Cataloging and Classification Education and Training in Library and Information Science/ Studies Departments in South Africa

Recent reports bemoan the lack of cataloguers in the country to support library information services. The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature, level, status and challenges of teaching cataloguing and classification in LIS Schools in South Africa. This study informs cataloguing and classification education in South Africa, and perhaps elsewhere by providing baseline information for planning, teaching, marketing and recruiting graduates qualified in the two research domains.

1. Introduction and Background

Cataloguing and classification as a subject area in universities has been dramatically affected over the last decade by rapid changes in Library and Information Science (LIS) or iSchool education (see Weigand, 1999; Blankson-Hemans and Hibberd, 2004; Gerolimos, 2009; Ivey, 2009). The most recent reports (Bowen-Chang and Hosier, 2009; Blankson-Hemans and Hibberd, 2004; Hill, 2004; Shongwe & Ocholla, 2011) confirm a shortage of cataloguers in libraries and information centres and strongly support their education and training. This would explain why information schools (iSchools) in South Africa are increasingly challenged and encouraged to produce more cataloguers for the library market.

Bowen-Chang and Hosein (2009) are right in suggesting that the infusion of technological innovations into libraries and the changing role of cataloguers have unearthed a new dimension in the sphere of cataloguing that influences its teaching as well. Thus, notes Hill (2004), cataloguing education has changed and the process of transformation is on-going and taking on different and unforeseen directions. The changes brought about by developments in information and communication technologies mean that cataloguing should not be treated as simplistically as it was in the past, for example assigning it to the use of CIP, creating an inventory of a collection, or even in current times, capturing a record from OCLC. It should focus more on enabling students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate publications of different types/ formats to improve or increase their access to information resources. We concur with those (e.g. Cloete et al., 2003; Bowen-Chang and Hosein, 2009; Shongwe and Ocholla, 2011) who are in favour of
teaching cataloguing and classification for LIS education as an important component of the organisation of knowledge. What we do not know are the challenges of supplying and teaching cataloguers in South Africa.

South Africa has 27 universities, 12 of which have LIS schools or information/library schools with different names: the University of Pretoria (UP) – Department of Information Science, University of Cape Town (UCT) – Department of Information and Library Science, University of Western Cape (UWC) – Department of Library and Information Science, University of Fort Hare (UFH) – Department of Library and Information Science, Durban University of Technology (DUT) – Department of Information and Corporate Management, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) – Information Studies Programme, University of Zululand (UZ) – Department of Information Studies, University of South Africa (UNISA) – Department of Information Science, University of Johannesburg (UJ) – Department of Information and Knowledge Management, University of Stellenbosch (US) – Department of Information and Knowledge Management, University of Limpopo (UL) – Department of Information Studies, and the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) – Department of Library and Information Science. Our survey observed that cataloguing and classification is currently being taught or offered at UCT, UL, UKZN, UNISA, UFH, UWC, DUT and UZ. Others do not teach it at all (UJ and US) or suspended teaching because of lack of students in the relevant qualification programme (UP) and suspension of student intake in the LIS Department (WSU).

This study investigates the nature, levels, status and challenges of teaching cataloguing and classification in LIS Schools in South Africa. The study addresses the following research questions: Is it still necessary to teach cataloguing and classification in LIS schools? Who should study or be taught cataloguing and classification? At what levels are the courses being offered? What is the content of the curriculum in terms of modules, courses and content or units being taught? How are the courses being taught in terms of the methods used? What are the challenges and opportunities arising from teaching cataloguing and classification?

2. Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative methods through a survey and content analysis were employed in this study, encouraged by the number of recent studies of this nature that successfully used mixed research methods (see Ngulube, 2010). In South Africa, examples include studies by Ocholla (2009) and Ndwandwe, Ocholla and Dube (2009), focusing on information ethics education in South Africa and Africa respectively, and Chipeta, Jacobs and Mostert (2009) focusing on information literacy education. All 12 iSchools or LIS Departments in South Africa were targeted. Within these departments, the departments’ heads and/or lecturers teaching the module, and the course outlines or study guides of cataloguing and classification modules/courses were main sources of information. Survey data was collected largely through questionnaires that were emailed to the respondents of the various LIS Departments. Content analysis was employed for curriculum and syllabus analysis. We were able to access most of the cataloguing and classification syllabi, which proved useful in confirming interview and questionnaire responses. The research instruments were very similar to those used in the studies referred to earlier, but with some modifications. Visits to the various departments and access to their curricula and syllabi for the two courses was done during the year for the duration of two months. In the case of most of the target departments visited, interviews were held with the lecturers teaching the courses. In total, we collected information from the eight departments highlighted in the previous section.

