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Practitioner involvement in teaching LIS at UWE

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Abstract

Purpose - This paper reviews the practitioner based teaching model for the MSc in Information and Library Management (ILM) at the University of the West of England (UWE). With input from students, practitioners and academics it considers the advantages and disadvantages of this approach and questions whether this is indeed the way forward for LIS education.

Design/methodology/approach - A case study approach is used with views gained from students, practitioners and academic staff involved in the course. These views were gained from a combination of informal focus groups, informal interviews and a short email questionnaire asking current students their views on practitioner involvement in the course.

Findings - Findings reveal a model of practitioner based learning on the MSc ILM at UWE which is meeting student and employer needs in terms of the skills they require in their future roles. Findings also raise questions as to how we can best ensure the involvement of practitioners in the future of the course; whether practitioner input is needed from a broader range of roles outside of the library and information service; and how we can best maintain a balance of academic and practical skills.

Practical implications - The study suggests that more thought may be needed on securing practitioner involvement in the development and delivery of LIS education and further consideration on whether some of that involvement should be from a wider range of roles.

Originality/value - This paper identifies the need to consider how to best ensure the ongoing involvement of practitioners in LIS education particularly those outside of academic libraries, whilst maintaining the balance of academic rigour. It is valuable to those involved in designing and delivering course content and to those thinking about getting involved.

Keywords Library and Information Science (LIS) education, Information and library management, Employability, Practitioner

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The MSc Information and Library Management (ILM) programme at the University of the West of England (UWE) is distinctive in that it is taught with a major contribution from practitioners.

Five years after the MSc ILM began in 1995 (which at that time was at the University of Bristol) Mike Heery, one of the originators of the course, reviewed the model of practitioner based teaching which had evolved to support the programme. Heery found that the course provided a successful postgraduate education for Library and Information Science entrants which emphasised the important role of practitioners in the education of LIS students. Heery highlighted the need for ongoing market research
and more consultation with library and information professionals over opportunities for new modules and continuing professional development (CPD). Ten years after this first review, we look again at the practitioner-based model for LIS postgraduate education.

This paper takes a case study approach, reviewing the practitioner-based teaching model at UWE. With input from students, practitioners and academic staff teaching on the course, as well as reflections on the author’s own personal experience, the benefits and concerns of this practitioner-based model are examined. A review of recent literature on LIS education forms part of the discussion on whether the practical/vocational nature of LIS education and practitioner-based teaching is indeed the way forward.

The practitioner-based model at UWE

The MSc in Information and Library Management (ILM) is taught with a majority contribution by practicing library and information professionals. The teaching team is drawn from information systems staff in the Faculty of Environment and Technology (where the programme is based, staff from UWE Library Services and senior library and information professionals across a range of services and sectors in the South West of England. From the beginning, when it was established in 1995 at the University of Bristol, there has been a strong ethos of practitioner involvement and emphasis on the course, reflecting the needs of practitioners in terms of the skills they required from new entrants into the profession. The well established and successful course transferred to the University of West of England (UWE) in 2005 following a review that showed the programme was somewhat removed from the mainstream of the University of Bristol’s research and teaching direction.

The course was developed as a practical one, taught by Library practitioners with strong linkages to the library and information services of the region. It is perhaps then no surprise that this is still the case today, although with even more practitioner involvement. In the recent revalidation, the programme team were commended for developing the programme inherited from the University of Bristol into “a dynamic, fluid programme that was responsive to rapidly advancing technology, responsive in the engagement with stakeholders and meeting the needs of the local area and further afield.”

Course content – reflecting needs of employers

The MSc ILM has seven core modules – Library and Information Services, Transferable Management Skills, Working with Information, Research Methods in Information and Library Management, Management of Information and Library Services, Information Systems and Services, and a dissertation in Information and Library Management. Three of these core modules are taught by academic teaching staff in the Bristol Institute of Technology (Faculty of Environment and Technology). The other four core modules are all taught by library and information practitioners. The course also has five optional modules covering Public Libraries with Services for Young People, Academic Libraries, Government and Legal Information Services, Corporate Information Services, Health and Social Care Information Services. These are all taught by practitioners. Practitioners are library and information professionals who work full time in other employment and who organise their whole module under
the mentorship of a permanent member of UWE staff, either Faculty or Library Services, who act as the official module leaders. The practitioners who organise modules also supervise dissertations in relevant subject areas. In addition practitioners/experts in the field are used as guest speakers on both core and optional modules.

