

Re-thinking boundaries in the African LIS work place as a contribution to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals: reflections from a South African study¹

Jaya Raju

Durban University of Technology, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract

Purpose - In the context of the historical influence of British and American trends on the African LIS context, the current knowledge society, as well as Africa's challenges in terms of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), this paper reports on the work-in-progress in an aspect of a wider study currently being undertaken in South Africa. The aim in this aspect of the study is to interrogate how current technology trends are impacting on LIS work place qualification and competency requirements. The intention is to re-visit traditional boundaries and demarcations in the interest of the growth and development of African LIS workers who in turn may contribute to meeting the Millennium Development Goals in a number of creative and innovative ways.

Design/methodology/approach - A qualitative research approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from purposively selected managers and staff from a sample of academic, public and special library services in South Africa.

Findings - The paper emphasizes the need for LIS in Africa, particularly in the context of the current knowledge-based society and the harsh realities facing African communities, to contribute to the attainment of the MDGs in Africa. In attempting to make this contribution, the paper recommends that the African LIS work place must not allow itself to be constrained by qualification and other work place boundaries that are legacies of the past, as evidenced in the limited study reported in this paper which demonstrates lessons of innovation as well as instances of restriction.

Originality/value - The paper calls for a paradigm shift in terms of qualification and other work place boundaries in African LIS work environments so as to allow African LIS services to make a meaningful contribution towards the attainment of the MDGs. In doing this the paper also offers lessons for other developing parts of the world.

Keywords - LIS-Africa, LIS-South Africa, Millennium Development Goals

Introduction

The historical influence of British and American trends on the African library and information services (LIS) context is well documented in the literature, notably by Rosenberg (1999). Western values and priorities have entrenched themselves both in LIS education and in the LIS work place in Africa. Okolie (2003, p. 254) usefully points out that while we in Africa should not "reject useful and useable elements of western civilization", we must also understand that African development must be guided by African realities; indeed such realities as reflected by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

African development models, be they in education or in the work place, do not necessarily have to travel the same route followed by counterparts in the west.

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Dependency theorists have often attacked these development and modernization routes for stifling Africa's growth and development. Hence the African LIS work place needs to re-think qualification and work place boundaries not only to more fully utilize its education products and in the process contribute to their growth and development but, importantly, to provide critical information required for everyday survival in many African communities as well as information for other development purposes.

The knowledge economy, influenced largely by rapidly advancing ICTs, has generated many opportunities and much excitement for information professionals. Automation of information-related functions has led to much down-shifting in the work hierarchy with support staff or paraprofessionals taking over many tasks that traditionally had been the domain of professional LIS workers, leaving the latter to engage in other value-added services to users. These changes present an ideal opportunity to re-visit old boundaries and demarcations often developed in a western context to meet western needs.

Toward this end, this paper reports on an aspect of a wider study currently being undertaken in South Africa; this study is researching the development of a LIS work place model that makes efficient and resourceful use of products of LIS education from different types of tertiary education institutions. Data is currently being gathered via semi-structured interviews with purposively selected managers and staff from a sample of academic, public and special library services in South Africa. The aim is to interrogate how current technology trends are impacting on work place qualification and competency requirements. The intention is to re-visit traditional boundaries and demarcations in the interest of the growth and development of African LIS workers who in turn may contribute to meeting the Millennium Development Goals through the creative and innovative provision of information needed for literacy development, for everyday survival by many local African communities, for research projects working on African research problems, for knowledge creation needed for African development, and so on.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the work-in-progress of the study mentioned. The paper presents this in the context of Africa's challenges in terms of the Millennium Development Goals.

Millennium Development Goals

In 2002 the United Nation's Millennium Declaration committed the world's countries and development institutions to a series of goals that address issues such as poverty reduction, environmental conservation, gender equity, education and health. These goals, better known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), are built into a framework of targets and indicators to measure world progress towards the achievement of these goals by 2015. The MDGs are particularly geared towards developing countries such as those in Africa, many of which are gripped by poverty and hunger, the HIV/Aids pandemic, ethnic conflicts, high debt burdens and weak governance structures often plagued by corruption. While there has been significant progress made in some countries, for example Ghana and Nigeria (Cleeve and Ndhlovu, 2004, p. 10), progress towards these goals in the world as a whole has been slow (Casal, 2007, p. 4).

