Lifelong Learning – challenges and opportunities for the information professions in the Arab world

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Abstract

This paper reviews the opportunities and challenges that are presented to educators, employers and professional associations by the evident changes in the information sector. It highlights the relationship between participation in continuing education and personal and organisational success. It examines issues raised by current provision. Finally it discusses how the library and information profession might underpin a culture of lifelong learning.

Introduction

One of the consequences of the rapid changes that have taken place in technology in recent years is the demand for a better educated, better informed, and more innovative workforce to assure the future prosperity of institutions and nations. This is increasingly recognised at government level in the Arab world. Speaking at the inauguration of the 'First Knowledge Symposium' in Dubai in October 2007, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, committing his new Foundation to the development of the state of knowledge in the Arab and Islamic worlds, acknowledged that

> "planning, organization, and sound management of resources, and awareness of the interconnection and integration in the performance and roles of knowledge producers are basic condition for enduring knowledge development…[and] that building accumulated knowledge is a process of innovation, development, change, and comprehensive reform. It is a number of consecutive and interconnected processes in an open environment conducive to excellence, experimentation and creativity." (Al Maktoum, 2007)

Information is the lifeblood that flows through the modern economy, being transformed into knowledge, and stimulating creativity. Everyone employed in the information sector recognises that it has a key role to play in facilitating the development of education and continual changes in the economy, and in supporting those who are affected by the consequent social changes. However, they will be able to do so only if they recognise that they are affected by these changes as much as any other group in society. The growing worldwide debate about the need for continuing education for library and information professionals has been reflected in the development of related activities in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). The IFLA Round Table on Continuing Professional Education was one of several initiatives in this field taken by the late Dr Elizabeth Stone, who was for some time Dean of the School of Librarianship at the Catholic University of America. Dr. Stone first proposed the idea at the IFLA Conference in 1977, but it took almost 10 years before IFLA agreed to the establishment of an informal Round Table to act as a world-wide network in which interested professionals could explore mutual concerns, share research, and demonstrate the state-of-the-art in practice (Stone, 1990). The Round Table has since developed a strong programme of activities including organising several world conferences, and attracted wide ranging support. In 2002 it became a fully recognised Section of IFLA as the Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section (IFLA-CPDWL, n.d.). The change of name does not perhaps fully reflect the most significant indicator of its development. In its early years, CPERT (as it was known)

was largely a grouping of university teachers of librarianship interested in this aspect of their institution's work. The Committee of the new Section consists almost entirely of practitioners, a sign of the growing recognition that the demands made on the knowledge and skills of the workforce are continually changing and need to be addressed by employers.

Interest in this emerging phenomenon appears to have been significantly less in the Arab world. A search of the literature suggests that, prior to two relatively recent papers originating in Kuwait (Anwar and Al-Ansari, 2002; Marouf and Rehman, 2004), a broad view of the subject in the Arab world was last taken by a few papers (Soufan, 1983; Aman, 1987; Marghalani, 1993), and doctoral theses (Al Arini, 1992; Alsereihy, 1993) published in the 1980s and early 1990s. This may be because the literature on librarianship in the Arab world has not been well covered by indexing services. The author's own investigations have confirmed that the major bibliographies on librarianship in the Arab world that were published in Britain (Pantelides, 1979) and the USA (Meho and Nsouli, 1999) are both incomplete in their coverage of the literature. It is not known whether problems in the distribution of the Arabic literature limited the coverage of the subject in the major index published in Saudi Arabia (Abdel-Hadi, 1981-2007), to which the author does not have access. However, whilst deficiencies in the indexes may have led to a few papers being overlooked, it does seem clear that the subject of continuing education appears to have received little attention from information professionals in the Arab world, despite the dramatic changes that have been taking place. While there are reports in English and Arabic of individual events, there appear to have been few studies that have taken an overview of provision of continuing education and commitment to it. The aim of this paper is to stimulate fresh discussion about the challenges in developing the future workforce facing both employers in the information sector and information professionals, and for the universities teaching courses in the field, the professional associations and other providers of continuing education.