Many of the core modules have remained the same in overall structure, though they have been updated with new content and some changes have been made to the way they are assessed. Others have evolved to reflect the need for new skills, such as the new core module Information Systems & Services which has been developed to address the need for skills in information architecture and experience of metadata standards. Whilst some of the optional modules – Public Libraries with Services for Young People, Academic Libraries and Government & Legal Information Services – remain close to their predecessors, others have changed to reflect changes in the needs of the profession and wider library and information trends. Health and Medical Information Services has evolved to Health and Social Care Information Services and the old Special Libraries module has been redeveloped as Corporate Information Services, reflecting the expanding need for information skills in the business sector.

As the course has developed, option sets have been simplified and reorganised to help with timetabling, assessment and student workload, particularly for the part-time students. Programmes and modules are routinely evaluated, formally and informally, by a number of means including module questionnaires, programme reports, and accreditation visits. Student experience committees and other staff-student meetings also provide a means of gauging student opinion of the course and enable the department to respond to the needs highlighted.

The use of “real life” case studies and scenarios now form an integral part of the course, providing a combination of theory and reflection on practice with original thinking and creativity. Some modules use case studies as part of their assessment. These case studies give the students a real flavour of how what they learn can be applied in a work environment.

**Linkages with local employers**
Links with employers in the South West region were established from the outset of the course, with employers being invited to make suggestions on course content. Over the years these linkages have been developed and strengthened. An annual Employers Fair for LIS is held at UWE which includes staff from universities, public libraries, Bristol Schools’ Library Services, Solicitors, government bodies and a local technology company in the region. This event provides a valuable opportunity to maintain essential links with employers in the region. It gives the course team an opportunity to explain the curriculum and context of the course and to provide employers with the opportunity to input their ideas and experience. These linkages with employers in the region also give rise to project work for students, forms of employment and placement opportunities for work experience.

**Responding to market need**
Links with employers also make for a very market-responsive course. The MSc ILM at UWE is a practical course based very much on market need. The course team are continually reflecting on how to meet the continuing professional development needs...
of library and information staff in the region. One area currently being explored is a top-up degree, a modular scheme forming a progression route for foundation degree graduates to achieve an honours degree. This would offer a progression and specialism path for foundation graduates from the South West region. The modules as part of this top up degree are being developed mostly by practitioners both in academic libraries and in the corporate sector and are focusing on information literacy, information systems, and information and knowledge management.

The view of those involved – students, practitioners and academics
These views were gained from a combination of informal focus groups, informal interviews and a short email questionnaire asking the students and those teaching on the course their views on practitioner involvement in the course.

The interviews clearly showed that the students were not at all surprised by the heavy involvement of practitioners in the course.

To have non-library practitioners teaching on the course would seem odd.

I would actually expect practitioners to run the course. However practitioners may be set in their ways, i.e. have a single view of things.

The fact that those teaching were doing the jobs that students were actually learning about was viewed as a huge benefit.

Insight into the workplace
Students commented on how having practitioners teaching on the course gives a good insight into library and information roles in the workplace. The practical/vocational nature of the course was also highlighted as being a positive with comments such as:

The course feels part of a job/career. (MSc ILM student)

I think it's helpful to have an insider's perspective on some of the topics and issues and it helps to bring the course to life, so that it is not just theoretical. Although I thought the management modules were well taught in the first term, the elements of the course that were taught by practitioners did seem more directly relevant to me, both in terms of my career so far and future interests. (MSc ILM student)

I don’t like receiving information in a vacuum. A lecturer with no experience in what they are teaching is presenting an ideal view of the world. Practitioners who are actually working in the areas they are teaching give a sense of realism.

Balance between academic and practitioner
Whilst this sense of realism and understanding of how what you are learning can be applied in the workplace, comments from students, practitioners and academics show the need for a balance.

The balance of practitioners and academics on the MSc ILM was thought to be good.