Africa's challenges

The United Nation's Millennium Declaration recognizes that African countries face particularly difficult development challenges as they are "largely marginalized from the benefits, while being exposed to the threats of globalisation" (Cleeve and Ndhlovu, 2004, p. 10). Furthermore, they are often plagued by internal constraints such as those already mentioned above as well as others such as political strife and natural disasters such as floods and droughts. Based on United Nations monitoring, it is claimed that Africa would not achieve most of the MDGs, including halving poverty and achieving universal primary education, by 2015 (Mutula, 2005, p. 592). While social indicators reflect hardships of populations growing faster than social services and economies can cope with (Dent, 2007, p. 205; Ahmed and Cleeve, 2004, p. 20), growth across the continent remains uneven. Botswana, for example, is the only African country to have shown consistently strong growth in terms of income per capita and GDP with similar

trends in Mauritius and Seychelles, while Ethiopia, Burundi and Sierra Leone continue to record the lowest incomes in Africa (Ahmed and Cleeve, 2004, p. 20). South Africa has achieved a remarkable reduction in child malnutrition, while life expectancy rates in Sierra Leone remain low (Ahmed and Cleeve, 2004, pp. 24-25).

Notwithstanding difficulties in economic and social progress in most parts of Africa in the decades following independence and with aggregate economic performance of the continent remaining weak, Ahmed and Cleeve (2004, p. 12) claim that the new millennium shows “renewed signs of economic progress and broader commitment to reform” in response to initiatives such as the MDGs. These reform efforts, they insist, “need to be sustained, strengthened and directed towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals”. As the gap between the rich and poor of the world widens, particularly as a result of the effects of globalisation, initiatives such as the MDGs seek to improve the living conditions of the poverty stricken of the world. How then can the LIS profession in Africa make a contribution to the attainment of the MDGs?

The LIS profession

It has been well documented in the literature (Raju, 2007; Rosenberg, 1999) that African LIS education and training, historically, has been influenced by British and American trends. This emulation of western models was inevitable given that in the pre-independence era African librarians generally trained abroad or engaged in distance education with institutions abroad; and that in the post-independence era, assistance and funding and even academic staffing came from the west in the setting up of the first library schools in Africa (Rosenberg, 1999). Thus western values and priorities were imported into the African LIS context. Curriculum content too tended to be based on what was taught in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom.

However, more recently African scholarship generally has de-emphasized Euro-American values with higher education and research striving to reflect the lived experiences of the vast majority of Africans. Okolie (2003, p. 235) in his call for

knowledge production in higher education for sustainable African development, appeals for African-centred higher education where African ideas, knowledge and ways of knowing are affirmed and promoted. This is reiterated by Raseroka (2005, p. 4) in her call to help bridge Africa's knowledge divide, where she appeals to African scholars and librarians to "stimulate knowledge creation and its analysis by local researchers and communities [and] thus stimulate rigour in the critical analysis of local research issues". LIS education and research in Africa, which is located in higher education, too needs to heed these calls particularly in view of efforts to strive for the attainment of the MDGs. LIS curriculum design and research should empower Africans "to deal with their peculiar conditions and fast changing ... information environment" (Mambo, 2000, p. 391).

Likewise, LIS services too need to make a contribution to these efforts. According to Raseroka (2005, p. 4) African populations generally lack the "requisite high level and varied types of needed literacy skills" required for access to critical information, particularly electronic access which, in the current knowledge society, is the dominant mode of access to information. Furthermore, this mode is dependent upon the existence of complex information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. Such infrastructure is poorly distributed, or even non-existent, among many African populations (Kari, 2007, p. 364; Raseroka, 2005, 4). African countries, in many instances, cannot afford investment in digital content, ICT awareness and skills, and Internet infrastructure, particularly in the vast expanses of rural areas (Kavulya, 2007, p. 212). These factors reinforce the information access divide that hinders Africa's meaningful participation in a true knowledge society; a society that affords equitable access to information by all communities and which indeed is required for African development in various sectors. Hence, Africa remains marginalized from the benefits of globalisation. Library and information services have a significant role to play in helping to bridge this divide. Examples of such contribution include making creative efforts towards literacy development of African populations, using innovative methods (e.g. repackaging) to make information needed for everyday survival available to local African communities and providing access to research outputs published abroad to scholars based in Africa and who are working on African research problems (Raju, 2007, p. 4).