The paper begins by considering some of the principal changes that have affected the information sector in recent years. It then briefly reviews some evidence for the benefits that can be derived from the continual development of staff working in the information sector. The main body of the paper discusses the fitness for purpose of current provision in the information sector for continuous professional development and workplace learning. The paper concludes with some brief suggestions for positive steps that might be taken towards an improvement in the situation. Examples of potential developments are offered largely from an international perspective but may open up topics for discussion in the Arab world.

Professional practice in the information sector

Librarians and other information professionals are no more immune to evolutions in technology and innovation, service provision and customer expectations than any other professional group. Perhaps the most obvious change in society in recent years has been the rapid implementation of new information and communication technologies. Arguably, therefore, the information sector and those who work in it have perhaps been affected more by technological and ensuing social change than those employed in many other sectors of the economy.

Technology has forced itself onto the managerial and educational agendas in the information sector, initially in the shape of the tools for managing library operations and services. This has led to significant and changes in the curricula of Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences over the last 30 years in an effort to provide the underpinning knowledge and skills required by the employers. However, recent research suggests that in the Arab Gulf States there may still be a shortage of appropriate technical empathy and skills in the region (Al Fadhli and Johnson, 2006).

The development of new media has also led to changes in the information resources that have become globally available through the Internet during the last 10 years, and in the publishing industry and its business practices. The introduction of electronic publications has led to significant changes in the staffing profiles of libraries and the skills required. These are not just technological. The price of resources has become negotiable, and the effective use of these resources needs specialist training, making new demands on professionals business and communication skills. Moreover, as a report on one American University library noted:

> "In 1999, there were four staff members primarily responsible for print periodicals check-in, claiming, binding, and maintaining holdings statements. They did not have any responsibility for managing electronic resources…The proliferation of electronic resources had a major impact on the acquisitions/serials activities from handling physical objects to initiating and ensuring ongoing access to electronic resources. It has resulted in a workflow that requires ongoing review and change to accommodate the constant technological developments that have impacted the management of information delivered electronically." (Zhang and Haslam, 2005)

The change in the format in which publications appear has also focused new attention on the preservation of published information. The preservation of printed material was seen largely, until recently, as a need that could be met by providing additional storage space to house the collection of an individual library or a cooperative group. Attention in the industrialised countries began to be focused on the deteriorating conditions of books and newspapers arising from the use of paper made from wood pulp, while UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme encouraged developing nations to invest in digitising their rare manuscript collections to preserve them and make them globally available. However, a new challenge was emerging. It has been recognised for some time that the preservation of audio-visual material was threatened by changes in formats. Now it is recognised that there is also a need to preserve other electronic media, a task that is complicated by their rapidly changing technical formats. In fields such as preservation, which are commanding renewed and more extensive attention, Continuing Education clearly reflects its broadest definition, serving multiple purposes for the library and archival science professions. It becomes not only an avenue for reinforcing and extending existing knowledge and skills, but also often a primary source of preservation education for library and information science professionals and paraprofessionals (Gracy and Croft, 2007).

Technology – and the Internet in particular – have also brought a fresh emphasis to the need to understand the legal and ethical aspects of information work. For example, the significant increase in the global flow of information that has resulted from the emergence of new Information and Communication Technologies attracted the attention of the European Union to the implications for protecting the rights of publishers, whose business represents a major element in the economies of several major European countries. The rights of users of information had to be defended by the national and international library associations. The International Telecommunications Union organised the World Summit on the Information Society (World Summit, n.d.), initially intending to harness the potential of information and communication technology to the United Nations' Millennium development goals. In that forum, it was again the library and information profession that stressed the importance of liberal access to information and knowledge, and of preserving the digital cultural heritage of nations. Activities such as these highlight the advocacy skills that are now required in the profile of librarians to promote and defend their services.

One consequence of the World Summit on the Information Society was the Prague Declaration (2003) "Towards an Information Literate Society." For the first time, high level international attention was focused on the need for teaching, through both formal education and life-long learning, the information skills which all sectors of the population need to cope with the growing volume of information and the continual pressure to use it to facilitate change and adaptation. While there is an ongoing debate about the extent

to which responsibility for developing these skills lies with librarians rather than teachers, there is no doubt that librarians do have a part to play in this educative process, and their own development needs to reflect this.