3. Results

We present the findings under nine subheadings below.

3.1. Is it still necessary to teach cataloguing and classification in LIS schools?

Responses were received from all the universities teaching cataloguing and classification who all agreed that cataloguing and classification should be taught in LIS education. They considered cataloguing and classification to be a core LIS course; the backbone of librarianship professional qualification; a course that supports knowledge of library information and reference services; extremely useful for the
critical analysis and synthesis of a library collection by knowledge domains/structures for effective information services; and essential for the organization of knowledge in libraries.

3.2. Who should study or be taught cataloguing and classification?

This area raised different opinions. Some i-schools do not teach cataloguing and classification because it is irrelevant to their qualification programmes (UJ and US). It is also not offered where non-professional LIS qualifications are offered, such as undergraduate qualifications or degrees in publishing, records management, multimedia, and information science (UP). However, the general consensus was that all future professional librarians should be taught cataloguing and classification, with a few suggesting that all i-school graduates should be offered the courses because it is relevant in information service provision of all kinds.

3.3. At what levels are the courses being offered?

Ocholla and Bothma (2007:158) categorized i-school qualifications into five: the nature and type of qualification programme offered (e.g. Bachelor or Masters degree); the duration and credit requirements for a qualification (e.g. three or four years); the academic levels of the qualification (e.g. undergraduate or postgraduate); the mode of instruction (contact or distance); and the orientation of the i-school (e.g. vocational or general education). All these have a bearing on the levels and depth of cataloguing and classification teaching, learning and research. This study shows that cataloguing and classification is mainly offered to senior students, normally from their second year of university study and mostly to 3rd and 4th years (where applicable). There are cases where the courses are offered from first year in a university, although these normally only cover the basics (of cataloguing and classification). Where LIS education is offered at postgraduate level, such as at UCT and UKZN, the content is largely similar to the content offered to undergraduate bachelor students because such students generally take this course for the first time in their career. This is the case because one of the requirements for admission to such a postgraduate programme is any bachelor degree.

3.4. What is the content of the curriculum in terms of modules, courses and content or units being taught?

We noted that cataloguing and classification courses are taught separately and bear a variety of course titles. Such titles (we picked these from the curricula/syllabi from the LIS schools that were available to us) included (in no particular order): Information Retrieval 1, Information Retrieval 2, Information Retrieval 4; Cataloguing, Classification, Cataloguing and Classification, Organisation of Knowledge; Descriptive Cataloguing; Subject Analysis; Bibliographic Control, Basic Descriptive Cataloguing and Classification; Subject Organization; Theory of Cataloguing and Classification; Practical Cataloguing; Computerized Cataloguing; Information Retrieval (Classification); Databases and Database Construction (Cataloguing); Basic Cataloguing; Basic Classification; Indexing and Thesaurus Construction; Special Cataloguing and Advanced Classification. In most cases, these courses are taught for one semester; some courses are offered at either basic or junior levels, while others are offered at an advanced level. In the latter case, there would be a prerequisite of having a basic level of knowledge in the course in order to enrol for a senior level (advanced) course. We observed that course titling could be influenced not only by content, but increasingly by the need to attract and retain students. We also noticed that there are cases where indexing, thesaurus construction and abstracting are taught within cataloguing and classification courses and vice versa.

The content of the cataloguing and classification courses fall within the following: AACR2; Abstracting; Authority control; Bibliographic control; Bibliographic description; Cataloguing: theory, process, tools, manual, computerised, online, etc.; Classification: theory, history, schemes, process, policies, practical, etc.; DDC, Descriptive cataloguing; Dublin Core; Indexing; Information retrieval; LCSH; Library catalogues; MARC 21; Metadata; Subject organisation and access; and Thesaurus construction.
3.5. How are the courses being taught in terms of the methods used?

Cataloguing courses are largely taught through lectures and manual practicals. Other methods include group discussions, online practicals, workshops, seminars, projects, practical assignments, case studies, and quizzes. With the exception of UZ, UL, and UKZN where these courses are offered by library staff (and a few lecturers), the courses are taught by LIS lecturers or faculty staff.

3.6. What are the challenges and opportunities arising from teaching the course?

A number of challenges were identified by the respondents. Generally, students were said to demonstrate low levels of competence and to lack general knowledge and analytical skills. Some students were said to require a lot of individual attention; there was not enough fieldwork or practicals where students could test their knowledge; and there were not enough cataloguing tools, particularly current tools (the AACR2, DDC, LCSH), computers and software programs for online cataloguing. The respondents also stated that one semester allocated for teaching cataloguing or classification is not adequate and that it was difficult to get the students to order the tools for practical work from the library. Other problems stemmed from the universities’ assessment rules and regulations, such as setting a two hour paper (theory & practical) for the assessment of students taking the modules (the respondents said this wasn’t enough). There were also complaints about the use of manual practicals only, which also limits the acquisition of knowledge and skills for computerised/online cataloguing. In some cases, the size (e.g. over 100 students in one university surveyed) of the class is too large to maintain high standards of teaching and learning.

