

# FROM CASE STUDY TO EMPLOYABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper describes the Library and Information Management Employability Skills Project, which has received funding from HEfCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. Collaboration between Library and Information Management Departments in three UK universities has resulted in the creation of learning and teaching materials which will be made freely available to all library and information academics via the Higher Education Academy's –Information and Computer Science Subject Centre. Co-operation with practitioners in the sector has resulted in context rich case study material which can be used to enhance academic teaching and improve student awareness of their employability skills.*

### Keywords

*Employability. Skills. Curricula. Library and Information Co-operation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The changing requirements of employers in the library and information sector means that there is an ongoing reevaluation of the content of academic curricula to identify gaps in the provision of skills being taught. According to specialised employment agencies for the library and information profession, as graduates seek employment and attempt to match their skills to job descriptions, they are often unable to make a direct

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link between what they have learned at university to the expectations of employers. This project provides a starting point for academics to address possible employability skills gaps and to raise skills awareness in library and information graduates of their worth to employers.

## 2. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS (LIMES)

The Library and Information Management Employability Skills (LIMES) Project was the only project in the library and information management discipline to be successful in its bid for funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEfCE) under their Fund for the Development of Learning and Teaching (FDTL), Phase 5. For the two year period of the project, Loughborough University is working closely with its partners, Liverpool John Moores University and the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol to create context rich case studies which can be used in learning and teaching to enhance the employability skills of graduates. The case studies will be made freely available to all library and information academics via the Higher Education Academy's Information and Computer Science Subject Centre (HEA-ICS) and will supplement theoretical material and provide examples to demonstrate to students how theory can be related to a workplace environment, increasing their awareness of their employability skills.

Against a background of a reduction in the number of library and information courses and a perceived devaluing of information skills within a 'Google' generation, LIMES has produced case study teaching materials to demonstrate to graduates how their skills learned during a university course will be valid when they seek employment.

### 3. DEMAND FOR SKILLS

Library and information work has always demanded a range of skills from enquiry technique to the more specialised interrogation of online resources and information. Recent literature on skills has confirmed that the demand for variety continues but that the emphasis or language used may have changed. The literature suggests that while there is still a demand for core skills such as cataloguing, indexing, searching, analysis, and communication, the profession should remain flexible to adapting these skills and others to the needs of library users and employers. Ashcroft writes:

“...information professionals are facing the challenge of new and emerging skills and professional demands...(and)...the most important aspect of this change is to be able to adapt existing skills...and to remain flexible within a changing work environment.” [1]

The new and emerging skills to which Ashcroft refers have come about in part due to the rapid increase in the electronic storage and delivery of information. Library and information professionals are well qualified to interrogate electronic resources, evaluate and order the retrieved information and to disseminate it in a format relevant to the enquirer.

Ashcroft also discusses the need to market “new developments in information provision” and to evaluate both the information itself and the promotional process. [2] There is increasingly a requirement to turn traditional promotional activity into pro-active marketing skills to advocate both the value of information and of the information professional to the economic and commercial world.

Fisher urges professionals to “assess our skills and to align traditional skills with the new terminology” (of recruitment advertisements).[3]

Cataloguing and classification, for example, seen as traditional skills, can be applied to web development, content management and digital imaging. It is a question of graduates and employers having an awareness of the flexibility of these core skills.

With the introduction of legislation, such as the Freedom of Information Act, the requirement to store and index organisational and corporate information has become more important and this is an area where information professionals are well-placed to apply their skills.

The previously named National Training Organisation for the Information Services Sector (isNTO), now the Lifelong Learning UK Skills Council, recognised in its Foresight report [4] that

while many skills needs could be met by the existing workforce there were skills gaps which should be prioritised for development:

- Customer care;
- Leadership;
- Managing change;
- Negotiating;
- Technology awareness.

LIMES is creating teaching materials in two of the areas identified by the isNTO report: customer care and negotiating and is intending to produce videos of library and information (LIS) professionals talking about leadership and managing change.

For our own research, the LIMES project conducted a survey of four specialist library and information employment agencies. The agencies place LIS professionals in a wide range of sectors including the health service, banking, government, the corporate world, schools, the public sector, academia and business libraries and were able to provide a broad overview of the skills in demand from employers in all sectors. Core skills, such as, the ability to organise information, enquiry work and collection management are still much in demand, but there is an increasing demand from employers to have more developed skills which are specific to certain situations. These skills range from negotiation, for example with a library supplier, to marketing, which now forms an integral part of a library service.