The new sub-discipline of knowledge management also has its roots in the increasing capacity of computer systems to store and manipulate data, often about seemingly unrelated topics, to contribute to a more coherent understanding of sometimes complex phenomena. Information professionals tasked with developing organisational knowledge systems found that they needed new skills to develop or implement techniques such as competitive intelligence and knowledge mapping, as well as systems for the protection and security of the organisation's knowledge.

Human resource issues in the information sector

Recognising challenges such as these across every sector in the economy at their meeting in Lisbon in 2000, the European Council, the regular meeting of the Heads of State of the members of the European Union, called for Europe's education and training systems to be:
> "modernised in response to the demands of the knowledge economy and the increasing socio-economic and demographic challenges confronting the Union in a globalised world." (Council of the European Union, 2000)

Another of the factors that influenced thinking in the European Commission, the Council's executive agency, is that current trends in the birth rate and life expectancy – at least in northern Europe – suggest that there will be fewer people of working age to support the economy.

It seems that there has been little attempt to assess the impact of likely demographic changes on the number of librarians and other specialists in information work. Manpower planning is not an exact science, and becomes even less so when a significant part of the national workforce is employed in the private sector, but some indicators could be drawn from, for example, the age profile of professional associations' membership. In Britain, for example, we are well aware that a very significant proportion of the members of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) will reach retirement age within the next 10 years. Similarly, the American Library Association has noted the aging professional workforce in the USA. Employers in the industrial countries are beginning to ask how they will be able to recruit and retain sufficient employees in what could become, overall, a more competitive job market. The potential for enhancing the role of their existing employees through Continuing Education is also receiving more attention.

Do we believe that the workforce in the information sector in the Arab world will not be affected by demographic change? It is not only Europe and North America that face challenges from these demographic changes. The Arab world already suffers from a steady and significant 'brain drain' to the more advanced industrialised countries. How much more mobile will employees in the information sector become in moving from the developing countries in the Arab world to the industrialised countries in search of employment? And what might be the impact on the development of information services in the countries they choose to leave? Could an active approach to the provision of continuing education and development influence staff retention in the Arab states?

Benefits of continuing education

The relationship between participation in continuing education and personal and organisational success is now well documented. Numerous studies demonstrate that

organisations that invest in staff development have better records of labour relations, staff retention, and productivity. It is generally accepted that the competencies acquired during initial professional education for librarianship and information work have a limited life span, and the changes that are taking place make it clear that modern library managers and their staff require continual retraining to meet the challenges of developing existing information services and implementing new initiatives. In an increasingly competitive economy, the need for continuous renewal of the knowledge and skills of the workforce becomes crucial not only for employers if they are to make the best use of their employees and to ensure the quality of their work, but also for individuals if they are to be able to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market. It has also been well established by research that continuing professional development (CPD) leads to enhanced competence and better individual performance (Jones and Fear, 1994).

Such considerations may lie behind the willingness of some employers in the Arab world to encourage their staff to participate in continuing education; one study found that most academic library directors in the Gulf States suggested that they used a variety of incentives for staff to participate in CPD (Anwar and Al Ansari, 2002).

However, individual commitment to participation in CPD is sometimes in doubt. There is an old saying that:
>   "No one is too old to learn, but many people keep putting it off anyway." (Anon.)

Indeed, the situation in the Arab world may not be encouraging. For example, studies over the last 10 years in Kuwait consistently indicate that there appear to be some library staff in the Gulf States who remain resistant to change (Al Hassan and Meadows, 1994; Al Fadhli and Johnson, 2006).

Contrary to this, a study undertaken at The Robert Gordon University confirmed that in Britain a broad cross-section of information professionals were not only enthusiastic about the need to participate in CPD activities but also recognised its importance both in dealing with organisational changes and in order to advance professionally. Keeping up-to-date was considered vital, whether it was ongoing reading or attending a course (Farmer and Campbell, 1998). Similarly, a recent survey of cataloguers and other metadata specialists in the USA confirmed that they would welcome more opportunities to upgrade their skills and knowledge in both traditional and emerging areas. They were especially keen on short courses, but also interested in more formal and longer-term programs (Hider, 2006).

