

Employers' Perceptions of the Graduates and Curriculum of a Library School in Botswana

L. O. AINA AND K. MOAHI

Department of Library and Information Studies, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana

Twenty-four employers of the graduates of the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of Botswana were surveyed to find out if these graduates met the expectations of their employers and to seek their opinions on the curriculum of the programmes in the department. The employers were themselves involved in tradi-

tional library tasks and were satisfied with the graduates, although they emphasised the need for strengthening of the IT component of the curriculum. It is recommended that the curriculum of the various programmes in the department be strengthened to enable graduates of the department to function more effectively in the emerging information market.

Introduction

Library schools are expected to impart the necessary library and information skills to their students so that after graduation, the graduates can be expected to function effectively in libraries and other information-related work settings with minimal supervision. Employers of library and information science school graduates are many and varied. They have different expectations of the library school graduates. Thus, designing an appropriate curriculum for a multiplicity of employers with different missions and objectives can be very complex. The demands of the employers who are the consumers of the products of library schools change over time. A library school is therefore expected to obtain feedback from employers either on an informal or formal basis. Employers, as the consumers of these products, need to be surveyed in order to know if expectations are being met.

The Department of Library and Information Studies, University of Botswana was established in 1979. Since then, the Department has embarked

on various programmes including a certificate in library and information studies, a diploma in library and information studies, a bachelor of library and information studies, a postgraduate diploma in library and information studies and a master's in library and information studies. The postgraduate diploma in library and information studies was phased out during 1994/1995 when the master's in library and information studies was instituted. To date, the Department has produced more than 500 graduates of the different programmes. These graduates are primarily employed in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, since the Department is mainly responsible for the training of librarians in these three countries.

Surveying the employers of the graduates of the department will ensure that a rich information base will be built up to shape the future curriculum of the department and to assist employers in their deployment of returning staff. Through such an evaluation exercise, it is hoped that this assessment will enable the department to find out if the graduates are meeting the expectations of the employers and what changes are likely to

be required in the curriculum. The main objectives of this study were: (1) to ascertain the general opinions of the employers about the graduates of the school, and (2) to find out if the graduates meet the expectations of their employers and, if not, what areas of the curriculum need to be emphasised or fine-tuned.

Employers' perceptions and their expectations of library school graduates have been covered extensively in the literature, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. The expectations of academic and research library employers are so varied and many that Battin (1983) advocated that academic and research librarianship should be a separate profession. In a survey, 76 research library directors of the Association of Research Libraries in the United States mentioned the top competencies required for beginning librarians as analytical, research, and computer technology skills (Marchant and Smith 1982). Bowden, Bier-schenk and Olivier (1989) expect potential employees of a medical library to be computer literate, familiar with database searching and to be service-oriented in addition to completing librarianship courses. For an agricultural library, according to Thomas and Russell (1989), the graduate must have a focus on the user, a service attitude, the necessary human relations skills and be computer literate. Of course he will also be expected to have a scientific background.

A study of public library directors in the United States (Smith, Marchant and Larau 1983) reported that the competencies required for entry level librarians are knowledge of general reference materials, human relations skills, and a knowledge of general bibliographies. They further suggested that instruction should provide graduates with increased on-line retrieval skills, supervisory skills and statistical skills. In another study with public library employers, Martin (1989) revealed that public librarians are expected to be skilful interviewers, like people, offer courses in adult need trends, popular literature, popular culture, children and young adult literature, child development and psychology. Spivack (1982) has categorised the personal characteristics of an information professional as service orientation, interpersonal abilities, communication skills, assertiveness, initiative and leadership, analytical/conceptual abilities, creativity and inventiveness, and curiosity.

Research design

To determine what employers perceived about the graduates of the department as well as the curriculum, employers of the graduates were surveyed. The population used for the study involved all the major employers of the graduates in the three countries: Botswana (25), Lesotho (8) and Swaziland (7). A list of the employers was extracted from the records available in the Faculty of Humanities, the faculty to which Department of Library and Information Studies belongs.

