

Professional accreditation of library and information courses in the United Kingdom

RESUMO

O artigo revê a história e o desenvolvimento da acreditação profissional na área de biblioteca e informação, primeiramente na perspectiva do ensino de nível superior no Reino Unido e, em seguida, no contexto do desenvolvimento do ensino profissional em biblioteca e ciência da informação. Descreve as práticas e procedimentos actuais e conclui considerando a mudança de foco e de direcção que a revisão do processo de acreditação em curso, no CILIP, representa.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the history and development of professional accreditation in the library and information studies discipline initially from the broader perspective of higher education in the United Kingdom and subsequently in the context of the development of professional education in library and information science. It describes current practice and procedures and concludes by considering the changing focus and direction represented by CILIP's ongoing review of the accreditation process.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

ACREDITAÇÃO

BASE DE CONHECIMENTO

CILIP

FORMAÇÃO

PROGRAMAS

LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

INSTITUTE OF
INFORMATION SCIENTISTS

INTRODUCTION

CILIP – the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals – is the professional body for those working in library and information services or information science in the United Kingdom (UK). It was formed in April 2002 through the unification of the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists. Under the terms of its Royal Charter it has a duty to promote the knowledge skills and qualifications of its 24,000 members. It is currently responsible for accrediting over 60 courses at bachelor and masters level at 18 universities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. A list of currently accredited programmes can be found on the CILIP website: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/qualifications/where.html>

PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Professional and statutory bodies have played a key role in ensuring the quality of standards in professional and vocational education in the UK for many years and for the certification of new entrants to the profession. This has led to a system in which universities and professional bodies work in partnership on the development and provision of professional education. Normally accreditation is achieved through the review of documents submitted by the institution to the professional body and is generally linked to a visit to the awarding institution. The successful completion of accredited courses is linked wholly or partially to subsequent entry to the professional body and admission to the professional Register. In UK library and information education professional accreditation currently applies only to graduate and, increasingly, to postgraduate courses.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK

When the Library Association (LA) was founded (1877) there were only seven fully established universities in the UK teaching traditional, academic, subjects. Vocational education was firmly linked to the requirements of the traditional professions such as law and medicine. From the late nineteenth century on the range of subjects increased but remained focussed on the traditional professions, which did not at that stage include librarianship. A number of colleges and polytechnics were established that prepared students for examination in a variety of technical and vocational subjects at sub-degree level. However, for many years

professional education remained in the hands of practitioners with courses being provided by a number of colleges and also large employers, particularly in the public sector.

In the mid twentieth century a number of polytechnics were created that offered courses in both academic and vocational subjects to degree level, including librarianship.

THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

The Association was one of a number of Chartered Professional Associations formed during the late nineteenth century that assumed the role of examining bodies. There was considerable argument and debate during the remainder of the century as members struggled to agree the appropriate nature and role of the Association in respect of education. A syllabus was developed and examinations were held from 1885 onwards.

The granting of the Royal Charter in 1898 effectively limited admission to the professional register to those who had passed the Association's own examinations. The first library school was established at University College London in 1919 offering a two-year programme that was open to both graduates and non-graduates. The programme covered the same subjects as the Library Association's own examinations. Following the Second World War a further six Library Schools were established offering full-time classes following the Association's syllabus. Many of the students and lecturers at these schools did not feel that the Association's own syllabus was appropriate for a full-time course and the one-year course was replaced with a completely new two-year syllabus, from 1964.

Entrance requirements matched university undergraduate entrance requirements and full-time study for professional education rapidly became the norm. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s a number of universities introduced full-time undergraduate programmes following internally designed and approved courses. Some Library Schools continued to offer the Library Association examinations until the early 1980s. However, the decline in student numbers matched with an increasing number and diversity of undergraduate and masters programmes signalled an inevitable move to a graduate profession with the responsibility for determining syllabi completely removed from the influence of the professional body.

A NEW ROLE FOR THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION IN PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

These changes challenged the Association to establish a new role in professional education. A key lever was that Chartered status remained a requirement for many professional posts and furthermore the Library Association determined admission to the Register. A working party was set up chaired by Miss Lorna Paulin, to look at the role of the Association in full-time education. At the same time another working party was set up to consider whole issue of professional training and preparation for professional practice.

