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Recruiting LIS Students who Can Navigate Complexity in Support of Global Understanding

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Abstract

Preparing LIS professionals who are “fit for purpose” is a key factor in meeting those employer demands evidenced in recent studies.¹ This paper builds on two previous large-scale studies by the 8Rs Research Team and provides the results of a new study of U.S., Canadian, British and Australian schools of LIS regarding their recruitment strategies and curricular plans in relation to the above research questions. The methodology includes a structured analysis of LIS recruitment materials, and a web-based questionnaire complemented by telephone interviews with selected respondents. The survey population is administrative staff of LIS schools (deans, directors and program coordinators). The paper investigates how we might all evolve in terms of recruiting those individuals who will thrive in the climate of change that is affecting all of the organizations to which our graduates contribute, no matter the country of their employment or their chosen sector.


Organization

- Context
- Prior research
- Rationale and research goals
- Methodology: Phases 1 and 2
- Results and discussion of Phase 1
- Plans for Phase 2
- Further questions

Context

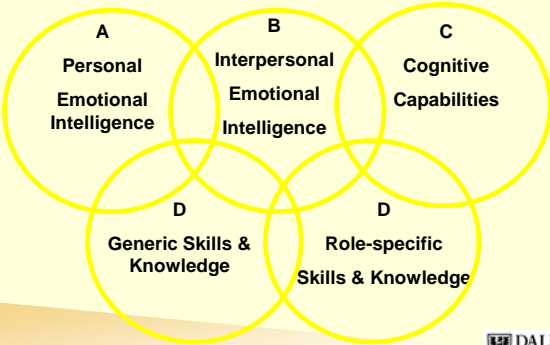
Context: premises and assumptions

- **Stereotypes about any profession die hard**
 - ▶ Information professions (IPs) are evolving at an exponential rate
- **Attitudinal change takes time and commitment**
 - ▶ A reflective profession requires effective collaboration among employers, educators and researchers
- **Little-researched areas:**
 - ▶ Professional characteristics as contributors of success and development of the IP fields
 - ▶ Characteristics for information professionals favoured in the past are, in general, no longer sufficient




Typically, higher education lags behind the employment environment in noting the evolution, especially rapid evolution, of the characteristics of successful employees.

Context:
Framework of Professional Capability (Geoff Scott)
(slide used with acknowledgement)



The diagram consists of five overlapping circles arranged in two rows. The top row has three circles labeled A, B, and C. The bottom row has two circles labeled D and D. Circle A is 'Personal Emotional Intelligence', B is 'Interpersonal Emotional Intelligence', C is 'Cognitive Capabilities', and both D circles are 'Generic Skills & Knowledge' and 'Role-specific Skills & Knowledge' respectively. The circles overlap to form various intersections.



Educators are in the midst of an enormous and stimulating evolution. If *Time* magazine is running feature articles on the topic, then we can be assured that it is not ground-breaking, but it is wide-spread.² Like computer science and business programs, information programs often have what appear to be close ties with employers.

Context: Snapshot of IPs' characteristics

Employers' requests for new employees

- Fearless with technology
- Comfortable with rapidly changing environments
- Highly tolerant of ambiguity

Previous emphases

- Organized
- High attention to detail
- Service orientation



Achieving a reflective profession requires not only appropriate curricula but also the active recruitment of students who have personal attributes and competencies that fit well with that goal. Mid-career LIS professionals in North America were, in large measure, not recruited with that goal in mind; the field is now suffering from a severe lack of professionals willing to take leadership and senior management positions. Employers are looking to LIS programs to help them deal with this dilemma.

Employers now refer less often to such attributes as 'attention to detail' and 'knowledge of AACR2R' and more often to a need for those with 'leadership potential', a 'high tolerance for ambiguity', 'ethical behaviours', 'commitment to diversity' and related personal competencies.³ These are being required of entry-level professionals and they reflect a significant opportunity or threat depending on the outlook of educators. This paper presents the results of the first phase of a new study examining the role educators are playing in providing the kinds of reflective professionals required by employers.

