

Education, training and skills development in libraries and information work: the UK experience

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The initial professional education of librarians and information workers in the UK is undertaken by specialist departments in 17 universities, at first degree or post-graduate level; most such courses are accredited by the Library Association. Inevitably, the picture is more complex than this because specialist courses have emerged (for example, an MA Education course specifically for education librarians, focussed on the theory and practice of education) and a great deal of ICT-focussed provision has emerged from university departments of management, business studies or information management (computing).

Once the student takes up his or her first professional post the picture becomes more diffuse. The Library Association offers a Continuing Professional Development programme to its members, usually consisting of one-day events on specific aspects of management (e.g. presentation skills) or professional work (e.g. information auditing); similar types of provision are offered by Aslib (the Association for Information Management) and various commercial companies, notably TFPL. This provision is patchy at best and is a significant expense for the organisations or individuals concerned, especially if they have to travel to and stay overnight in London.

A National Training Organisation for libraries and information services (isNTO) was set up two years ago as one of 76 government-prompted bodies covering most areas of business, industry and the public sector. The NTOs have so far concentrated on identifying the available skills and gaps in their sectors and promoting the uptake of National Vocational Qualifications which are based on specific competencies required at different levels of (in this case) library and information work. For example the level 4 NVQ is for librarians, information scientists and information managers. It consists of 24 units, each with two or more elements: unit 2 'Meet users' information needs' covers gathering available information, evaluating it, and providing users with it. As part of a Review of isNTO completed in March this year, we identified a range of education, training and skills development needs in libraries, archives (as well as the culture and heritage sector) of the UK by conducting interviews and focus groups with senior managers. The priorities for staff training in the next five years were identified (in descending order of frequency of mention) as:

ICT – handling the technology; applying it; managing electronic content

Management – project/finance/business management; marketing; managing change; preparing bids for external funding; devising new services and products

Leadership – especially at senior levels (“Some sort of preparation is required to help our profession step into leadership roles”)

Communication skills – research; teaching; education; presentation skills; customer care skills

People skills – human resource development; managing people; interpersonal skills; negotiating and influencing; teamwork; cross-domain understanding (e.g. between libraries and museums or education); personal effectiveness; partnership working

Information management – knowledge management; management information systems; information skills from searching to packaging; classification and organisation of knowledge

Sector-specific skills – librarianship; archives; records management

Notice how low down the traditional skills of librarianship appear on this list. One manager summed up the new emphasis by saying “*We have moved from subject-based organisation to function-based organisation.*” Is the picture very different in Portugal?

How well are these needs being met? Another manager said:

“There is no national training strategy. At the moment, training is a mixture of private and public (University) training and it is patchy. There are too few skilled library and information staff to meet the needs of the UK. Universities are beginning to provide modular packages to plug gaps but there is not enough distance learning.”

Again, how different is the picture in Portugal?

How are things likely to change?

A large boost to library training budgets has been offered in the past two years through UK national lottery money being channelled into the ICT training of school librarians and, more recently, of public librarians. The Library Association recognised the importance of this initiative for upgrading the skills of thousands of librarians and at the same time broadening their professional outlook. But new opportunities called for a new approach to provision of training.

A public sector and private sector partnership was created in Autumn 1999 involving the Library Association, Canterbury Christ Church University College (who specialise in distance learning using ICT), RAE Associates and Information management Associates. The Library Association ICT Training Consortium was registered as one of the approved trainers for school librarians and later for public librarians.

The school librarians’ training consists of two days of face-to-face training focussed on ICT, backed up by carefully structured distance learning materials made available on a dedicated website. This incorporates the latest in ICT provision so that students can map their own paths through the materials (they have to select – there is far too much to use it all) and so the tutors can track student progress electronically on a day-to-day basis. Students progress through modules covering ICT knowledge and skills (e.g. constructing a website), supporting information skills development in pupils/students, collaborating with teachers to support ICT use in the curriculum, and managing the library use of ICT. The Consortium is currently offering a version of this programme to international schools in Hong Kong.

The public library version of the programme puts the emphasis on training public library staff to become ‘educators’ (trainers and mentors) to help their colleagues to undertake basic ICT training (some face-to-face training linked to distance learning modules using another dedicated website). Specialist ICT training is offered by the Consortium to selected library managers covering the roles of:

- Net navigator
- Information technology gatekeeper
- Information consultant
- Information manager
- Educator

This training programme is potentially very powerful in giving working librarians the opportunity to update their skills and to broaden their professional horizons at a time when another major programme (The People’s Network) is introducing PCs into all public libraries in the UK. Does this model offer any possibilities for Portugal? Will future professional education and training be very different from what is available now?