The knowledge society

The knowledge society, driven largely by rapidly advancing ICTs, “has brought about a whole range of opportunities and excitement ... the changing roles of information professionals has been a result of these inevitable forces” (Tin and Al-Hawamdeh, 2002, p. 331). In this knowledge-based context, increasing information needs and demands have prompted a global trend where LIS paraprofessionals or support staff take over the role of professionals “in providing basic reference service, thereby releasing the professionals to provide other value-added services to users” (Tin and Al-Hawamdeh, 2002, p. 333). Likewise, in many areas of information work particularly where there has been the automation of functions, paraprofessionals are being assigned tasks that were previously solely the domain of professionals (Neal, 2006). Significantly, this downward shift in the work hierarchy has resulted in much task overlap and blurring of lines between responsibilities of LIS professionals and paraprofessionals. In fact the Congress on Professional Education (COPE), held under the auspices of the American Library Association, relevantly pointed out that if information technology has changed the nature of work in libraries, then this calls for the contents of many jobs to be re-evaluated and re-defined (Congress on Professional Education (COPE), 2003). Is it perhaps not time then for LIS, especially in Africa, in the context of critical information required for everyday survival in many communities (e.g. dissemination of medical, preventative and other health related information) and hence for the attainment of important MDGs, to more fully utilize the skills and knowledge of LIS paraprofessionals (as argued by the author elsewhere (Raju, 2007)).

As also argued previously (Raju, 2007), this paradigm shift is also relevant in the context of many school leavers in Africa coming from severely disadvantaged educational and economic backgrounds; thus in many instances they are not able to access the more elite traditional universities but are in many cases able to access vocational institutions such as universities of technology and polytechnics (a case in point in South Africa), and thus emerge as paraprofessional LIS products after three years or so of study. Such available skills and knowledge should be harnessed not only

for the provision of required LIS services needed for the attainment of the MDGs, but also for the educational development of these individuals themselves so that they too may grow and develop and in turn impact on the growth and development of African society and thus on the attainment of the MDGs. 'Information capabilities' on the part of both providers and users "can act as agents of change for individuals and communities enhancing their abilities to engage with formal institutions in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres of their life" (Casal, 2007, p. 5), and in this way take African society forward. Why then should the African context, when it comes to qualification and work place requirements, adhere to demarcations and boundaries developed in a western context to meet western needs. African countries have their own development challenges unique from that of other parts of the world. Their qualification and work place requirements should be dictated by these challenges. Lessons for such a paradigm shift may be drawn from the following report on the work-in-progress of an empirical study currently being undertaken in South Africa.

Empirical study

This paper reports on just one aspect of a wider study (explained in the **Introduction**) currently being undertaken in South Africa. In the context of the current knowledge society which is being driven by rapidly advancing ICTS and which has led to the global trend of task overlap and blurring of lines between responsibilities of LIS professionals and paraprofessionals, this study, among other issues, interrogated the following critical question:

If technology has significantly altered the nature of work in the LIS environment as evident in the literature (that is, in many areas of LIS, work is no longer carried out in the manner in which it used to be done), then have job functions devolved in response to the changing technology?