Prior research

Prior Research – Published

- Published research in interrelated fields:
 - ▶ Higher education; professional education; professional competencies (e.g., Mullins and Linehan, 'Desired qualities of public library leaders.' *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 27.1/2 (2006): 133-43.)
 - ▶ 8Rs Research Team
 - The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries
 - Training Gaps Analysis



Prior Research – Unpublished

- Unpublished work:
 - ▶ Canadian Library Association President's Council work
- Structured administrative input, through interviews, retreats, focus groups and survey questionnaires, by:
 - ▶ Employers
 - ▶ Recent graduates



Rationale and Research Goals

Rationale and Research Goals

- Sufficient evidence to reexamine our recruitment strategies, in order to provide graduates for the 21st century environments
- Higher education strategic planning now looking ahead to 2012 and beyond
- Research goals:
 - ▶ Examine recruitment goals and practices and compare them
 - ▶ Examine directions the field is taking
 - ▶ Using evidence-based research, suggest recruitment strategies



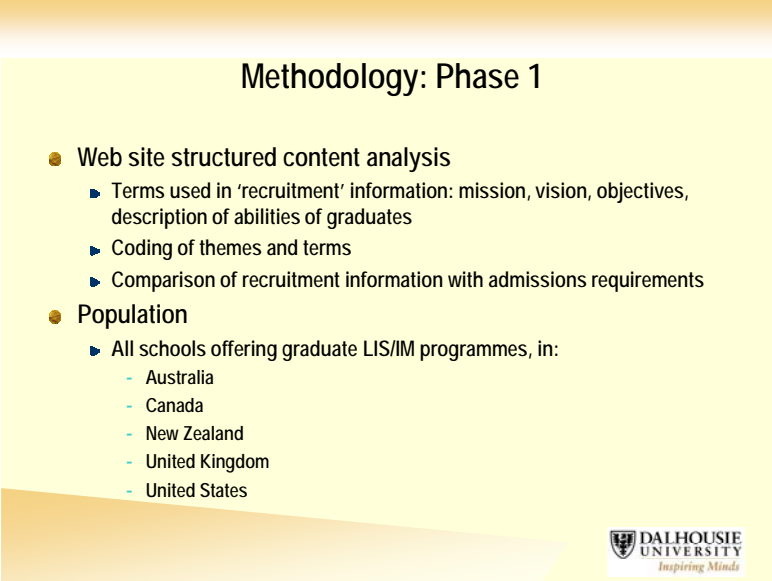
Several research questions relate to this fundamental issue for our field: Graduate programs place understandable emphasis on GPA rankings in order to offer places; however, do recruitment staff and materials make clear to applicants that a combination of academic ability and appropriate personal competencies is sought by employers? Are web-based recruitment materials for LIS programs reflective of the latest trends in information work and do they refer clearly to the competencies sought by employers? Do the materials offer evidence that one role of the academy is to push the envelope in the information professions in all sectors? Are library professions placed within a perspective of information work in public, private and not-for-profit sectors?

There are many issues surrounding these research questions and they have been posed by practitioners and educators alike. They include, for example, the very old and still contentious

issue of professional versus support role and where the divide should lie. We need to move on from pondering such unanswerables, perhaps, and focus on recruiting and educating such high calibre individuals that they will act as professionals and contribute to the field from that perspective. A related issue is that of 'deprofessionalization' and this threat is not unique to library and information studies.

Methodology

This paper provides the results, primarily, of the first phase of a study of U.S., Canadian, British, New Zealand and Australian schools of LIS regarding their recruitment practices as evidenced by a structured analysis of their websites. The second phase, currently underway, includes a web-based questionnaire, complemented by telephone interviews. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the website review form the core of the paper.



The slide is titled "Methodology: Phase 1" and is set against a light yellow background with a gradient. It contains two main bullet points: "Web site structured content analysis" and "Population". The first bullet point has three sub-bullets: "Terms used in 'recruitment' information: mission, vision, objectives, description of abilities of graduates", "Coding of themes and terms", and "Comparison of recruitment information with admissions requirements". The second bullet point has one sub-bullet: "All schools offering graduate LIS/IM programmes, in:", followed by a list of five countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. In the bottom right corner, there is the Dalhousie University logo and the motto "Inspiring Minds".