These reports were issued in 1977 (Library Association 1977). The publication of the second report normally referred to as the Paulin Report resulted in significant changes in the relationship between the Association and providers of full-time education.

One immediate outcome of the Paulin Report was that the Association ceased to be an examining body; members outside the UK sat the last Library Association examinations at local centres in 1985. Effort was instead directed to creating a more formal and effective mechanism of accreditation. From the outset the intention was not to be prescriptive about detailed course content but to encourage the academic community to ensure that their programmes were relevant to both current and emerging practice. These were identified in the Body of Professional Knowledge.

INSTITUTE OF INFORMATION SCIENTISTS

The Library Association was not the only professional body in our domain that became involved in accreditation. The Institute of Information Scientists (IIS), formed in 1957, had also developed policy and procedures for accrediting courses in universities and polytechnics that often included more specialist programmes in information science. Both bodies worked increasingly in close partnership with the universities and by the end of the 1980s both were regularly invited to participate in joint validation and accreditation events where they might consider individual programmes or whole schemes.

PROFESSIONAL BODY ACCREDITATION IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

By the 1980s the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists had both developed accreditation instruments. Despite their different approaches

the underlying philosophy was that both organisations had in place effective mechanisms for ensuring the recruitment of quality assured graduates into the profession and eventually onto their respective professional registers. Their accreditation instruments provided what Peter ENSER has described as «a conceptual map of the subject discipline against which the content of each submitted courses could be compared» (ENSER 2002). They were concerned with more than just the content of a course but with the whole learning experience and with the fitness for professional practice that might be expected from graduates from accredited programmes.

In recognition of the ever-closer cooperation between the Institute and the Association their accreditation operations were merged to form a Joint Accreditation Instrument in 1999. That Accreditation Instrument was subsequently re-adopted by the new professional body, CILIP, in 2002 and has remained in use to this date (CILIP 2002a).

It is important to bear in mind that completion of an accredited course is not thought sufficient to provide all the formal learning opportunities that practitioners in our dynamic and rapidly changing discipline require. Thus career planning and development (CPD), sometimes referred to as continuous professional development, has long been considered essential for those wishing to keep their knowledge skills and understanding up to date in the increasingly competitive environment in which library and information workers operate.

CURRENT PRACTICE

Accreditation of library and information studies programmes in the UK is managed by the Accreditation Board of CILIP, with administrative support provided by the Membership, Careers and Qualifications Department, located at the London offices. The Board has fully devolved responsibility for this crucial area of professional body activity but reports to the Professional Development Committee and through them to CILIP Council.

Membership of the Board is drawn from all sectors and members represent a wide range of practice, most of them at senior level. The accreditation process allows practitioners to contribute directly to courses intended to meet the employment needs of current and developing practice. The accreditation process has a secondary value beyond the quality endorsement aspect that CILIP recognition affords a Department. It can also support professional colleagues

by endorsing their requests for additional funding and resources as well as providing a quality stamp on the programme or programmes offered.

Accreditation is carried out at the invitation of the university. However, CILIP also approaches universities offering more specialist or technical programmes, for example in the emerging fields of knowledge management, cultural heritage and information architecture, as they become known.

An accreditation visiting party (VP) will, as far as possible, reflect relevant professional expertise and experience in the areas covered by the syllabus of the programme or programmes under review. Frequently accreditation visits are combined with the universities own internal quality review process, or validation, and bring together academic and the practice based review procedures. In those cases the VP will also be looking for features that are not normally part of the validation panels remit in terms of the adequacy of the course as a preparation for professional practice. A programme cannot be formally considered for accreditation until the validation has been agreed.

Courses submitted for accreditation may be at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Specifically designated pathways through multidisciplinary degree schemes may also be put forward for accreditation. In assessing a course the VP have as their primary concern the relevance of the course to current and developing practice in librarianship and information science, rather than purely academic issues. In view of the wide range of skills and expertise now needed for the efficient provision of information and the effective management of library and information services it is no longer appropriate to stipulate precise requirements for course content. The VP look for evidence that students emerge equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills to enable them to enter the profession, however specialist their course.

For many years library and information studies courses in the UK were fairly general in content with any specialisation being gained through specific modules. However, the rapidly expanding market for information professionals in all sectors has led to the development of increasingly specialist courses. More recently the main entry route to the profession has been the conversion masters programme although in the last twelve months there has been evidence of a move to reintroduce bachelors' programmes, of both a generalist and specialist nature.