The author is currently gathering data via semi-structured interviews with purposively selected managers and staff from a sample of academic, public and special library services in four provinces in South Africa which house major LIS services of the

country. The aim is to interrogate how current technology trends are impacting on work place qualification and competency requirements. The intention is to re-visit traditional boundaries and demarcations in the LIS work place in the context of changes and opportunities presented by the knowledge society. Although these interviews are still in progress, the researcher has completed most of them in one of the four provinces (KwaZulu-Natal) and wishes to report on some of the trends evident thus far. In total 12 interviews have been conducted: In each of four major academic libraries in the province a director or senior manager was interviewed and a group interview was conducted with three staff members (one with a traditional university LIS qualification; one with a technikon (now called university of technology) LIS qualification; and one staff member with no formal LIS qualification). The same was done with the major public library service (with about 90 branches) operating in the province. Special libraries are a different breed, being small departments within large organisations, and hence the head of each of the two special libraries surveyed thus far was interviewed. Each interview lasted between 50 minutes and an hour. The researcher worked from a semi-structured interview schedule, using different interview schedules for managers and general staff, with special library heads getting a mixture of questions from both interview schedules. However, the design of the schedules had enough common ground for purposes of triangulation of responses from the two groups of interviewees.

While other data collection methods were employed as part of the research design of the wider study mentioned, the particular aspect of the study being reported in this paper used interviews to interrogate the issue in question. Understanding LIS work place behaviour called for a qualitative research approach which according to Babbie and Mouton (2001, p. 270) investigates social reality by studying “human action from the perspective of the social actors themselves” (in this case LIS managers and staff). Interviews as a data gathering method, “the most frequently used technique in qualitative work” (Alvesson, 2002, p. 107) was used to gain access to the research subjects as this method allowed the researcher to focus on the aspect of social reality under study in its ‘natural setting’/in the ‘real world’ which would allow the researcher to try and understand the LIS work environment in all its complexity, an important aspect

of qualitative research (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005, p. 133). Having collected empirical data in this way the researcher then carefully examined it for patterns and trends to understand and explain how current technology trends are impacting on LIS work place qualification and competency requirements.

In attempting to do this, it was evident that each LIS service surveyed had its own complexities and idiosyncrasies (context) that influenced the way it operated - which is what the qualitative research approach, as mentioned above, attempts to take into account in social enquiry. For example, each of the special libraries surveyed so far is so confined to the subject of the service that it supports (e.g. law or medical science) that there was very little that could be drawn by way of lessons for the wider LIS context. The importance of the LIS service, particularly in the knowledge context underpinned by ICTs, and the contribution of the incumbent operating the service are almost subsumed or overshadowed by the presence and work of specialists (lawyers, scientists, etc.) often to the dissatisfaction of the LIS worker in terms of: recognition as a professional; remuneration; job title/designation; library budget; additional assistance; little opportunity for upward mobility; and being required to engage in work from photocopying up to budgeting and providing a virtual information service for company users based sometimes nationally and even internationally. Much of the job, particularly about the subject area, is learnt 'on the floor' and hence a LIS degree or even a LIS diploma and some information work experience are general qualification and competency requirements for such positions.

The public library surveyed, on the other hand, with its almost 90 branches, over 500 staff in 10 districts with libraries servicing urban centres and outlying areas offers some important lessons for and is perhaps closer to the central theme of this paper, that of LIS and Africa's MDGs. As part of the transformation agenda in South Africa, public libraries are being made increasingly accessible to the historically disadvantaged communities, particularly in the rural areas. It is therefore not surprising to find that in more recent years the huge public library service surveyed has shed its erstwhile policy of only employing traditional university graduates (with an academic focus in their four-

year training) as professional librarians and now also employs in this category, university of technology (UoT – previously called technikon) graduates, with a technological focus in their four-year training. Furthermore, UoT diplomates (holders of the three-year national diploma in LIS) may be appointed as paraprofessionals in Assistant Librarian posts, instead of, as was done in the past, being bundled together with Library Assistants who have matriculation (year 12) as their minimum qualification requirement. This shedding of old demarcations imported into the library system from foreign models indeed does allow for some career progression especially for those who, for economic or educational reasons, have only been able to access vocational institutions such as the UoT for their LIS training. Mobility within the system is further facilitated by the fact that labour unions, which are very active in the municipality and which by their very nature are acutely aware of the need to provide workers with development opportunities, have insisted, according to the District Manager interviewed, that experience requirements for positions be kept to a minimum - for example, for the position of Librarian, one year's experience in a library environment is required and not necessarily experience at a professional level. Senior posts such as those of District Managers and Deputy Director in the public library service do not require advanced qualifications in LIS such as Honours and Masters but a basic four-year LIS qualification with, obviously, an increase in the number of years of experience in a library environment.