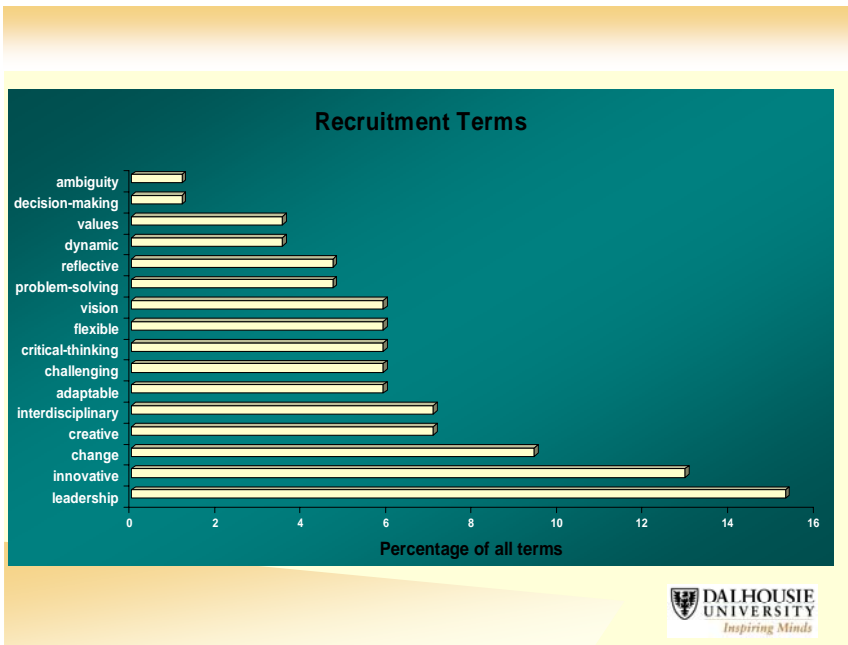
Methodology: Phase 1

- Web site structured content analysis
 - ▶ Terms used in 'recruitment' information: mission, vision, objectives, description of abilities of graduates
 - ▶ Coding of themes and terms
 - ▶ Comparison of recruitment information with admissions requirements
- Population
 - ▶ All schools offering graduate LIS/IM programmes, in:
 - Australia
 - Canada
 - New Zealand
 - United Kingdom
 - United States

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Results of Phase 1

Employers are demanding information professionals with several key competencies. Our recent survey of recruitment materials of information programs in five countries indicates that the term most frequently used, presumably to attract students to the programs, is 'leadership.' Other terms with high numeric rankings include 'innovative,' 'creative,' 'critical thinking,' 'interdisciplinary,' 'dynamic' and 'problem-solving.' Interestingly, very few of the programs using these terms apply them to their admissions materials by requesting that applicants demonstrate evidence of these characteristics.



Higher education recruitment practices impact student perceptions of information fields and help determine whether we attract the types of candidates likely to be successful in the workplace.

Recruitment Terms and Admissions Requirements

Unanticipated research finding:

- Few programmes ask for evidence in application of the desired competencies implied or stated in recruitment materials
 - ▶ Examples from 4 programmes who attempt to do this, with varying degrees of specificity:
 - Applicants require “necessary professional attitudes”
 - “Library and Information Management in the 21st Century – Maybe Not What You Expect?” (Webpage with additional links)
 - “Is Librarianship for You: Stereotypes and Myths”
 - Applicants required to submit essay, which links some recruitment terms to admissions requirements

Example of Recruitment/Admissions Convergence

Based upon your reading of the School's **Goals and Objectives** and the description of the MLIS Programme, please discuss the following points in a 3 – 6 page essay:

- Tell us about your MLIS Programme goals. How will our School help you achieve them?
- What are the strengths you would bring to the MLIS Programme and to the IM profession?
- Opportunities to perform **management functions** and to assume **leadership** roles abound in the IM field. **Explain** your perception of these opportunities, and how they will shape your future as a professional.
- Most professional occupations rely on team work. Demonstrate how your participation on a team has contributed to the success of a team's objective.
- New information technologies shape changes in the profession. How do you view technological advancements affecting you as a student? As a professional?
- The IM field is a **dynamic** and changing environment; provide evidence of your **adaptability** in a **changing** context.
- Describe how your prior work experience (part-time or full-time; paid or voluntary) in any setting has shaped your MLIS goals.