There is a good combination of academics to provide background and theory with practitioners who can provide practical examples.
When asked to name up to three aspects of the course that they felt should be preserved one student said:

The balance between the guest speakers/lecturers and academics. I think it adds a more practical element to the course that makes it easier to link what you are learning to what you have done and hope to go on to do. I thought the combination of practitioners and academics was a good one overall.

However, it is not always easy to get the balance right between the academic and the practical. Practitioners are not always aware of other aspects of the course and the timing of topics, which can result in some duplication or students being misinformed. Setting assignments and marking is often a challenge to the practitioner new to teaching as they are often not part of the academic community and so less aware of the academic processes and standards.

The issue of content coverage is echoed by an academic lecturer on the course who recognises that the involvement of practitioners does make course content more difficult to co-ordinate. Co-ordination can also be difficult from an administration perspective: with a variety of practitioners from different sectors and outside academia it can be difficult for them to travel to or get the time to attend course meetings. With more remote working opportunities and virtual learning environments this can hopefully be addressed.

Both students and academic practitioners commented on the disappointment with some guest speakers. At times guest speakers seem unprepared and talk “off the cuff” with little supporting materials. This is often a problem but not one specific to LIS education. Although presenters may be subject matter experts they are not necessarily trained in or accustomed to teaching, which may mean they use less engaging teaching methods:

But where speakers prepare properly, it really brings a valuable dimension to the sessions. (Practitioner)

One student raised the concern that a practitioner whilst being an expert in their particular subject, for example, cataloguing and classification, may only be doing that in their professional post and may lack the wider view of the organisation.

It seems though, that:

If the practitioner could deliver the academic theory as well as the practical and this could be true across the board that would be the ideal. (Student)

Networking

Practitioner involvement enables the students to network and gain useful contacts for professional development and advice in relation to future employment. It can also lead to invitations that involve students in professional events:

It is useful to have real life librarians. They can provide a “way in” to organisations and information. (Student)
The networking potential of practitioners is good, i.e., we can contact them outside the course for help/advice. (Student)

The value of the networking, the workplace insights and ongoing support practitioners can offer when students get to know them well can increase their confidence considerably and provide a marked improvement to the “work readiness” that appears so important to employers. (Practitioner)

Access to knowledge
Access to the knowledge of experienced library and information professionals who are high up in their respective organisations was viewed as a real positive, particularly when it came to advice around dissertation topics and dissertation supervision. One student commented how valuable having a Head of a Library Service as a supervisor was for their dissertation as it gave access to such high level knowledge and experience.

I felt privileged to have my dissertation supervised by a Head of Library Service. His breadth and depth of knowledge and experience was incredibly helpful and enlightening. It was one of the highlights of the course for me. (Student)

The value of having access to knowledge and hearing the views of new and often younger entrants into the profession is also felt by practitioners involved in supervising dissertations.

Supervising dissertation students gives me the chance to see some really interesting issues in more depth. (Practitioner)

Practitioner involvement – enhancing teaching and learning
Comments from practitioners show a high level of enthusiasm for teaching on the course. Although it is not just enthusiasm that is required, teachers who are passionate about what they do will stimulate interest and learning in the students.

On a personal level I find involvement in the course gives me a huge amount of professional enrichment. It stimulates me to research areas which I might otherwise pass by. (Practitioner)

Discussion – practitioner involvement, is this the way forward?
In the paper “Practitioners as educators: the Bristol MSc in Information and Library Management” (Heery, 1999) Heery considers the issues arising from the establishment of the MSc ILM and the involvement of practitioners in designing and delivering LIS education. The involvement of practitioners in LIS education has been highlighted as a good way forward, but Heery cautions us on this approach:

Are lecturers able to devote adequate time to the course? Should not teaching be informed by an academic research environment? Are staff available to provide students with individual guidance when they need it? How do lecturers working in different libraries keep an overview of the whole course? How do they develop their own modules for the benefit of the whole package? How do they share their experiences of teaching? Who gives thought to the strategic development of the course and any new courses? Is an emphasis on skills and practice limiting in vision or lacking academic rigour? Is the Bristol model one that should be copied elsewhere? (Heery, 1999)
Some of the issues that Heery raises have been addressed, some are still challenges and other new issues have come to the fore.