Patterns of CPD provision

There are indeed a variety of types of activity that contribute to lifelong learning. In addition to any in-house training organised by their employers, there is no shortage of external opportunities for library staff to participate in CPD in large countries such as the USA. Similarly, there are literally hundreds of providers organising CPD activities in Britain each year, including professional associations, schools of librarianship, and commercial agencies (Johnson, 1989). Continuing library education in Germany is equally fragmented and has no national organizational structure (Hasiewicz, 2006). This diversity of providers has some advantages, but does not necessarily facilitate the development of a comprehensive response to needs, because the providers tend to offer courses only on currently fashionable topics that they perceive likely to attract support.

Other countries have taken a more strategic approach. For example, the need to support and interact with an economy in transition has focused attention in Russia on the need for continual professional development, and a wide variety of initiatives have been taken by the federal government. Perhaps the most interesting is the "All-Russia Library Innovation

School." Established in 2000, the School evaluates library innovations and promotes their practical implementation. It teaches the techniques of creativity and implementing innovative projects. The School helps librarians to adapt to innovations that are being implemented, and to acquire socio-psychological techniques of overcoming resistance to the new (Kuzmin and Kuznetsova, 2005).

In the smaller countries such as those in the Gulf region, the needs for CPD are just as great. Some individual libraries in the Arab countries have recognised this and implemented in-house continuing education programmes to upgrade the competencies of their staff (Chaudry and others, 1993; Khurshid, 2008). Whilst this may satisfy continuing education needs at a basic level, for which there is usually a relatively large number of potential participants, more advanced needs are likely to be experienced only by individual specialists. How will their needs be met?

In every country, most organisations will not be able to meet all the potential local demands for CPD support in specialist fields. Collaboration with others, in the same country or region, or perhaps globally and with other disciplines, may be the only way to cover the range of specialisms that will be needed. How can this be mobilised – and monitored? Could models such as CAVAL Collaborative Solutions (n.d.), which was established by the Australian universities as a not-for-profit company, be adapted by groupings of libraries within the larger countries in the Arab world or (as has been suggested) across the smaller countries in the Gulf (Anwar and Al Ansari, 2002)?

Distance learning – access and acceptability

In all countries, accessibility is a challenge for prospective students who live and work at some distance from the education or training providers. Do the new Information and Communication Technologies offer a solution? The use of Virtual Learning Environments has begun to transform classroom teaching, and the spread of the Internet and the development of electronic publishing have transformed the potential of distance education. This is encouraging institutions in the industrialised countries to begin collaborating internationally in making specialist higher education courses available on a global basis (WISE, n.d.). However, examples of provision of distance learning courses remain relatively few. Developing and delivering distance learning is an expensive activity. Who will be able to provide it, and how might it be funded? Perhaps more significantly, qualifications earned through international distance learning are not yet recognised in some countries, where there are residual fears about the quality of the pedagogy and the integrity of student participation. How could the potential of this new medium be exploited in support of lifelong learning by the Arab universities?

Higher degrees as CPD

For the Universities, CPD has tended to mean the provision of higher degree programmes. Is there a broader issue for the Arab universities in the form that CPD takes? Since the 'Bologna Declaration' in 1999, the Higher Education systems of the European Union's member states have become more compatible and comparable, and this model is being adopted by some Arab countries. In some respects these reforms have been very successful, in that there are now three clear cycles in Higher Education, leading to a Bachelor's Degree after 3 or 4 years, a Master's Degree after a further 1 or 2 years, and then to the Doctoral level. However, different patterns of postgraduate education persist in the information sector in Europe, where a Masters Degree may be intended as a first qualification in librarianship and information sciences for graduates in other disciplines, or as a programme of advanced study in the discipline for those who have already completed a

Bachelors Degree in librarianship and information sciences. Both of these approaches have a part to play in terms of supporting lifelong learning, albeit for different elements in the labour market. The challenge lies in the fact that, in most countries in Europe and elsewhere (including most of those few Arab states where Masters Degrees in the field are available), only one of these routes to a Masters Degree exists. How could that deficiency in CPD provision be overcome?