Perhaps in terms of Africa's development challenges outlined in the first half of this paper, adjusting such boundaries in terms of local needs is not only realistic but also opens the way for LIS services to contribute to the attainment of the MDGs rather than being constrained by colonial legacies imported into its work environments. Okiy (2003, p. 126) realistically points out that rural dwellers in Africa are largely "characterized by ignorance, poverty, apathy, and illiteracy", and therefore cannot be "adequately served by print-oriented information media that use a language and format that is irrelevant to them". A public library servicing such a rural environment would need to tailor "its services to accommodate the non-literate rural majority" (Okiy, 2003, p. 126). Information required for making informed decisions in whatever context (health, crop

production and other agricultural and economic activities, political and social contexts) needs to be supplied in alternative mediums such as oral, audio, visual or even electronic formats. The question to be asked is: Does the role of transferring this required information to the rural masses in an accessible format need to be carried out by a graduate who has spent five years at university (a professional LIS requirement in the west) and who might even be reluctant to work in rural areas? Could the role of assessing rural information needs and repackaging and remodelling information so that it can reach the rural populace to meet their needs, not be fulfilled by paraprofessionals based in the community and who have had exposure to basic training in LIS services from, for example, a polytechnic and not necessarily with a traditional university-based full professional LIS qualification. Struggling African economies are more likely to be able to afford the latter in terms of human resources and, further, this provides opportunities for the educational development of local people. Hence shifting qualification and experience requirements to suit local needs, as we have seen in the South African public library example, is necessary if LIS in Africa is serious about contributing to the attainment of the MDGs.

The demands on an academic LIS service, however, are different because of the more intellectually sophisticated user population. Nevertheless, here too things can be done differently from the developed world, in order to contribute to the MDGs. Among the academic libraries surveyed, those based in the traditional universities continue to maintain traditional boundaries in terms of qualification and competency requirements. Here LIS graduates from traditional universities occupy professional positions (e.g. Cataloguing Librarian and Subject Librarian) and those from UoTs, including those with a four-year Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech.) degree, occupy support or paraprofessional positions (e.g. Library Assistant and Senior Library Assistant). Those academic libraries located in the universities of technology, however, employ LIS graduates from both the traditional university and the UoT in professional positions while holders of the three-year diploma in LIS from the UoTs qualify for paraprofessional positions (e.g. Assistant Librarian). The library of one of the UoTs (located in a township and therefore perhaps more sensitive to development needs), breaks traditional ground

even further by regarding the diploma in LIS from the UoT as a requirement for entry level professional positions (Assistant Librarian) with routine clerical duties being allocated to incumbents (Library Assistants) who have no formal LIS qualifications. Once Assistant Librarians acquire their fourth year at a UoT (B.Tech.) they move up a grade and become fully fledged Librarians. Staff career progression is obviously a priority in this LIS service. The Director of this particular academic library service discourages the use of the label 'paraprofessional' as she believes that it does not allow for progression of staff in the work place. Senior positions involving management functions in all the academic libraries surveyed require senior LIS qualifications such as Honours and Masters (and rightly so because of the demands on the service from a teaching, learning and research community often located in a knowledge-based and ICT driven context), with the UoT libraries also including here the Master of Technology (M.Tech.) qualification. In terms of experience requirements, all of the academic libraries surveyed require multiple years of experience especially for professional posts with some libraries insisting on professional experience and others not.

It is evident from these findings that academic libraries located in traditional universities are still very Anglo-American in their outlook and resist embracing the new role functions that the university of technology (B.Tech.) graduate can contribute in a technologically advancing academic library environment. Technology has re-defined the information environment and the LIS profession is "re-defining itself to meet the challenges of the changing environment" (Omekwu, 2006a, p. 243). The time is opportune then to re-visit traditional work place boundaries, largely imported from the west, to meet development challenges that are particular to the local African context. Is it perhaps not time for African LIS work environments to change their qualification boundaries and re-define roles of professional, paraprofessional and other support staff as information technology particularly in a tertiary education environment, increasingly, allows people to seek information without the direct help of LIS personnel. This diminishes their role as information intermediaries to take on other roles such as developing strategies to manage technology and information in the knowledge age, repackaging and remodelling of critical information, literacy development, etc. Yet all of