Discussion

The Stephen Abrams of this world cannot be everywhere.⁴ While organizations around the world invite such speakers to address their staff on a wide variety of topics such as Web 2.0, the grim truth is that information-intensive organizations should not require a Canadian or anyone else to introduce these topics. The organizations should be full of those who are fearless in their explorations of technologies and any other innovation that might be of use to fulfill the strategic directions of the enterprise, be it a library, a law firm or liberal arts college. Computer literate members of the millennial generation do not require a workshop to understand blogging, newsreaders and feeders, wikis or live classroom technologies. They just download, explore and use. *These* are the people we must attract to LIS and IM programs and the question remains, are we doing so?

Recruitment Terms and Admissions Requirements

- Potential outcomes of this apparently general inconsistency, using a marketing approach
 - ▶ Applicants will enter programmes with misguided assumptions about success criteria in 21st century LIS/IM
 - Will require additional teaching effort to alter those understandings
 - A proportion of them will be unemployable on graduation
 - ▶ Undergraduate advisors, reviewing only the admissions materials, will continue to hold stereotypical views of the fields and the kinds of applicants needed to push the fields forward

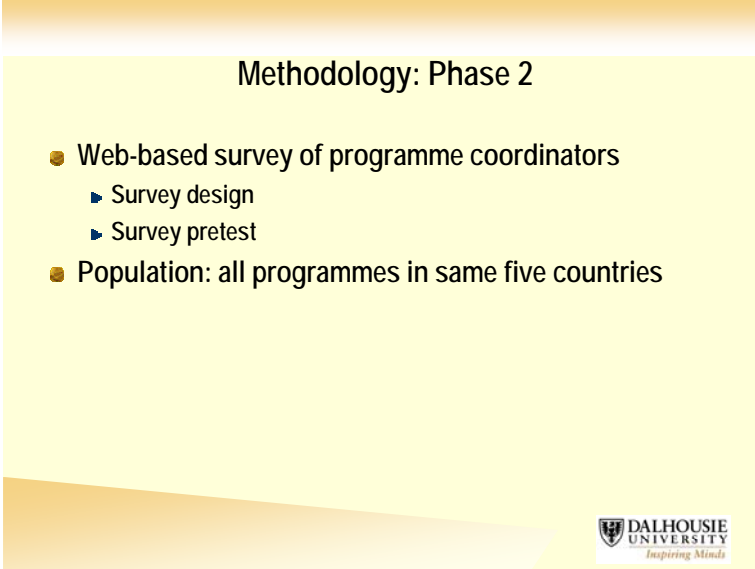


Recruitment issues

Reading the academic reference letters so carefully crafted by hundreds of undergraduate faculty members is a lesson in cultural shifts, or lack of shifts. How many of us find that the phrases used by these intelligent, articulate colleagues reflect a major misperception of the world of information theory, practice and services? 'I don't have any weaknesses to point out. He is a retiring person who has now found, after three degrees, his path in life. I commend him to you most highly.' Nowhere do such referees refer to political savvy, technological fearlessness, passion and vision. Yet we know that employers seek these very characteristics and competencies. What is the process that will help the information fields move towards a much closer match between student and referee perceptions, educational realities and employer demands?


Phase 2

Using the same study population of accredited programs in five countries, our second research phase involved a web-based survey of program coordinators or directors. The survey instrument is included in the appendix.

A presentation slide with a yellow background and a white title bar. The title bar contains the text "Methodology: Phase 2". Below the title bar, there is a bulleted list with three items. The first item is "Web-based survey of programme coordinators", which has two sub-bullets: "Survey design" and "Survey pretest". The second item is "Population: all programmes in same five countries". In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is the Dalhousie University logo, which includes a crest and the text "DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY Inspiring Minds".