**Practitioners’ time**
Practitioners teaching on the MSc are librarians or information professionals who work full time in other employment. As well as the actual teaching of the content there is the organisation of their module, assessment setting and marking, and following up student questions. As Heery points out, teaching on an MSc module is a big commitment. In today’s economic climate of reduced budgets and increasing demands on practitioners’ time, how do we ensure not only that practitioners on the course have the time to devote to teaching but also that they remain involved in the course, particularly in relation to representing the different sectors with LIS roles? For academic library practitioners this is generally recognised as an important development part of their role and an opportunity to enhance their existing teaching skills. For LIS practitioners outside academia it can be more challenging to gain not only support from employers, but also the time needed. With the strong linkages the course has in the South West region, there is a wide recognition of the role the MSc ILM has in equipping new entrants to the profession with the skills they need and it seems this is key in ensuring future practitioner involvement.

From the comments received from practitioners in this small study and from personal experience, there is no doubt about the personal development and fulfilment gained from teaching on the MSc programme. The comment made by Mike Heery over ten years ago still holds true today:

> It stimulates and directs professional reading and other activities, giving a focus for development. It helps practitioners to reflect upon their own professional practice. It is also satisfying, in that many people who participate in the course derive satisfaction from the interaction with students (Heery, 1999).

**Employer needs**

While it is recognised that library and information graduates are still required to be taught core theories, knowledge and skills while at university, employers are increasingly demanding them to have additional skills to enable them to function as competent information professionals (Stephens and Hamblin 2006).

Research carried out as part of the Library and Information Management Employability Skills (LIMES) project shows the continuing need for graduates with the core skills of the profession: for example, the organisation of information, collection management and enquiry work, as well as the need for skills in customer care and awareness of technology and how that impacts on the provision of information to users. The study found that, in their new entrants, employers were looking for awareness of the library and information sector and of how an information unit worked. This was found to be lacking in LIS courses. Also lacking was an awareness of how the skills learnt in degree courses could be applied in the workplace.
It is this awareness of the information field and the application of the skills learnt that practitioners can really help with. They have the expertise and experience, and they have the examples from which students can really learn. New emerging roles are creating increased demands for the following skills: research skills, awareness of legislation, web development, records management, application of IT within an organisation (Stephens and Hamblin, 2006). Engaging with practitioners, involving them in decisions over course content and having them teach others about what they do, how they do it and why, giving insights into their particular sector, must surely be a good model for preparing entrants into the profession.

Library and Information Services Management, including budget management, appear in some format in most LIS courses. What are less defined and more difficult to teach are the softer skills of negotiation, persuasion and influencing. Yet these are crucial in the competitive environment that many LIS roles now exist in:

Less is said about “effective boss management”, without which development of the service may be curtailed and its survival may even be threatened. Even less, I suspect is said about the strategic issues that surround information provision in organisations (Johnson, 2009).

This is where practitioner input, from those dealing with these issues on a day to day basis, is essential.

Colvin discusses the growing trend of roles for graduates with LIS skills outside of libraries and calls for us to gain feedback from business leaders and graduates in non-library settings on the effectiveness of LIS training.

Stephen Abram, outgoing president of the American Library Association, comments:

In my opinion, there is a severe gap on the output side of most library schools to train people in the soft skills, such as management, leadership, relationships and interviewing (Colvin, 2009).

Should LIS education be preparing students for dealing with more of these strategic issues or is this a skill that is gained through experience? I would argue that practitioners have a key role here in at least giving an insight into why these issues are important and providing examples of how to deal with them. Johnson (2009) questions whether LIS education needs to expand its remit – perhaps the practitioner input can be too narrow in focus and we need to involve practitioners from other fields, for example, business managers to give more of that wider organisational perspective and help develop the skills to influence organisational change.

This is echoed by some of the comments made from those surveyed which questioned whether some practitioners might have too narrow a focus on their core subject and less wider industry or organisational awareness. Whilst enabling LIS professionals to broaden their skill sets and improve awareness of their skills within their organisation, this would also give the non-LIS practitioners a better understanding of the Library and Information professionals skills.

Focusing on these aspects of professional roles in LIS education can better equip our students to enter the profession and cope with the demands placed on them.
In their paper looking at how LIS education at the University of Sheffield has changed since the 1960s, Brewster and Chapman (2009) suggest that as long as the LIS curriculum remains up-to-date and focused on professional needs, the future of LIS education looks good for another 60 years. As a result of responding to employer needs and emerging trends modules are created and modules are disbanded. Although this constant change in syllabus structure can pose problems to academic staff in terms of scheduling and approval, this is considered necessary if the content taught is to reflect the needs of an ever changing LIS environment.

