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**Embedding Employability Skills in the Library and Information
Management Curriculum in the UK**

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Abstract

This paper will report on the findings of a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) designed identify any gaps in the availability of employability skills-related teaching materials and create new materials in consultation with UK LIS academic departments, the British Association for Information and Library Education and Research (BAILER), the UK's Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and specialist LIM/LIS employment agencies and employers.

Background

The changing LIM curriculum has been a theme of academic and professional literature for some twenty years (Moore 1987; Brittain 1988; Elkin and Wilson 1997; Furner 1999; Feather 2003). There is now an even greater imperative to enhance the provision of employability skills in the curriculum and that is because the rate of change has accelerated as LIM departments and programmes recognise the changing destinations of their graduates and the need for appropriate curricular changes. Recent work has identified the gap between some educational programmes and employers' expectations (Blankson-Hemans and Hibberd 2003). The relationship between these changes and professional accreditation is also evolving. Most recently Ashcroft (2004) has written of the need for personal transferable skills in future information professionals in, among many others, marketing, promotion and negotiating contracts with information suppliers. These types of real world activities combined with "being able to adapt traditional librarianship skills such as.....cataloguing information" need to be embedded in new teaching materials that bring the workplace to the LIM classroom without absencing academic depth and rigour. Ashcroft further comments on new roles suggested by Pedley (2001) that librarians must adapt their skills and consider roles such as intranet manager, webmaster, content manager, knowledge manager and competitive intelligence analysts.

Project Funding

Actual curriculum changes naturally rests with universities and academic department, however support for change is also available from the UK government. In particular support for innovation is exemplified by the long term commitment to supporting initiatives in higher education. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) contribute to the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL). FDTL phase 5 aims to "reward and stimulate innovation and good practices in learning and teaching, and to disseminate such practices to secure the widest take-up among institutions" (HEFCE). Since 1995 the fund has supported 164 projects in five phases. In 2004 the fifth round of this funding covered the 11 subject areas assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education between October 2000 and September 2001 across a range of small, medium and large scale projects. These projects were designed to address issues raised during the assessment of those subjects by the QAA process. Obtaining project funding involved a two stage application process over 14 months. The Department of Information Science at Loughborough University and its partners at Liverpool John Moores and the University of Bristol received an award from the fund worth £150,000 over two years; the only project funded in the LIM subject area.

Project Aim

The project title is Library and Information Management Employability Skills (LIMES). The project aim is to enhance the provision of skills-based teaching materials in the LIS/LIM discipline and also document these key skills for the future employability and the continued professional development of information professionals and librarians in the UK.

The concept is to create new, free teaching materials which can be used by LIM departments in the UK. The vision is to create complex materials which might not otherwise be available from an individual academic but which the project is able to

create because it has more time and access to resources. These new skills-based teaching materials will be trialled and hopefully successfully embedded into the curricula and the skills can be documented by graduates using the Recording Academic Professional and Individual Development (RAPID) professional development portfolio (PDP). Brine and Feather (2002) suggest PDPs may enhance graduate prospects for employment by providing evidence of their skills achievements and progress. PDPs will be a vital tool for life long learning, by identifying training needs and continuing professional development activities. PDP tools are recommended to be made available to all UK students by universities in 2005.

The dissemination strategy is intended to embed the outputs of the project in UK LIM departments directly through the activities of the Project staff, its Partners and other BAILER member departments. 20% of the LIM departments are already represented by the project and the remaining 80% will be reached by the Project staff and individuals within the Partner departments. Dissemination activities will adhere to TQEF NCT Project Briefing No. 2 guidelines as follows. The target is 90% awareness among the 300 academic staff¹ and other teaching staff in the 15 departments and staff in their institution's educational support units; 80% understanding by departments through a member of staff; and 15% action through at least one course per institution. This should impact favourably on the disciplines' students.

LIM graduates and employability

The most recently available UK government statistics on the UK LIM student population are shown below.

Figure 1

Students studying Librarianship and Information Management in the UK

	Part-time	Full Time	Total
Undergraduate	620	1250	1870
Postgraduate	2310	1135	3445
Total	2930	2385	5315

Adapted from Table 2e All HE students by subject of study, domicile and gender 2003/04 HESA statistics.

Employer expectations are becoming more demanding (Tenopir 2000) and the ability to move seamlessly from graduation to employment greatly concerns employers (Goulding 2001). Recruitment agencies are often the first step for recent graduates and consequently have to assess their skills and align them with available employment.

The project has surveyed four of the UK's national employment agencies dealing with LIM graduates. Our research confirms the continuing need for graduates with the core skills of the profession which are still much in demand. But some of the

¹ The Times Higher 2 April 2004 p.7

interesting trends identified support Ashcroft's assertion that newer skills such as negotiation are necessary. Preliminary work by the project indicates that teaching materials to support negotiating skills with software suppliers are not prevalent in the UK LIM curriculum. Consequently the project will be working with a software supplier to generate a case study example of information unit personnel negotiating with a software company. Teaching materials will include streaming video of an actual series of negotiations with key negotiating approaches and tactics described and identified. Further activities will be designed to allow students to simulate negotiating with outside vendors.

It is through creating and trialling such teaching materials that the project seeks to support UK academics in changing the curriculum to address employer and graduate demand for emerging and demanding skills in the LIM world for the 21st century.

Conclusion

Curriculum change often requires great efforts from academics to design new or adapt existing materials. In the UK the pressure to also undertake research and foster links with industry is also a strategic requirement of universities. Consequently it can be argued that the amount of time available to devote to teaching materials has been reduced. The LIMES project is intended to provide the necessary materials for UK LIM departments to address the provision of suitable skills-based teaching materials through avoiding 're-inventing-the-wheel' on an individual institution basis, maximise the availability of high quality teaching materials and advance the employability prospects of our graduates.

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