A combination of instruments was used in collecting data. The questionnaire was the principal instrument used for collecting data while the interview technique was also employed. Another instrument used for collecting data was the unobtrusive observation technique that involved observing the graduates at their different work situations. These instruments were used by the researchers to solicit opinions from the respondents, as well as to gain a firsthand knowledge of the tasks in which the graduates were involved. The data were collected between June and August 1996. A postal questionnaire was sent to all the employers in the population. A sample of the employers in Botswana was interviewed. The surveyed respondents were given the detailed course contents of the curriculum and were asked to give their impressions of the curriculum. The researchers visited some selected institutions within Botswana so as to gain firsthand knowledge of the working conditions and how former students were utilising the skills gained from the department.

Results and discussions

A total of twenty-four employers responded to the questionnaire on their perceptions of the training received by their library employees. Three of the respondents are based in Swaziland. These are the University of Swaziland Library, Swaziland College of Technology, and the Swaziland National Library. Although copies of the questionnaires were mailed to institutions in Lesotho, no completed questionnaire was returned. Sixteen libraries under the Botswana National Library system completed the questionnaire. Other employers in Botswana included the Botswana National Productivity Centre, Rural In-

dustries Innovations Centre, the Botswana Technology Centre, the British Council Library and the United States Information Service. The University of Botswana Library did not complete the questionnaire but the management of the library was interviewed. Some of the questions in the questionnaire were raised during the interview with the management team. Similarly the management of the BNLS was also interviewed.

Actual employers and the nature of library and information work

Respondents were asked to indicate the schedule of duties performed in their libraries. The schedule of duties in which five or more organisations were involved is presented in Table 1. The table shows that the libraries were more or less involved in traditional library work. It is therefore not surprising that such traditional library tasks as acquisition (95.8%), cataloguing (95.8%), current awareness service (83.3%), weeding (83.3%), and collection development (83.3%) were the major tasks performed by a large number of the organisations. Surprisingly, only a few of the employers were involved in tasks classified as constituting the emerging information market as revealed in Table 2. In Table 2, tasks performed by four or fewer employers were CD-ROM searching (16.7%), software installation (16.7%), advertising (16.7%), marketing (16.7%), searching on-line databases (12.5%) and hardware and software support (4.2%).

Tasks assigned to the graduates

Given that graduates of a library school are given different tasks to perform by their employers, depending on their qualifications, respondents were asked to indicate the tasks that they typically assigned to the certificate graduates that they hired. Many of the organisations indicated that the certificate holders were involved in tasks such as issue desk, shelving and stock taking, receiving and processing new materials and assisting users in locating information. The employers were generally satisfied with the performance of the tasks assigned to the certificate holders. In other words, the formal competencies acquired during training in the library school enabled these staff to perform to the satisfaction of their em-

Table 1: Schedule of duties in 5 or more libraries

Nature of work	Frequency	%
Acquisitions	23	95.8
Cataloguing	23	95.8
Collection development	20	83.3
Weeding	20	83.3
Current awareness	20	83.3
Assessing library & information needs	19	79.1
User education	19	79.1
Reference services	18	75.0
SDI	17	70.8
Searching on behalf of others	17	70.8
Storage of information	16	66.7
Conservation	13	54.2
Referral services	13	54
Preservation	12	50.0
News gathering	12	50.0
Recording of events	12	50.0
Extension activities	11	45.8
Collection of statistics	11	45.8
Indexing, abstracting	9	37.5
Public relations	9	37.5
Customer information services	8	33.3
Compilation of directories and bibliographies	8	33.3
Analysis and use of data & information	7	29.2
Production of magazines and reports	7	29.2
Training user in IT	7	29.2
Sifting & interpreting information	5	20.8
Database management	5	20.8
Research/feasibility studies	5	20.8
Statistical analysis	5	20.8

Table 2: Duties in which 4 or fewer libraries were involved

Nature of work	Frequency	%
Marketing of documents	4	16.7
Advertising	4	16.7
Searching CD-ROMs	4	16.7
Software installation	4	16.7
Searching on -line database	3	12.5
Technical writing	3	12.5
System analysis & design	2	8.3
Microfilming	2	8.3
Desktop publishing	1	4.2
Hardware & software support	1	4.2

ployers. The duties assigned to the diploma holders were circulation activities, reference services, cataloguing, shelving and shelf reading, ordering new books and managing libraries. The employers indicated that they were satisfied with the tasks performed by these graduates. Only a few of the employers indicated that they had employed holders of the bachelor in library and information studies (BLIS) degree. When they were then asked to list the job tasks that they assigned to their BLIS holders, management and adminis-

tration of libraries as well as cataloguing and classification were the main tasks listed. Other tasks mentioned included reference searches, computerised information retrieval, user education, etc.