The LIS – practitioner gap
Much has been written about the perceived gap between LIS educators and LIS professionals. Halam looks at LIS education in Australia where there has been a decline in the numbers of academic staff in the library and information science discipline. Halam points out that there has been a decline in the numbers of academic staff members in the LIS discipline particularly with a PhD being considered essential criteria. Over the period 1996-2005, the number of staff decreased from 130 to 64 (Halam, 2007).

Not only are the numbers dropping but the educators themselves are “greying”.

Which she feels raises issues in terms of the currency and relevance of the curriculum.

Halam suggests that more needs to be done to ensure the profession is equipped with the skills needed:

The process of developing these innovative, visionary and successful library and information professionals is not the sole responsibility of the LIS educator but must be viewed as a career-long process that involves the individual, universities, training providers, employers and professional associations (Halam, 2007).

Weller and Haider see the current situation of academic LIS research as problematic. They argue that the field of LIS has moved closer to professional and business degrees with less emphasis on academic research and academic (as opposed to vocational) teaching. The authors found that the faculties offering LIS education (undergraduate and postgraduate) vary from business, computing, engineering and mathematical sciences to social sciences and humanities. As a result there is “a largely uncohesive postgraduate body”. Although the authors claim that students bringing their knowledge, preferences and methodologies from their undergraduate discipline could be a strength and broaden the field of LIS research, they are more concerned about the difficulties this brings in LIS being viewed as an academic discipline.

One could argue that the absence of an explicitly academic focus, which seems inherent to LIS almost from the start, also encourages implicit confusion or at least uncertainty which ultimately leads to a somewhat uncohesive form of community, of academics, and also of practitioners (Weller and Haider, 2007).

The authors raise concern that although the teaching of LIS professional education to practitioners is one of its most cohesive elements, this does not appear to promote LIS status as an academic discipline. It is professional issues that tend to be taught and stressed in LIS education rather than the academic.
Although LIS education is vocationally based, students are taught research skills and apply these through assignments, case studies and through the dissertation programme. As the roles that LIS students go on to fill broaden, these skills are used in a number of different settings across different sectors. Colvin suggests our task should be in building and reinforcing connections within and among different sectors, academia and business, across the public and private.

As our collective professions – comprising old and new standard bearers alike – encounter widely disparate ideas about what constitutes “real” librarians or “true” information professionals, we will continue to be faced with finding a common language and a compatible vision to guide us through the changes and “advancements” yet to come (Colvin, 2009).

Perhaps there is a danger that LIS education could focus too heavily on the practical skills needed by the profession and that the LIS research community could be isolated, particularly as the role of LIS graduates broadens. The emphasis has been on linking LIS research to practice. In today’s climate of quickening developments in technology and continual review of how we provide services in a cost effective way, surely this is the correct way to proceed. We do need, however, to ensure we are paying attention to the academic side of the discipline, particularly if it is leading to a lack of understanding around what the discipline is.

Conclusion
This review of the MSc ILM at UWE clearly shows the benefits gained from practitioner-based teaching, not only to the students on the course but to the wider LIS profession. The students are gaining a practical and relevant insight into what is needed in today’s work environment, with real life examples and topical case studies to work on. As a result this is helping to deliver graduates with the skills needed by employers. Feedback from employers is highlighting the need for knowledge of the application of skills and awareness of workplace environments. The practitioner-based model seems ideally placed to address this need.

If we are placing such emphasis on practitioner involvement in the design and delivery of LIS education, then how we ensure the future involvement of practitioners needs to be considered. As we see more LIS graduate skills being required in a wider range of non-traditional roles we may need to consider the breadth of practitioner input and whether some of this should be coming from non library and information professionals.

The question of maintaining a balance between the academic and the vocational remains a difficult one. The paper has highlighted concerns over the lack of academic identity for LIS and that the move to practical education may be partly responsible for this. While acknowledging the need to retain academic and research led content, we should be mindful of meeting the needs of employers and equipping students with the skills required. Practitioner involvement in this is key.
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