organisation

This is addressed mainly by *organise access* (statement 6), with some framework provided by *broad context* (statement 1).

Students are introduced to the methodologies of description and organisation of knowledge in its various recorded forms, developing an understanding of the standards and rules that may apply in different environments. The principles of content analysis, vocabulary control, indexing and classification can be applied in practical projects such as the creation of bibliographic databases.

Students become familiar with the principles of classification through the *DDC* and *LC* schemes, as well as other schemes that have been implemented in specific subject areas, and may be applied in contexts outside libraries, such as on the Internet. In fact the Internet provides a broader context within which they may be introduced to more general principals of organisation per medium of metadata. The principles of description and classification, introduced through such protocols as Dublin Core, are intended to produce students who can move with ease into environments where alternative standards are used, whether they be descriptive standards such as *MARC*, *AGLS*, content standards such as the *Legal Thesaurus*, or *Moys*.

Students should also be able to apply improvements such as better subject access in catalogue records through inclusion of contents notes, or direct links to web sites or fulltext documents using the flexibility of library management systems.

Management of the information environment

As is to be expected, there is an element of management in all the ALIA statements, but it is most explicit in *plan strategically* (statement 3), and *infrastructure* (statement 4).

There have been concerns that, as the spectrum of technical knowledge increases and needs to be incorporated into the curriculum, the level of interest in management issues may be reduced. These have been expressed as a need to underscore the importance of strong management.¹¹

¹¹ Library Administration and Management Association 1999, *LAMA statement of concern related to the education of professionals for libraries and information service careers*. www.ala.org/congress/lama.html (accessed on 01/07/2001).

Students in professional courses are normally introduced to the concepts of marketing, fiscal management and financial reporting, and space planning.¹² Professional standards are also introduced to stress the importance of ethics and legal responsibilities.

Human resources management is central to library work: there is close involvement with colleagues, at both professional and paraprofessional levels throughout the organisation, as well as requirements to manage casual staff, or outsourcing. The advent of knowledge management has given a new dimension to human resources, as librarians grapple with the necessity to correlate documented information with the intellectual capital. The relationship of knowledge management to information management is now an important element of curriculum.

Many of the desired generic attributes of graduates in general, and of graduate librarians in particular, relate to the area of effective management skills. Business communication skills are especially important to people working in the legal environment.

APPLYING CURRICULUM AT QUT

At QUT, the graduate course is an eight unit Graduate Diploma. Intake from any completed non-LIS course is accepted providing there is some basic IT study within the course. It also permits articulation into a Master of Information Technology that may be completed by another four electives. However, most graduates exit with the Diploma (which has ALIA recognition) and head for the workforce. The undergraduate course is a specific stream, also recognised by ALIA, through a Bachelor of Information Technology. It aims to produce graduates with combined skills in computer and information literacy.¹³

¹² Think about how often law librarians are involved in relocating the library – or indeed the whole firm – or merging with other firms.

¹³ Details of the two courses are at www.qut.edu.au/pubs/hBK_current/courses/IT25.html and www.qut.edu.au/pubs/hbk_current/courses/IT21.html (accessed 26/07/01).

The preceding general comments about curriculum have been employed in curriculum development for both courses. There are several other factors that are particular to the courses because of the interests of the staff members, and their location in an IT faculty.

Knowledge management

Knowledge management principles are introduced within the framework of information management units. The particular awareness of law librarians in this area, the willingness of local members of the profession to contribute to case

studies, and the fact that this is a field of research in one of the Faculty's centres, have all sustained this area.

Systems analysis

Either version of the course requires students to undertake a unit on systems analysis. This involves an introduction to requirements analysis for information processing systems, and the application of this to the design and development of such systems. At the undergraduate level, it is a key element linked with data modelling for information systems. At the graduate level it is a stand-alone unit. In each case, we feel that it introduces students to the analytical framework with which to approach information management environments in general.

