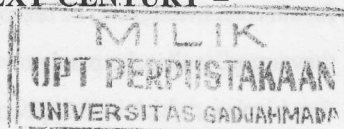# EDUCATING INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS FOR THE NEXT CENTURY – THE ASIA-PACIFIC RIM PERSPECTIVE*

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It is, indeed, an honor for me to be asked to introduce this program exchanging views relating to library and information service education particularly as it relates to Southeast Asia. Some of you may be wondering what my qualifications for doing this. I have lived and worked in Thailand for much of the time in the past ten years. I have had the privilege of lecturing in library and information science programs all over the Asia-Pacific rim, including Australia, China, Korea, New Guinea, and New Zealand. Lately I have served as the outside examiner for University of Technology, MARA in Malaysia and have recently had funded a major grant to work with colleagues in Vietnam in improving library and information science education. Other lecturing/consulting assignments for me have included Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Singapore. I have also worked with professionals in Cambodia and Laos. One of my most recent assignments was at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok from 1994 through 1997 and again in the Fall of 1998, when I not only directed the library and information centers, but also held a professorship in the School of Advanced Technologies where I was instrumental in introducing both master and PhD programs in information management. In April and May I was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at KKU in Thailand, helping to develop the first PhD program in Information Studies in the country.

With that background in mind, and with apologies to all library and information studies educators and their institutions to which I do injustice by generalizing, let me begin.

As I talk I remind myself and you that to cross a national frontier is to move from one context to another – to a different economy; to a different political system; to a different educational system; to a different technological infrastructure and, in particular, to a different culture. I am aware of the context as we begin to explore issues and trends that are now facing the profession. Even though much of the basic theory that is imbedded in my remarks is international, its interpretation may not be. I have no intention of forcing a western view but I do believe some, if not all, of the points I will make can be discussed on an applicable scale.

A well-known futurist[1] reminds us that society is now in a 'time of parenthesis' almost as if bracketed off from both the known past and the unl\known future. This time of parenthesis is a time of change and questioning for us because society is now dealing more with conceptual space connected by electronics, rather than physical space connected, in our profession's terms, by "the library." If librarianship and archival studies are to remain relevant elements in the total information system chain, forming a link through which society is held together and a culture is created and maintained, then our approach to educating future generations requires continuous analysis. If we don't take deliberate, calculated steps to remain relevant, our programs may, indeed, become endangered. One article I read recently points out that Library and Information Science Education has been compared to the giant panda, it is struggling for survival against business and technology studies as the giant panda is struggling

for survival in nature.[2] The reason the panda is nearly extinct, they argue, is that the panda never adapted to any diet other than bamboo, which is disappearing from the ecological world system. The information world is moving so rapidly that users of information will not depend upon a profession that is, metaphorically, still eating bamboo.

A nation's political, economic, social, and technological development depends upon access to information that can be converted into knowledge and understanding by information seekers and users at all levels. The implementation of a nation's information policy requires provision of electronic services, use of information technology and access to Internet resources and has great significance for library and information services and particularly for information services educators. That is, of course, because an information infrastructure enabling that process to occur requires knowledgeable educators who are responsible for preparing the new generation of information professionals who must develop those services and systems needed to successfully accomplish the goal of a knowledge society.

New information technologies now are beginning to offer an opportunity for the emerging and fast-developing countries of Southeast Asia to use as a force in changing the way people communicate, learn, find and use information. There is beginning to grow awareness in this Region, among educators, politicians and the private sector that information is key to this development. It is a dramatic change in attitude. Consequently it is being recognized that effective management of information requires professionals who understand information, how it is created, organized, sought, and used by people in both their work lives and their personal lives and that this requires a core of qualified information professional. In order to accomplish this at a national level it is important to develop standards against which each program can be measured.

Not until fairly recently has education for librarianship and information work in Southeast Asia focused upon recordable information knowledge and the services and technologies to facilitate that media's management and use. Even now, in some of these countries, access to the Internet is limited or non-existent. Now international information policies and global economic and technological development on the one hand and societal demands on the other require professionals who know why, who, what, where and how to access information in all of its formats. Professionals are required who can think conceptually and reason logically, using both that knowledge and advanced technologies to deliver information services needed by society.

