

Education and training for reference and information service delivery

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The 'computerisation' of information has revolutionised the delivery of reference services in libraries. Not only has it changed the way in which libraries provide client services but it has also contributed to fundamental changes in staffing structures, roles and skills of library workers. Education and training for reference and information service delivery, however, has not kept pace with these changes. The change in reference staffing structures and role-blurring between librarians and para-professionals has been an ongoing debate. Despite a general acceptance of para-professional at the reference desk, many restrictions are placed on the extent of para-professionals involvement in particular aspects of reference work.

Perceptions of roles

Results of a national survey of para-professionals and managers in reference sections of Australian academic and state libraries provided some insight as to why education and training needs for reference para-professionals are not being met.

Para-professionals working in reference identified that they perform a wide-range of reference tasks. However, many managers are unaware of the tasks these staff members performed, the frequency they performed them and the extent they did so without assistance. Managers agreed that para-professionals perform many of the lower-level reference tasks at the reference desk, but were unaware of them performing higher-level tasks. Such differences in perceptions about tasks performed and task restrictions highlight the difficulties in attempting to clarify reference para-professionals' roles. Managers need to accurately identify the level of work reference para-professionals are performing and ensure that para-professionals have the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out the tasks actually performed in the workplace.

Reference skill source

Respondents to the survey were also asked how para-professionals acquired their current reference skills. Generally, respondents believed that most reference skills were 'picked-up' on the job. There was slight support for the view

that skills were also acquired through in-house training but respondents tended to agree that reference skills were not acquired through formal qualifications. This is of major concern. Comments in the survey reflected para-professionals' frustration about lack of adequate training — 'training is minimal and there is little, if any, training or support for staff adjusting to the technological changes'; 'it is hard to keep up with new technology and still process the work each day'. Many library workers feel swamped by new technology. Library technician courses must keep in touch with these changes and supply relevant subject matter.

The results of the study highlighted the lack of sufficient and/or appropriate training in reference work for para-professionals either through formal education courses or by management in the form of formal in-house training for their employees. The fact that managers and para-professionals alike agreed that most skills for reference tasks are 'picked-up' on the job has raised important questions about skill acquisition for reference para-professionals and the adequacy of their training.

Technological change has contributed to a redistribution of reference tasks and created new roles for reference librarians and para-professionals alike. It is time to acknowledge that a fundamental shift in reference work roles has occurred and rethink education and training accordingly. ■

New courses

Two new courses are offered by Edith Cowan University for those who have a basic grasp of information technology, but wish to know more about the ways in which information services may be enhanced through the use of the Internet and other networks:

Advances in Information Technology introduces foundation concepts in computer networks and explores basic tools on the Internet. It focuses on the three aspects of technological change: the effects of electronic networks on the provision of user services; user requirements in an age of networked information services and bibliographic searching and ordering via networks.

Selection of Electronic Resources explores the principles required to effectively identify, select and evaluate resources, including electronic databases, interactive fiction, electronic encyclopedias, atlases and other reference resources. The course also considers selection tools, criteria, copyright and collection policies as they relate to these materials. ■



Professional Development Courses
Edith Cowan University
and the



Australian Library and Information Association

offer the following short courses (distance education) in 1997:

	Fees
Project Management for Information Services	\$200 ALIA/\$240 non-ALIA
Strategic Planning for the Information Manager	\$200 ALIA/\$240 non-ALIA
Upgrading Search Strategy Skills (Consists of three modules)	\$100 ALIA/\$150 non-ALIA (per module) \$250 ALIA/\$400 non-ALIA (per course)
Advances in Information Technologies	\$340 ALIA/\$400 non-ALIA
Selection of Electronic Resources (available from September 1997)	\$340 ALIA/\$240 non-ALIA

- Enrolments may commence at any time.
- Participants are given generous time allowance to ensure that they will be able to work at their own pace to complete the course requirements.
- Course materials are self-paced, and available in print and electronic form through the World Wide Web.
- Courses are supported by Edith Cowan University's Virtual Campus which provides electronic information and communication services for participants via Austpac, local modem and AARNet.

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Information is correct at time of going to press.