ACCREDITATION INSTRUMENT

The Criteria for the Assessment of Courses are used by CILIP to help determine the appropriateness of the course for professional recognition. In applying the Criteria the Chartered Institute will be concerned with the context in which the course is being offered, as well as the content and will give equal consideration to the following:

- the relevance of the course to the library and information science profession
- the professional involvement and commitment of the teaching team
- the relationship with the parent institution
- the expertise and experience of staff
- the span and quality of courses offered
- the calibre of students as evidenced by assessments and subsequent employment

The VP is assisted and informed by a range of documents relating to the courses and the institutional context in which they are delivered. CILIP is not prescriptive about the format of documentation, and generally uses documents prepared by universities for internal validation. Normally the following documents will be sent to the VP ahead of a visit: —

1) course documents

evidence of institutional support for the course at both faculty and institutional level, details of the institution's internal validation and review procedures, staff development policy and evidence of commitment to the professional accreditation being sought

2) evidence of market research/consultation with the profession concerning the need for the course, professional employment prospects and employment market for graduates

3) for existing courses statistics concerning previous student cohorts' subsequent employment

4) for existing courses reports of external examiners
resources available to support the course

5) prospectus of the awarding university

Despite these rather daunting specifications VP adopt a fairly flexible approach when carrying out assessments and their approach is holistic, not mechanistic.

They expect course leaders and course teams to be aware of likely future developments in professional practice and to be able to explain how they will take account of changing requirements in the short to medium term. Although not all the topics listed in the Course Content Checklist must be covered, the VP must be able to map a cohesive and meaningful programme of study that fits the requirements of either a general or specific area of professional practice.

The Course Accreditation Checklist is divided into five main categories:

A | Information Generation, Communication & Utilization

This can be broadly interpreted as the processes and techniques whereby information resources are created, analysed, evaluated and manipulated to meet the requirements of defined user populations. It includes topics such as the principles of library and information science, principles of collection and data management, the organization, recording & retrieval of knowledge and data restructuring and information presentation

B | Information Management and Organizational Context

This is defined as the application of techniques for planning, implementing, evaluating, analysing and developing library and information products and services within the context of the organization's culture, aims and objectives. This may be covered by the development and provision of information services and products, quality issues and liability, the analysis of user information needs and user studies and education

C | Information Systems & Information & Communication Technologies

This section of the checklist is reflected in teaching and learning in the areas of the availability and functionality of manual and electronic information systems and information and communications technologies insofar as they apply to the principles and practices of information management. It also includes the application of techniques to identify, analyse, specify, implement and evaluate appropriate systems.

D | Information Environment & Policy

Courses are expected to expose students to some degree to a consideration of the dynamics of information flow in society, in (and between) nations, governments and the information and media industries. This will involve students in the study of legal and regulatory issues, professional and ethical issues and regional, national and international information policies and issues

E | Management and Transferable Skills

The area of study is the principles and techniques associated with business and institutional management, together with transferable skills of literacy and numeracy. It includes a number of general transferable skills and a crucial area for CILIP, namely instruction in research methods that are demonstrated in practice through the successful completion of a substantial piece of individual work in the form of a project or a dissertation.

The accreditation instrument has been used successfully for a number of years with some minor adjustments to take account of the changing nature of the student body. At one time all accredited course had to demonstrate that students had appropriate practical experience, either as a pre-requisite for joining the course as in the form of a placement. This requirement has been amended to accommodate the changing nature of the student body and the increasing number of specialist programmes whose students would be unlikely to find meaningful placements.

FUTURE CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

STATE INVOLVEMENT IN ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997) transferred responsibility for external quality review within higher education, known as subject review, to the newly formed Quality Assessment Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The report also proposed that benchmark information should be developed and used by institutions, as part of the programme approval process, to set degree standards (HUCKLE 2002). The resulting subject benchmarking project in librarianship and information science represented a bringing together of the interests of the newly formed Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists. The professional bodies had a very significant impact on the creation of a subject benchmark for librarianship and information management, which was largely but not exclusively based on the course content checklist. However, the then JAA drew back from the proposal made in a subsequent consultative document (HEFCE 2001) that the QAA and the JAA should share visits as the procedures involved in external subject review, and indeed the intention behind the two processes was substantially different but the prospect of future cooperation between the QAA and CILIP may well return to the agenda.