Other challenges were the need for continuous training in order for the lecturers to keep up to date and staffing problems, such as only three people in one of the surveyed departments. It was stressed that classification in particular is a very challenging course that demands adequate preparation and students learning competence. Equally disturbing in some cases was the description of the students’ lack of reading interest, which makes learning more difficult. In addition, expensive cataloguing tools; lack of mathematical skills; language or communication problems for students whose mother tongue is not English; cognitive problems (not the best students attracted); and lack of general knowledge were noted.

3.7. What suggestions can be made for the future?

In order for the teaching and learning of cataloguing and classification to be improved, the challenges identified in 3.6 need intervention. Small group, practical sessions are necessary, and this requires staffing and adequate time allocation in the timetable. Individual consultation times for lecturers to interact with students need to be regularised where this does not occur. Modern libraries are increasingly computerised, demanding computerised or web-based information processing and retrieval knowledge and skills from LIS graduates. We noted that manual cataloguing predominates: only a few iSchools enable access to web-based cataloguing. A strong blend of both computerized and manual cataloguing is recommended. Other respondents’ suggestions were to: «Make copies of relevant pages (e.g. title page, table of contents, etc.) for practical teaching in class»; «Teach changes in the latest edition theoretically and where possible show them (because as a lecturer I have the latest edition that cannot be given to students)«; enable students to practice using the online university library system and through fieldwork experience; cataloguing tools should be made available; the size of classes should be reduced; iSchools should be involved in student selection; and more people should be employed. There was the suggestion that lecturers should be Interest Group for Bibliographic Standards (IGBIS) members and should be aware of all current changes. It was also suggested that it is important to use everyday life examples to relate to students better.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

While all the surveyed departments teach cataloguing and classification, the degree, level, depth and breadth are not uniform and depend on variables such as the levels of pitching the course, the objectives of the course, and the outcomes required. There are different opinions on whether cataloguing and classification should still be taught in LIS schools, but we support the teaching of cataloguing and classification
because it is an essential component of LIS education, particularly for future librarians and information service providers in South Africa. Given some of the concerns raised by the respondents, cataloguing and classification should be taught at senior levels of university education, preferably from second year. In our opinion, students need to be introduced to the concepts and background of information science, librarianship, information literacy, information collection and information sources before they tackle cataloguing and classification.

The titling of LIS courses in the changing information environment is becoming an art in itself and a compromised necessity for student attraction and retention. As noted in a recent tracer study of UZ graduates (Shongwe and Ocholla, 2011), in the Bachelor of Arts –Information Science programme that was aimed at the broad information service market, cataloguing and classification was initially removed for fear of losing students who would not necessarily work in libraries and who were obsessed with the strong IT component in their IS education. However, when they graduated, most of them found jobs in libraries and their lack of cataloguing and classification knowledge became the problem. We had to introduce the courses under «Information Retrieval 1(largely cataloguing) and Information Retrieval 2 (largely classification) to enable them to obtain the knowledge they might need in the market, but at the same time not to chase away potential students of the qualification programme (we do, however, call the courses by their actual names in the four year librarianship qualification programmes on offer).

While this is a dilemma faced by most iSchools in South Africa, ideally course titling should reflect the content being taught and should not be overly swayed by customer/ student perceptions and attraction needs. We have noted more similarities than differences in the course content on offer in LIS schools in the country. The differences, as mentioned earlier, and the use of appropriate technology in the content and for content delivery. There is evidence of the efforts being made to achieve appropriate delivery. Regarding teaching methods, lectures and practicals are predominant, as it should be. However, fieldwork or experiential learning, which is also essential for teaching and learning, was not mentioned.

Although the challenges identified for teaching cataloguing and classification are not necessarily new, they require intervention through short, medium and long term plans that have to be prepared urgently by iSchools in the country. The introduction and integration of Resource Description and Access(RDA) in the teaching of cataloguing in the near future is South Africa will come with challenges that have to be addressed now. Ivey (2009) concludes that, «Although library science programs will need to train students in the new cataloguing tools, they must also prepare them to be effective teachers and researchers.» He continues: «The cataloguer of the future must be visible, be a good communicator, and be capable of performing many different library functions.»

We believe that this study will inform cataloguing and classification education in South Africa and perhaps elsewhere by providing baseline information for the teaching, marketing and recruitment of graduates who are qualified in the two domains.

5. References