Methodology: Phase 2

- Web-based survey of programme coordinators
 - ▶ Survey design
 - ▶ Survey pretest
- Population: all programmes in same five countries

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Conclusion

This brief paper has pointed to some key questions for LIS educators. How do schools of LIS determine whom to educate? How do they develop appropriate recruitment strategies? How do schools' recruitment staff monitor the changing employment environment? Graduate programs place understandable emphasis on GPA rankings in order to offer places; however, do recruitment staff and materials make clear to applicants that a combination of academic ability and appropriate personal competencies is sought by employers? We need strategies for the development of joint human resource planning among educators and employers, in order to ensure the education and development of reflective professionals who will move the library/information fields forward.

Further Questions

- Is there a match between the following 3 elements:
 - ▶ What programme directors believe is happening
 - ▶ What recruitment versus admissions materials imply
 - ▶ What curricula deliver
- Are we recruiting for a reflective profession that will move the LIS/IM fields forward?
- Are we recruiting who we think we are recruiting?
 - ▶ Cycle of revisions to programme websites?
 - ▶ Employer reviews of programme recruitment materials?
 - ▶ Other mechanisms to investigate convergence versus divergence?

Appendix – Draft Questionnaire

1. are you aware of the need, expressed by employers, for new staff to have clear management and leadership abilities and interests?
2. do you agree that this is a legitimate expectation for new graduates?
3. Does your school monitor the changing employment environment regarding skills and competencies?
 - a. If yes, how?
4. do you believe that LIS programmes have a responsibility to provide graduates
 - a. with management potential?
 - i. If yes, does this affect what you look for in applicants to your graduate programme
 - b. with practical management skills?
 - i. If yes, does this affect the design of your curriculum?
5. how would you describe the competencies needed by managers in the LIS field today? Can you give some examples (words or phrases)?
 - a. Do any of your materials for prospective students include any of your own words and phrases?
 - b. Do any of your materials for prospective students include any of the following words and phrases (or their cognates):
 - Flexible
 - Action-oriented
 - Reflective
 - Committed
 - Self-aware
 - Keen problem-solver
 - Proactive
 - Politically savvy
 - Experimental
 - Risk taker
 - Comfortable with change
 - High tolerance for ambiguity
 - Excellent communicator
 - Technologically savvy
 - Collaborator
 - Highly tolerant of ambiguity
6. has the content of your material for prospective students changed in the last three years?
 - a. If so, do the changes reflect changes in the competencies, personal and professional, required by employers?
7. do you have a student recruitment strategy?
8. what are the characteristics of your ideal student?
 - a. do your materials for prospective students align with those characteristics?

9. how does your school select from the applicant pool?
 - a. Graduate programmes place understandable emphasis on GPA rankings in order to offer places. Do your materials for prospective students make clear that a combination of academic ability and appropriate personal competencies is sought by employers?
 - b. Do you ever reject applicants who have more than the minimum required GPA? Why?

10. Has your school attempted, in any structured manner, to reeducate undergraduate career advisors and professors who may have outdated understandings of 'library work' and the type of professionals required for libraries and other information management settings?

11. does your school offer any incoming scholarships that reward evidence of leadership potential? Please explain.

12. does your school offer any graduation prizes that reward evidence of leadership potential? Please explain.

13. in your MLIS programme is there a course specifically on leadership?

14. does your school or student group offer professional development opportunities (e.g., workshops) relating to leadership?

15. do you track the success of your graduates?
 - a. How do you do this?
 - b. Does your tracking include evidence of leadership roles, in work settings or in association or research settings?

16. do you have any comments you wish to add about...

¹ 8Rs Research Team (2005). *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries*. [Edmonton: The 8Rs Research Team]; 8Rs Research Team (2006). *Training Gaps Analysis*. Ottawa: Canadian Library Association.

² Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe (2006) 'How to Bring U.S. Schools out of the 20th Century.' *Time* 168.25: 32-38.

³ Ryan Deschamps (2003). 'In Reference to Management: Requirements for Management Skills in Entry-level Reference Positions.' Unpublished MLIS paper, Dalhousie University.

⁴ Christine Mackenzie (2006). 'Skilling Staff for Library 2.0.' *incite* 27.12: 7.