Most Masters Degrees are only offered as complete programmes. What are the Universities in the Arab states doing to enable individuals to take parts of these programmes for CPD? What are they doing to permit individuals to aggregate credits from a variety of courses and institutions towards a Masters Degree that is recognised as of comparable standing to any other Masters Degree and whose curricular content is accepted to be professionally relevant?

As possession of a Masters Degrees become more common, and the status conferred by the possession of a Masters degree diminishes, will an increasing number of graduates wish to progress to the next step on the qualification ladder to enhance their career prospects? Evidence suggests that CPD is more effective when reflection is incorporated (Hartog, 2002), as it is in doctoral study and those Masters Degree programmes assessed by dissertations, and/or by independent assignments rather than examinations. In an increasingly complex environment, where the skills of the reflective practitioner have to be applied to significant investment decisions, will employers value expertise in the systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of evidence to resolve problems in service development and delivery that is developed at Doctoral level, and encourage and support staff to develop in this way? Is not a culture of research and evaluation a central element of professionalism and, if so, how should it be encouraged as part of establishing a culture of lifelong learning in the information sector?

Short courses and conferences

For most people, however, the term Continuing Professional Development is probably synonymous with attendance at conferences and short courses. Both of these activities have a part to play in raising the skills of the relatively inexperienced and, of course, conferences have an additional role in facilitating the networking and the development of the 'Invisible Colleges' through which senior practitioners tend to share experiences.

The scatter of the professional community in the Arab world implicitly limits the number of events that can be viable, and the opportunities to participate. But how valuable are these short courses and conferences for those who attend and those who support their attendance? Do the organisers of short courses in our field always offer clear statements of their objectives? Do they evaluate what learning has been achieved by the participants? Indeed, who does evaluate the learning by participants in short courses? The literature certainly focuses more on training than on learning (Su, 2006).

CPD for Paraprofessionals

This paper is largely focused on the professionally qualified staff in the sector. But what provision is made or should be made for the continuing development of a group that constitutes the majority of employees in most organisations in the information sector? Although the education system in several of the East European member states provided formal programmes of study and qualification for their paraprofessional employees, this was not so common in most of the West European states or North America (Johnson, 1991). Is in-service training enough to meet their needs? Indeed, how well organised is in-service

training for this group of staff in libraries in the Arab world? Would someone who had completed an in-service training programme be given any credit for it when seeking promotion or moving from employer to employer?

Accreditation and certification

Awarding credit for completing Continuing Education courses is not a new idea. In September 2006, the European Commission issued proposals for the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). Essentially, the Proposal is for the introduction of a reference tool for the comparison of qualifications, across disciplines and across national boundaries. The Proposal also seeks to introduce, across the whole spectrum of lifelong learning and at every level, the principles of Quality Assurance that also form a key element of the Bologna process. However, in recognition of the different legal and regulatory arrangements and variety of providers of CPD in the member states of the European Union, the Commission has accepted that initially the Framework can only be introduced on a voluntary basis.

Voluntary commitment has always been a feature of participation in CPD, and voluntary certification of the CPD experience does seem to be gaining some support both within and outwith the European Union. In the USA, for example, there appears to be a growing acceptance of voluntary certification programmes for librarians (Brumley, 2007). Professional associations such as the Medical Library Association have for many years offered formalised programmes leading to certification (Roper, 2006). A more recent example is the American Library Association - Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) Certified Public Library Administrator (CPLA) Program. This aims to provide a route by which public library administrators can have the opportunities for continuing education following the attainment of an ALA accredited MLS qualification (Poole, 2006).

