Memories of the future

The year is 2020. Sheffield University's MSc in Electronic & Digital Library Management has been running for 10 years. What paths have its graduates' careers taken? **Andrew Cox** and students **Kevin Cooper**, **Chia Ching Chang**, **Mashael Al-Omar**, **John Shawler** and **Simon Wakeling** report.

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IT IS NOW 10 years since the creation of Sheffield University's MSc in Electronic & Digital Library Management,[1] and, to mark the anniversary, students from the 2010 course were contacted to discover how their careers have fared since graduation. The vocational potential of the course was a primary consideration when the programme was developed, as programme co-ordinator Andrew Cox explains.

'I remember when we were first developing the course worrying about a Michael Wesch video that was popular at that time.[2] Wesch was saying that students will graduate to work in a job that doesn't yet exist. It is quite a responsibility for a teacher to prepare students for emergent, "boundaryless" careers. We were also thinking about the increasing hybrid nature of professional roles, with people having complex career trajectories that seem to take them on a path between librarian, IT person, knowledge manager, content manager, scholar.[3] It will be interesting to hear from students about how well we helped them. We were always thinking about teaching flexibility, learning to learn, developing skills in research and taking a strategic approach. More practically we wanted them to understand things like electronic resource management processes and how to set up their own digital library, from hands-on digitisation to defining metadata standards.'

So what of some of the students who graduated back in 2010? We turn first to Kevin Cooper:

'I was already working in an academic library when I enrolled on the course, but wanted to gain skills and knowledge that would help develop my role within the ever more important digital environment. As a Subject Librarian my role has always been to select, organise and facilitate access to information, and fundamentally little has changed over the last 10 years. I still work in what I would describe as a library and, although e-publishing is the norm today, with distribution by companies such as Google Books, we still have our antique book collection (although the days of multiple copies are long gone) from which I can digitise chapters from books which are not available electronically. The dramatic rise in the amount of material available online means my information retrieval skills are more important than ever, and I spend a lot of my time nowadays developing highly focused digital libraries for each taught unit in my subject area. These are a combination of e-books, journal articles, podcasts and other audiovisual recordings , and with the latest translation software they are easily accessible to our students across the globe.'

Moving further afield, Chia Ching Chang has returned to her native Taiwan and is working to promote the Taipei Public Library's new suite of services:

'It has been a long, long time since books were a core part of our library. The lending model we apply allows users to download digital resource from our website – either directly to portable devices or to computers. One problem we have encountered is the potential exclusion of people without access to the basic hardware, so we also run schemes to provide devices as well as the resource itself. Promoting this service and managing the logistics of the supply and return of such devices forms a key part of my job. I also spend a lot of time running our audio-book facilities. We have just started running a new project called Train of Knowledge with Taipei Metro – we played audio books and some book reviews (audio version) in certain coaches of the Knowledge Train to let passengers "listen to a book". It has helped promote our circulation a lot. This is not to say we provide no physical books. Only recently I received a delivery of books from our warehouse for a special exhibition we are running next month – 'Children's Fiction 1970-1990'. The fact that I remember many of titles (I just came across The Snowman by Raymond Briggs) makes me feel a little old!'

Mashael Al-Omar has also been working outside the UK:

'After graduating I returned to my role as the head of an information centre in Kuwait, and faced many barriers developing my organisation. In an environment where the demand for our services and the expectations of our users

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> *'My job involves ensuring each item in our digital collection is properly marked up with the correct digital rights management (DRM) encoding. My key relationship is with Google Books.'*

References

1 http://bit.ly/9AxPHQ

2 http://bit.ly/jnYR

3 S. Corrall and A. Cox. 'Capturing the hybrid ground.' *Library & Information Update*, 7 (7-8), 2008, pp. 42-44.

4 http://bit.ly/9FEdzz

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have risen at a pace beyond the growth of our budgets, we focused heavily on methods of gauging user satisfaction, and establishing robust evaluative frameworks for our services. With the digital revolution in libraries, new user-centred analytic methods evolved that allowed us to monitor the success of our services in real time. This not only allowed us to ensure we were meeting our users' expectations, but let me focus on developing the skills of my staff in the areas that would have the most impact on my organisation's performance. Now as a faculty member I am teaching digital library courses and researching digital library evaluation, with an emphasis on developing, managing and maintaining digital libraries in Kuwait and the Gulf region.'

In the US, John Shawler is now a DRM Manager:

'My job involves ensuring each item in our digital collection is properly marked up with the correct digital rights management (DRM) encoding. My key relationship is with Google Books, the largest supplier of e-books in the world. This relationship governs the access of patrons who wish to view and virtually borrow books to read on desktops, laptops, mobile phones and other portable devices. The partnership with Google Books relies on a subscription fee which is variable, according to the size of the library's customer base and number of patrons. Another large part of my role is to encode new material which enters the library with tracking information. This information is used to monitor how and why the borrowed material is being accessed. With this information, the library database can automatically generate recommendations for the user based on their previous browsing and borrowing history. In addition, this information is used to prevent DRM circumvention and, by extension, violation of copyright and media piracy. The stringent legal penalties now in place for institutions which breach copyright mean we have been forced to explore every possible measure that might help ensure compliance.'

Closer to home, Simon Wakeling is working as a Semantic Web Librarian at a UK university library:

'My career has centred on the incorporation of interactive web technologies into library systems, particularly methods of utilising community-generated content to augment more traditional information retrieval models. Sophisticated recommender software and systems for sharing resources are now integral to most library platforms, and the demand for truly personalised services has led to a radical change in how libraries present their services. Most students now manage their own personal digital collections, with the library one of many providers of resources and support – something that meant libraries becoming ever more brand conscious. More recently the emergence of semantic technologies as part of the mainstream web has also brought challenges, and has led most libraries to employ a specialist responsible for managing their semantic web services. This means utilising tag clouds and folksonomies to feed subject or relational ontologies, and determining new and innovative ways to aid the evaluation, linking and discovery of library and wider web resources. The strengthening of web accessibility legislation has meant considerable work being done to ensure library services are available to all (I remember making a film about this at Sheffield[4]), and of course the huge increase in the proportion of distance learners means we are now supporting educators more than ever before in virtual environments.'

So what can we conclude from these diverse career paths? Andrew sees some common themes:

'I think what comes out of these accounts is a sense of changing skills but enduring values. The shared concern to offer to everyone in society unhindered, easy access to knowledge, as well as caring about the rights of privacy and, yes, those of rights-holders too. One thing that is different and stronger is the global connectedness of the profession. What the internet has enabled us to do is maintain ties – not just among alumni of the EDLM course, but students on our other courses, indeed with current students and staff. What they used to call the invisible college seems to be more and more visible and powerful.' [U]