the LIS contexts covered in the survey so far, while enthusiastically admitting that technology has dramatically altered the traditional nature of work in the LIS environment, show no systematic and structured efforts at re-evaluating and re-defining all posts in the system as a response to the changes to traditional LIS roles brought about by technology (except for sporadic instances of responses to technology demands (e.g. creation of posts such as Electronic Media Librarian, Systems Librarian, IT Officer, etc.)). Many of the designations currently used in LIS services are exactly what they used to be fifteen to twenty years ago, yet technology has over this period almost re-defined the information landscape, and work place nomenclature should creatively reflect this re-definition. Admittedly, one might argue that the nature of some LIS jobs are essentially the same even though the processing tools have changed, but nevertheless these very tools (technology) have in many instances forced re-organising of the work hierarchy (as the literature reflects). It is this shift that creates opportunities for re-evaluating and re-defining the content of posts which should reflect itself in the choice of job title nomenclature. As Omekwu (2006a, p. 243) points out, the LIS profession should be “re-defining itself” ... “to meet the challenges of the changing environment”.

If properly harnessed “the Internet offers [a] platform for unfettered global access” to Africa’s rich cultural heritage (Omekwu, 2006a, p. 253). Africa may be deficient in ICT systems and infrastructures compared to other parts of the world but it abounds in undocumented indigenous knowledge (Omekwu, 2006b, p. 857; Mutula, 2004, pp. 283-284). University of technology graduates by virtue of the nature of their technology-based training, are in an ideal position to harness Internet capabilities to the benefit of African society. The African continent is “being fast-forwarded into the digital revolution” (Omekwu, 2006a, p. 254), so why not use such available skills to globalise local African content and national knowledge assets and thus help make Africa an active and valuable participant in the global knowledge society .

Mutula (2004) emphasizes the benefits for Africa in developing digital libraries particularly the opportunities they present for Africa to create local content so that

school and university curricula and African research need not be dependent on foreign content with formats and values that are not relevant to African communities. LIS graduates with technology-based education from universities of technology and polytechnics are well placed to develop such digital libraries. Therefore the LIS work place needs to re-think traditional boundaries so as to allow it to make use of such available skills for the betterment of African society.

Conclusion and recommendation

Africa's challenges are numerous and often daunting and more so in a globalised context of unequal participants. It is therefore imperative that every sector of African society make an effort to address these challenges. However the continent's development, particularly in the context of the current knowledge society which is being propelled by rapidly advancing ICTs, must be guided by African realities as reflected in the Millennium Development Goals. Thus the African LIS work place must not allow itself to be constrained by qualification and other work place boundaries that are legacies of the past imported into our environment from foreign contexts, as evidenced in the limited study reported in this paper which demonstrates lessons of innovation as well as instances of restriction. LIS work place boundaries and demarcations must be informed by local African needs, bearing in mind that within the African continent itself these needs will vary and would require appropriate responses. Only such a paradigm shift, particularly in the public and academic LIS contexts which are significant role players in the African development arena, would allow African LIS services to make a meaningful contribution towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in terms of: literacy development; provision of critical information for everyday survival in poverty stricken African communities; supporting African research and knowledge creation towards addressing African research problems; and developing strategies to manage technology and information to help bridge the information access divide so that Africa can make meaningful contributions in a real knowledge society. Re-visiting traditional qualification boundaries and other LIS work place demarcations in the context of local African needs would also promote the growth and development of African LIS

workers, who are critical role players in striving to attain the Millennium Development Goals.

LIS in Africa has a moral obligation to contribute to what Ahmed and Cleeve (2004, p. 12) described as Africa's renewed commitment to economic progress and reform in the new millennium. In attempting to meet this obligation LIS individuals and organizations must be bold and innovative enough to break traditional ground (as some are already doing) to make the LIS work place relevant to African needs, and thus make a contribution to alleviating the suffering of African communities which is what the Millennium Development Goals are ultimately aimed at.

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