Should voluntary participation in Continuing Professional development be replaced by mandated requirements? Should the continuing recognition of professional status as a librarian depend on evidence of their continuing education, as is the case in some countries for other professions such as medical doctors, teachers, etc.? In some countries, librarians in state funded organisations are already required to undertake regular continuing education. This is the case for some school librarians in some states in the U.S.A., who must achieve credits from continuing education on a regular basis, just like the teachers in the same schools. In Hungary, since 2000, public librarians have been required by law to take part in 120 hours of continuing education in every seven-year period, financed centrally by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The training courses can be provided only by licensed institutions, one of which is the principal professional body, the Hungarian Library Institute (Hangodi and Torokne Jordan, 2007). In France, where continuing education is also a legal requirement for librarians employed by the state, the principal providers are separate educational institutions established for this purpose, the Centres de Formation aux Carrières des Bibliothèques (CFCBs). These regional centres have continually adapted to the needs for continuing education of library staff and the restrictive procedures of public sector. Interestingly the CFCBs have adapted to the evolution in ongoing training, introducing initially examinations and diplomas, and more recently collaborating with the university system to offer Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees (Pavlides, 2007).

If a system of accreditation and certification of CPD is to be introduced, the evaluation of the providers of CPD becomes an issue that must be addressed.   What will be the role of the national professional associations and other non-governmental specialist bodies in the information sector? In Britain, the professional body (CILIP: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) has a long history of accrediting the Schools of Librarianship. Now it promotes a scheme for the voluntary revalidation of professional competence for

those members who wish to gain recognition of their commitment to personal professional development, and also offers to award certification to paraprofessionals (CILIP, Framework, n.d.). There are few professional associations in the Arab information sector, and most of them are small and weak. How many of these professional associations could claim to have any similar, meaningful experience of accrediting education and training?

Would the accreditation of CPD provision in the Arab world be acceptable and feasible? Perhaps the solution needs to be found at the international level. In submitting its proposals, the European Commission drew attention to the degree to which the relevance of qualifications might be identified and compared across Europe. This implicitly focused attention on the potential role of transnational European bodies such as EBLIDA (n.d.) and EUCLID (n.d.), but at present they do not have the mechanisms in place to support an accreditation scheme, nor do IFLA and the other international bodies in the information sector. Do we need, in the information sector, some equivalent to the American AACSB (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) (n.d.) or the European Foundation for Management Development's EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) (n.d) schemes for accrediting Business Schools? AACSB and EQUIS were established to raise the standard of management education, and assess not just CPD provision but all the activities of the institution, including their degree programmes, research, and engagement with industry and the professions. They charge institutions a substantial fee for their initial accreditation and for subsequent regular reviews, but accreditation by one or both of these bodies has become a global status symbol to which the leading Business Schools aspire. Is this model sustainable in the information sector on a global basis or across the Arab world? Even if it is, how could Quality Assurance and accreditation be implemented across the many small organisations that also provide CPD activities in our field?

As a contribution to this debate, the IFLA Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section has recently initiated a project to produce evidence based guidelines for assessing the quality and effectiveness of CPD activities, programmes and events. The new guidelines will build on those emanating from the American Library association 20 years ago (SCOLE, 1988),and should be able to be used by individuals and organisations providing CPD activities, as well as individuals and institutions undertaking or purchasing CPD activities either for themselves or their staff. The guidelines are expected to address variations in terms of the needs of professional practitioners in a range of countries and cultures (IFLA-CPDWL, n.d.).

Informal CPD

Any review of the wide range of activities that constitute CPD should also include informal learning, through mentoring and coaching, and professional reading.

These may help redress a particular challenge faced by many Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences in terms of meeting employers' expectations. It must be acknowledged that, from time to time, some employers express dissatisfaction with recent graduates' awareness of developments in professional practice. Often this can be attributed to their own poor selection techniques when recruiting new staff, their failure to publicise a service initiative that they have introduced, or their lack of familiarity with current curricula. More serious, however, is employers' widely expressed need for the 'soft' skills required for working in teams and communicating with people effectively. Whilst these can be developed to some extent through an appropriate pedagogical approach in the Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences (Johnson and Williams, 1990), mentoring and coaching staff in the workplace probably plays a more important part in such development. However, recent research in some academic libraries in Taiwan showed that while academic librarians there are generally skilled in empowerment of human resources and application of technological

devices, they are relatively weak in the application of knowledge management to organizational transformation (Su, 2006). Is this a widespread problem? If so, how can the appropriate skills be developed.