Professional practice

Professional practice is a required component of both courses; in each case students undertake two brief postings in information management environments.¹⁴ Students who are interested in law librarianship as a career have the opportunity to undertake a placement with a private law firm, in a government law library or in a university law library.

Electives are permitted in both courses, but the Faculty only permits a limited number and must have sufficient enrolments for them to run. Students from both

¹⁴ Curriculum workplace experience is highlighted by ALIA to serve as an 'integrated component to link the theory and practice of the profession' (ALIA Board of Education 2000 *op. cit.*)

courses may attend the electives together, but with a total elective enrolment of just over a hundred from the Diploma and the degree LIS stream at any time, the numbers do not justify electives in many specialties, law librarianship included.

Teaching and learning approaches are diverse and encourage reflective practice. The academic framework incorporates many forms of learning including group, project and problem based, and practical work experience. By fostering an active learning environment, staff encourage the understanding of theoretical principles in conjunction with practical opportunities for students to synthesise and apply their new knowledge.

Students themselves bring a wide range of different experiences and talents to the course, and they take with them a spectrum of new competencies, skills and interests. One argument for the broad scope, rather than a narrow area of specialisation, is that students can never know precisely what direction their future career might take. Initial interests may be modified or new interests may emerge as they are introduced to new topics and issues. There are many librarians serendipitously working in roles they never envisaged. The more general curriculum enables students to develop an understanding of standard principles that will offer them greater flexibility in their career.

We acknowledge that LIS education is currently in a transitional phase, reflecting the information environment itself, as it moves from library issues of information ownership towards issues such as management of access to electronic formats of information. It is important, of course, to remind other stakeholders – users, clients and employers – that not all information is available online. Our philosophy is that there remains a need for the broad base of skills that underpin an understanding of the principles and practice of information organisation, the ability to evaluate the content of information resources, the delivery of quality information services, and the effective management of it all.

Our LIS curricula aspire to maintain the flexibility to build in the traditional skills of librarianship and to adapt them to meet the current needs of this evolving, more expansive and challenging information environment.

CONCLUSION

The constraints applying to universities have seen Australian LIS departments generally subsumed within broader groupings. These have the advantage of bringing in more specialised teaching within areas relevant to information management like management, psychology or IT. However, they preclude the teaching of library specialties. On the other hand, the growing investment in universities to provide digital delivery of course materials has increased the flexibility of distance education. This has been accompanied by efforts to make available enrolment in specialised units from other institutions within courses. In this respect, there has been collaboration by interested LIS parties resulting in a web site that itemises relevant subjects.¹⁵

If there are to be specialised approaches to information management for the law, they could be developed by one institution and offered to other institutions by distance education within the framework of their own courses. However, this requires a number of hurdles to be overcome in relation to resource commitment, expertise, curriculum and collaboration.

An alternative, in an era where lifelong learning has assumed a greater profile, is the pursuit of continuing professional development, now formally fostered by ALIA through its Associate Fellow category. A first professional course should be acknowledged to be simply an important first step in the career, supplemented by continuing education as an essential ongoing process to gain the additional knowledge and skills needed to support a successful career. Law librarians have access to a range of professional development opportunities within Australia through ALLG seminars, symposia and conferences. The commitment to continuing professional development must be encouraged from the outset by educators, so that its significance for personal career management is appreciated.

We have indicated that law librarianship draws on a wide range of skills and competencies. A recent job advertisement indicated that the academic law

librarian would be involved in the provision of reference services, faculty liaison, user education, collection development of policies and procedures, budgeting, personnel management, strategic management and web development. Added to this was the requirement for proven service-orientation, interpersonal organisational, leadership, teamwork and communication skills. The expansive range of knowledge and skills required in such a position highlights the importance of conceptual learning within an LIS programme that can serve as the foundation for further job-specific skill development.

¹⁵ Information Studies Educators Forum 2001, *Australian information studies schools*. farer.riv.csu.edu.au/als/ (accessed 26/07/01).