THE CILIP FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

Of more immediate concern and interest is the forthcoming review of the knowledge base of the profession that is to be undertaken as part of the development of a new framework of qualifications for CILIP.

The new organisation was charged in the CILIP Corporate Plan 2002 to 2005 to carry out a review of the accreditation process «and the body of knowledge underpinning that process» (CILIP 2002b).

The review of the knowledge base is crucial to the wider work of designing and implementing a new framework of qualifications that will include a CPD or re-validation scheme for chartered members, a certification scheme for para-professionals and access routes for members from non-traditional backgrounds, including those from Europe with historically different traditions of professional education. Not only will the knowledge base be the mapping tool by which those who have come via vocational and work-based training routes assess their progress within the new framework the accreditation process will potentially have to expand to accommodate a greater range and level of courses. This work is still in its early stages and there is little detailed methodology to contribute to this paper, however, the first draft of the new framework should be available in the early autumn, when it will be easily accessible via the CILIP website.

Before the work of revising the knowledge base and the accreditation procedures was commissioned both the Accreditation Board and the academic community had been expressing concerns about the relevance of the Accreditation Instrument. The world has changed significantly since the current checklist was devised and increasingly panel members find it difficult to map current course content to the checklist. There is clear evidence of broadening and cross-sectoral activity that encompasses heritage and records management, as well as ever increasingly specialist programmes in the areas of knowledge management, health informatics and information architecture to name but a few. Another pressure has been the increasing modularisation of courses, which enable students to navigate individual pathways towards achieving graduate status. This has led to tension between universities on the one hand who wish to encourage student choice and flexibility, and the professional bodies who occasionally find it necessary to be very prescriptive about what must be studied to achieve an accredited qualification to ensure equity for graduates in their subsequent progress towards Chartered status.

The emergence of computer based and web-enabled information delivery and the development of digitisation are all difficult to assess using the current accreditation procedures that are out of step with new modes of study

and of service delivery. All these factors must and will be taken into account in the design and development of a new knowledge base and new accreditation procedures and I hope to be able to discuss those in more detail in the not too distant future.

CILIP is seeking to build strategic partnerships with other bodies at a national level that are concerned with accreditation and with extending formal and informal learning opportunities. In relation to accreditation we will be discussing joint accreditation with other relevant professional bodies. Discussions with the British Computer Society (BCS) in the late 1990s led to a number of visits at which either the BSC or the then LA were observers at each others accreditation events. At that time it was not felt appropriate to seek a closer partnership however, the formation of CILIP has given new impetus to review and possibly revive this or other similar partnerships.

These discussions are at a very early stage so I cannot name those bodies with whom we seek to build closer partnerships but they represent all areas of the broader spectrum of information work. We will also look to create reciprocal arrangements with other accrediting institutions that will provide alternative routes in to the profession for members from outwith traditional sectors.

EUROPE

The final major element that must impact on the future of professional education and accreditation in the UK is Europe. The LA had a considerable influence on the development of professional education in many of the Commonwealth countries. Students from many countries have also been attracted to the UK for the purpose of gaining higher-level academic qualifications or for research purposes. More recently various European Union programmes, such as Erasmus, have helped foster links between the UK and other parts of Europe. The signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 has been a driver for change in UK higher education in general and these changes will have to be accommodated by the library and information community. As more concrete information and decisions emerge on the practical impact of the declaration they too will have to be accommodated in the accreditation procedures.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the accreditation role of CILIP has been closely linked to the wider developments in professional and vocational education in the UK since the late nineteenth century. During the intervening period there have been significant developments in technology and the importance and use of information. The role of the traditional librarian has been challenged by the emergence of a new breed of information professionals that has changed and challenged understanding of our roles and responsibilities. The formation of a new professional body in April 2002 provided a unique opportunity for CILIP to acknowledge that its accreditation policy, and the underpinning knowledge base, had become out of step with the demands of both the academic sector and the professional community. These are now being revised to ensure that policy and procedures are in place to meet the requirements of our dynamic and rapidly changing discipline. This is a debate that will become increasingly prominent in the next twelve months and is likely to inform a key area of policy for the professional body.

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