Librarians and students of librarianship in the Arab countries, as much as anywhere, need to maintain an awareness of leading edge developments in information provision and services if they are to underpin effectively the efforts of their governments, their diverse research community, and commercial and industrial enterprises to develop the national economies within the region. Behavioural scientists have explained that the factors that influence individuals to adopt new ideas include not only their perceptions of both the complexity of introducing and the relative advantages of adopting a new idea, as well as their understanding of its compatibility with existing practices, but also the visibility of examples of its successful implementation. Research into the diffusion of innovation notes the significance of communication channels in transferring awareness and understanding of innovations (Rogers, 1995). Confidence is clearly likely to be engendered by reports of advances in the same country or region. Whilst there are many channels through which advances in LIS professional policy and practice could be communicated (Johnson, 2004), professional journals clearly could have a significant role to play in the process of transferring innovative concepts and practices.

In a paper written 30 years ago, Madkour (1975) identified 3 fundamental obstacles impeding the transformation and modernisation of information services in developing countries: the volume of material being published; its limited geographic dissemination; and linguistic barriers. However, international studies show a low level of practitioner reading of professional journals, and especially those that are research-oriented (McDonald and Feather, 1995; Turner, 2002). Is this because practitioners are not interested, or because the journals are not readily available to them?

Within the Arab world, the problems are exacerbated by the relatively few professional journals about library and information sciences that are published in the Arabic language. Many of those journals that are published can be criticised for their poor control over the quality of their contents, and/or suffer from irregular publication (Gdoura, 2008). In the Arab world, the problems faced by libraries in acquiring publications because of the weaknesses of the book trade, and particularly the inhibitions on international distribution, have also long been known as a problem (Calvin, 1976; Del Castillo, 2001). One consequence is that the professional journals also do not enjoy a large circulation, particularly outside their country of origin.

There has been one other problem, and that is finding content for these journals. Professional development and writing for publication are related activities and are mutually beneficial. However, research has shown that the published outputs of library and information science faculty in the Gulf countries have been relatively limited (Al Ansari and others, 2001). More consideration needs to be given to the reasons underlying this problem. One lies in our understanding of why academics write for publication. On an altruistic level, researchers want their work to be recognised and to have some impact. A more selfish motivation may be that a good record of publications may be required for tenure or promotion. Promotion and remuneration systems for academics in the Arab world do not appear to encourage research activity and writing for publication to the same extent that they do in most European and North American countries. Moreover, the poor distribution of printed Arab journals has not made them attractive as places in which to publish. The journals that are widely distributed and highly regarded tend to be those that publish papers in English. Writing in English may be a challenge for some researchers, and the editors of some journals are not willing to invest the time and effort required to transform an author's inaccurate use of language to facilitate the publication of what may otherwise be an interesting paper based on sound research.

It is also important to recognise that practitioners also have some responsibility to write for publication to raise awareness of examples of the workplace experiments and innovations that they undertake, and the research that they carry out to assess user needs and satisfaction. However, the pedagogical methods in many of the Arab states, even in higher education, do not necessarily encourage the initiative and skills that underpin writing for publication. Recent attempts to change university teaching practices in one Arab state from the present didactic methods based on use of course textbooks failed almost immediately after they were promulgated by the government. The cause is not clear, and may have been resistance to change on the part of the academic staff. However, they would have been able to justify their position easily by pointing to the absence of either a range of Arabic material that could be selected for undergraduates to read around the subject or adequate library facilities to help them identify appropriate material, or both.