### 4. LIMES MATERIALS

While the LIMES project has taken into account the skills gaps identified in the literature and from the survey, the materials have been created with the strengths of the partners and the practitioners involved in the project. Academic modules have an obligation to fulfill certain criteria and this may have limited the subjects of the materials created. However, the materials can be seen as contributing to fulfilling some of the gaps identified by the isNTO report and by the LIMES survey of agencies and are being developed so that they can be used in part or as a whole to fit into a variety of modules. The materials are also designed so that parts of a case study can be used in different subject areas. This will allow library and information management (LIM) academics to modify the material to suit their specific purpose, for instance, to enhance their lecture by providing an example, or to be an integral part of the lecture and form the basis of group discussion.

Examples of the materials are:

- An information audit case study;

- Demonstration of customer care concepts;
- Resources for disability awareness in collection management;
- A branding case study;
- A library management system case study;
- A video of negotiating skills;
- Videos of practitioners talking about their work, including leadership and management issues.

The project also intends to make available case studies in marketing, knowledge management and cataloguing and indexing.

## **5. CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION**

The LIMES learning and teaching materials are being created by academics, for use by academics, in a unique collaborative effort between three library and information management academic departments. Practitioners are also being closely involved in the content of the materials to ensure that the results will enhance graduate employability in the work environment.

### **5.1 Involvement of academic departments**

The FDTL5 funding has offered the opportunity for LIM academics to work together to produce case studies for teaching. The three partners are able to bring their individual specialisms to the project and it has allowed academics in those departments to create material which they may not have done otherwise.

One of the targets of the project is to raise awareness in 90% of LIM academics about the project. In the UK there are currently seventeen departments [5] accredited to teach library and information studies and a survey was sent to 254 named academics in these departments. Although the response rate was low (13%), responses were received from 14 out of the 17 departments.

In order to consolidate the responses and to continue to raise awareness, the project team has embarked on a programme of visits to academic departments to disseminate the project and to engage academic staff. To date all but three main teaching departments have had a visit and there has been widespread enthusiasm about the project not just from the survey respondents but also from other academics in the departments.

### **5.2 Co-operation with practitioners**

Wherever possible practitioners are being asked to contribute to the LIMES teaching materials. This is to ensure that the materials are directly relevant to

an employment situation and demonstrate to students how their skills can be applied.

Loughborough University are working in co-operation with Dialog [6] to produce a video of the negotiating process with a library supplier. Ashcroft recognised that "Information professionals must develop negotiating skills in order to address issues of purchasing and collaboration". [7] As budget allocations to electronic resources increase the information professional must negotiate the best deal for library users in terms of price and access. The survey of employment agencies also recognised that this was a skills gap for new graduates so this video will be a timely resource to enhance teaching. UWE, Bristol have a number of practitioners who teach on their post-graduate programmes and are therefore well-placed to consult with them on the creation of materials for LIMES. Colleagues at UWE have drawn on the experience of local librarians in putting together their disability awareness in collection management materials.

In another collaboration Liverpool John Moores are working with the library management system supplier, TALIS [8], to create a selection of teaching materials. These will be used to teach students about the process involved in implementing a library management system, from the tendering process through to implementation and ongoing maintenance, allowing students to increase their awareness of library technology.

A customer care teaching package is being created by a working partnership formed between Liverpool John Moores University and Edgehill University (previously Edgehill College of Higher Education). Again, this was another area where the employment agencies have found skills to be lacking. Edgehill have designed an online training package for their library staff to improve customer care and to raise awareness of the different customers a library service may have. Academic staff at Liverpool are working in partnership with Edgehill to modify the package to allow parts of it to be used with their students. It has been suggested that some of the elements will be used within the Information Literacy module and some within a new Continuous Professional Development strand which is being introduced at Liverpool John Moores University. The package will introduce students to the concept of customer care in a library and information service, develop the theory behind it, identify the customer base and put the theory into practice by identifying the areas of customer care/service required.

### **5.3 Professional contributions**

LIMES has had input and co-operation across the breadth of the library and information sector. From the professional organisation, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, (CILIP), to commercial suppliers, many have contributed support and time to the project. The Museums Libraries and Archives Council have identified suitable candidates for the videos through their regional network. The project team have met with local employers' training groups in the East Midlands to obtain their views on skills requirements. Contact has been made with the Learning and Skills Council who are currently conducting their own national consultation of employers. This co-operation demonstrates the strength of feeling that exists in the profession that today's library and information management graduates should be properly equipped with the relevant skills for an evolving profession.

## 6. EVALUATION

The project is overseen by a Senior Adviser from the HEA and an experienced external evaluator from the University of Lancaster, both of whom have praised the achievements of the project to date.