When the employers were asked if they were satisfied with the performance of BLIS holders of the tasks assigned to them, there was no unanimity, as there was with the diploma and certificate holders. This is to be expected because this is a recent programme. At the time of the survey only three sets of these graduates had been produced. The holders of the postgraduate diploma in library and information studies (PGDLIS) were generally involved in cataloguing and classification. Other tasks included management of reader services, acquisitions, and library management. The employers were generally satisfied with the performance of these graduates.

Perceptions of the curriculum

A significant component of the curriculum of the school is information technology (IT). This is because some libraries in the sub-region are computerised and many of them are at various stages of computerising their services. Other aspects of the programmes that are prominent are traditional cataloguing and classification, general reference sources and special information sources, management and research methodology. When employers were asked to indicate the adequacy of the curriculum, they were generally satisfied with the curriculum but they expressed the need to beef up the IT component by incorporating more library software used in libraries into the curriculum of the school. At an interview with the University of Botswana Library management team, the need to strengthen the IT component was also stressed. The management of the Botswana National Library Service shared the same sentiment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Out of the 40 employers targeted, twenty-four, or 60%, completed the questionnaire. These employers included libraries attached to tertiary and secondary institutions, parastatals, research institutions etc. The majority of the respondents were involved mainly in traditional librarianship. The various information-related tasks that con-

stitute the emerging information market were rarely performed. It is therefore not surprising that the employers were satisfied with the graduates of the department since traditional library tasks are well covered in the curriculum. Since the number of libraries is not growing at the same rate as non-traditional library organisations requiring a strong information component, it is recommended that the Botswana library school broaden its curriculum to include a detailed information technology component so that their graduates can penetrate organisations other than libraries. However it is also clear that so-called traditional libraries are slowly turning to the use of information technology. That many have not done so already is a function of the funding and the shortage of skilled manpower. It is the view of the researchers that a more comprehensive survey of employers, both actual and potential, would have to be undertaken to determine what skills they would like a typical information worker to possess as opposed to asking them about their satisfaction with the present skills possessed by our graduates. In realisation of this, the department launched what it called the "Competence-Based Vision Product" research project towards the end of 1998, with the objective of determining the competencies required in various information-related tasks performed in libraries and other non-traditional library organisations with a substantial information component in the region. The result envisaged from this study is to obtain enough data to overhaul the existing curricula of the various programmes in the department. The scope of the study will cover Botswana and the sub-region of Southern and Eastern Africa, the source of the bulk of the students of the department.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Humanities Research and the Publications Committee, University of Botswana for funding this project.

References

- Battin, Patricia. 1983. Developing university and research library professionals: A director's perspective. *American Libraries* 14 (January): 22-35.
- Bowden, Virginia, Nancy F. Bierschenk and Evelyn R. Olivier. 1989. Medical library employers expecta-

- tions. *Journal of Library Administration* 11 (3/4): 129–45.
- Marchant, Maurice P. and Nathan M. Smith. 1982. The research library director's view of library education. *College & Research Libraries* 43 (November) : 437–44.
- Martin, Rosemary. 1989. Public librarians as employers: Expectations. *Journal of Library Administration* 11 (3/4): 175–86.
- Smith, Nathan M., P. Marchant and F. Nielson Larau. 1983. Education for public and academic librarians: A view from the top. *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 24 (4): 233–45.
- Spivack, Jane F. 1982. Career planning and professional growth. In *Careers in Information* edited by Jane F. Spivack. White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications.
- Thomas, Sarah E. and Keith W. Russell. 1989. The library perspective on library school education: The National Agricultural Library as employer. *Journal of Library Administration* 11 (3/4): 117– 28.