Although it must be acknowledged that access to the Internet in the Arab world has not yet reached the same levels as in Europe and North America, the spread of the Internet, and the rapid evolution of electronic publishing suggest that it would be worthwhile exploring the potential for using new technology to improve the availability of information in Arabic and underpin the development of independent learning. From its inception, the three primary advantages of electronic publishing over paper publication have usually been stated as more timely distribution of ideas (Butler, 1995), flexibility in delivery and content (Ball, 1997), and a potential reduction in costs (Harnad, 1995; Varian, 1996). There is no denying the ability of the Internet to disseminate information widely. The technology for publishing journals online is readily available, including the best known open source journal management and publishing tool, Open Journal Systems (n.d.). As yet, however, only a few online journals are now appearing in Arabic aimed at the information sector, such as Cybrarians (n.d.) and Al Arabia 3000 (n.d.). Online indexes to some Arabic periodical articles are being published by MultiData Services (n.d.) and AskZad (n.d.). The latter also includes the full text of some papers, but generally access to the journal articles that are identified in these services appears to remain problematic. However, the online publication of dissertations placed in Institutional Repositories is also slowly beginning to add to the volume of scholarly material in the Arabic language that is available on the Internet.

Underpinning a culture of lifelong learning

Whilst there is clearly a need for further up-to-date studies of the situation in the Arab world, the fundamental challenge lies in establishing greater motivation and commitment to lifelong learning across the information sector. This requires action, initially on the part of the Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences in the region – and their students, and then perhaps on the part of the professional associations, and the employers in the sector.

Increasingly, Schools of Librarianship and Information Sciences in Britain are adopting the use of Personal Development Portfolios (PDPs), such as that produced by the RAPID project, Recording Academic, Professional and Individual Development for Information and Library Science (n.d). The PDP approach encourages students to document their continuing development throughout their course to enhance their prospects for employment by providing evidence of skills achievements and progress. Implicitly, it encourages them to learn to recognise how they are developing and the benefits that this brings them in terms of improved performance and more commendations from their tutors. It also helps them to focus on the skills that they have to offer to prospective employers and develops their self-confidence. How widespread is this approach in LIS Schools in the Arab countries?

Whilst the Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies in the Arab world might be able to equip their students with up to date knowledge and skills, and with the ability to learn, the

real dilemma is how to ensure that these students to continue their self-critical analysis of their own development after they graduate and take action to ensure that they do not become professional fossils. Some employees are either not engaging in CPD or are doing so in a sporadic, inconsistent and non-reflective manner (Khurshid, 2008). Too many of our colleagues seem unwilling to take responsibility for their own continuing development.

So, what do the professional bodies do to encourage their members to continue their professional development? For example, CILIP's Code of Professional Practice indicates that individual members are expected to:

> "ensure they are competent in those branches of professional practice in which qualifications and/or experience entitle them to engage by keeping abreast of developments in their areas of expertise." (CILIP, Code, n.d.)

Are there similar codes of professional practice for members of every professional association? Whether there is such a code of practice or not, what do local professional associations in the Arab world do to provide opportunities for continuing education?

It has largely been left to employers to provide the motivation and support for continuing education. For a library's management to be truly responsive to the needs of its community, it must give the highest priority to nurturing its employees through a continuing education policy (Weingand, 1995). Could the extension of Personal Development Planning to the workplace provide a vital tool for Life Long Learning by identifying training needs and continuing professional development activities? How many employers in the Arab world have regular and meaningful staff appraisal and development programmes that would make individual use of PDPs worthwhile? One recent study found that 12 out of 13 academic libraries in the Gulf states did not have a systematic staff development plan (Anwar and Al-Ansari, 2002). Another revealed that while companies in Kuwait recognised the need for continuous upgrading of the skills of their employees, their approach to ensuring that it took place and the priorities that they attached to selecting staff to participate were not always coherent (Marouf and Rehman, 2004).

For Continuing Professional development to be effective, it needs to form part of a strategic development plan for the organisation. Libraries that have such development plans could actively influence the content of continuing education programmes (Hasiewicz, 2006). Continuing education provision based on libraries' goals and needs assessments would more easily become viable. Are such plans common in the Arab information sector?

Concluding remarks

It is clear that lifelong learning should be an integral activity from the moment anyone enters the information sector as student or employee. Whilst accepting that the situation in every Arab country is different because of different educational, professional and legal structures, should that prevent individuals and their employers from initiating and implementing a strategic approach to Continuous Professional Development? The challenge is to develop and maintain a viable CPD programme that will provide the sector's workforce with the knowledge and skills needed to function effectively now and in the future.

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