Evaluation forms have been designed for the purposes of monitoring the process of developing and piloting the materials. Feedback is required from the creator of the materials at the point that they are used for teaching, and from the academic member of staff who is piloting the materials, who initially may be from one of the project partners. The partners are also being encouraged to involve their institutional learning and teaching units to provide pedagogical advice and to ensure quality assurance.

As the materials are more widely used across the LIM departments, academics and their students will be encouraged to provide feedback to the project team. This will be used to modify the materials where necessary and also in promoting the materials with suggestions or examples of how the materials might be used.

## 7. SUSTAINABILITY

It is intended that the materials created for LIMES will be sustained by those academics who create them and repurposed by those who use them. The materials lend themselves to modification and can therefore be updated and added to regularly by the academic community. Where a network or 'community of practice' already exists this will be the best way for academics to work co-operatively. Further sustainability will be provided by the HEA-ICS Subject Centre that currently hosts the LIMES web site [9] and that will continue to promote the materials after the life of

the project. The LIMES materials will be available through the HEA as part of the resources available to the library and information community. The project is also considering the possibility of depositing the resources in JORUM [10], the free online repository for teaching and support staff. The technical aspects of video streaming are being explored to deliver the videos created for the project via the web.

## 8. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The LIMES survey of academics asked the respondents if they would be interested in being involved in a community of practice as a way in which the materials could be maintained. Three areas were also included in the survey where it was felt by the project partners that a community of practice would facilitate academics and practitioners to share expertise. These three areas are:

- Information literacy;
- Cataloguing and classification;
- Research Methods.

A growing active community already exists for Information Literacy [11] However, those involved would like to extend the community to include more practitioners and academics in order to share best practice. This is echoed in the research methods community, which currently is dominated by academic research. In the case of the cataloguing and indexing community, this has been identified as an area where urgent action is required to ensure that valuable teaching skills are not lost, particularly as it is an area which underpins many of the employability skills currently in demand by employers.

LIMES is offering an opportunity to these three areas to extend participation in these specialisms. Together with the HEA-ICS it is organising events that will offer an opportunity for practitioners and academics to meet to discuss how they can work together to share expertise. It is intended that these events will result in communities of practice which will offer practitioners the opportunity to contribute directly to academic teaching materials which will, in turn, help to enhance graduate employability through an improved awareness of skills.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES

The LIMES Project has taken the evidence of employers and the profession to identify perceived skills gaps in library and information graduates. Working with the strengths of the project partners together with co-operative effort from practitioners, LIMES has produced case study teaching

materials which are intended to enhance graduate employability.

While it is recognised that the issue of employability is one which affects graduates from all disciplines, not just library and information studies, it is not within the scope of this project to develop this further. It is recommended, however, that the approach adopted through LIMES, that of using case studies to demonstrate employability skills, is considered in other vocational areas.

The legacy of this project will be a sustainable range of learning and teaching materials which are freely available to the LIM academic community via the Higher Education Academy. These will be skills based case studies which will raise awareness of employability amongst graduates through the provision of examples where skills are used in the workplace.

Taking as a model of best practice the collaborative effort of academics, suppliers and practitioners in the project, communities of practice will be formed to share expertise in three areas: information literacy, cataloguing and indexing and research methods.

It should be recognised that it is only through funding that this unique approach to creating teaching materials has been possible. The FDTL5 funding has enabled academics to create case study material which will benefit many others. It is a cost-efficient way of maintaining the currency of teaching materials and avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort.

It is recommended that the HEA-ICS consider how they can build upon the valuable support they have given to the LIMES project in order that they might develop further subject areas for case studies.

The project also acknowledges that the support and enthusiasm aroused by the project's aims to develop employability skills through the creation of sustainable teaching materials has demonstrated

that LIM academic departments continue in their commitment to produce graduates fit for an ever-changing profession.

## 10. REFERENCES

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[2] *Ibid*, p.84

[3] Fisher, B., Skills for the Future Information Professional; the role of individuals, educators, professional bodies and employers, *Impact, the Journal of the CDG*. **6(6)**, 66-69 (2003).

[4] information services National Training Organisation, Skills Foresight in the Information Services Sector 2003-2009, (2003).

[5] The Department at the University of Central England stopped recruiting new graduates in September 2005.

[6] Dialog, a Thomson business, is an international provider of online-based information services.

[7] Ashcroft, L., Developing competencies, critical analysis and personal transferable skills in future information professionals, *Library Review*. **53(2)**, 82-88 (2004).

[8] TALIS is a leading provider of products and services for public and academic libraries in the UK and Ireland.

[9] The LIMES web site can be found at: <http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/limes/>

[10] Information about JORUM is available on the web site at: <http://www.jorum.ac.uk/> (accessed 19/06/06).

[11] <http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/> (accessed 19/06/06)