Programs of library science, information studies or whatever the term might be of a specific program or country in the Region are now scrambling to enhance curricula, recruit qualified faculty, change degree designation and attract a wilder pool of potential information professionals. Educators here, just as in other areas of the world, have recognized their responsibility to act as change agents, to initiate curricula and design programs to meet future needs of information professionals, and to build a commitment to change that is constant. We all know that an educated, informed teaching staff is the most important single element in a program, since the faculty and its expertise is the curriculum. Educators are responsible not only for the transmission of knowledge but also for the creation of knowledge. The quality of a program is reflected in the consulting, writing, speaking, research and other professional activities undertaken by a highly educated faculty.

As we enter the 21st Century, there is no greater evidence of change than is apparent here in Southeast Asia. These societies have rapidly developed three main characteristics: first, information is now being used as an economic resource; secondly, there is a greater use of information among

the general public; and finally, there is growing development of an information sector within the economy[3].

With that in mind, one can understand why it is difficult to encapsulate library and information services education in this Region of the world. This change is coming fast and furious, oftentimes aided by consultation from outside experts and sometimes modeled or remodeled on western programs. Most of this development has taken place in the last ten years, with much of it within the last five. Still, there remains a definite uniqueness about programs in this Region. When I think about this uniqueness, these differences from what I am used to in the western milieu, I'm reminded of Lester Asheim's sage remarks over thirty years ago. That great American educator wrote about the parallels and contrasts of systems and services in developing countries of the world. I remember one example he used, drawing on an account in "For Whom the Bell Toll," when, the author, Ernest Hemingway, who set himself the impossible literary tasks of trying to describe, in words, the smell of death. Asheim remarks that it was a brilliant effort, but it failed. "You cannot – ever – get the sensation of an odor without actually smelling it,"[4] he wrote. There are some experiences that can be truly felt only directly, never vicariously. One of those has to be education for the profession, the culture, mores, values and infrastructure of a country or region always paint a different picture, frame a different scenario, reflect a different image, no matter how subtle. Unless one experiences it first-hand, one does not know it, only knows about it.

However, it is not my intent to document those subtleties in this, for me, exotic Region of the globe, only to lay the general groundwork of program development in Indonesia. Nuances always vary somewhat from program to program, and country to country, but with the core curriculum for information professionals providing for the same theory, principles, and practices that are required for the provision of good information services anywhere in the world. It addresses the nature of information placed in the larger PEST context of each society – those being the political, economic, social and technological factors. Cognate areas are sometimes recognized, though oftentimes politically not feasible to take advantage of, as very important in the context. Bob Taylor, former Dean at Syracuse, sees it as a "science that investigates the properties and behavior of information, the forces governing the flow of information, and the means of processing information for optimum accessibility and usability. The field is related to mathematics, logic, linguistics, psychology, computer technology, operations research, telecommunications, the graphic arts, computer science, management and several other fields."[5] The possibilities of cross-disciplinary study seem to be much more restrictive here than in some other Regions with which I am familiar.

In order to address those issues and criteria in a systematic and current way, I cite a set of guidelines that were recently developed through a lengthy process of discussion and consideration within the framework of UNESCO's ASTINFO Program. This process began in Beijing in 1995 at a workshop on information education strategies. After an interim meeting of experts in the Philippines, deliberations concluded in Bangkok in 1997 with intense discussions and debate among educators and other professionals form several Asia-Pacific Rim Countries – including Australia, Bangladesh, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, The Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam. I Took part, as a resource person, in those deliberations and had a hand in producing this booklet entitled: "A Curriculum for an Information Society – Educating and Training Information Professionals in the Asia-Pacific Region"[6] which was published.

The reasons for a proposed curriculum for the future are:

1. A Pressing need to educate and train a group of information professionals who will be able to make

a real contribution to the emerging information societies throughout the Region.

2. There currently is a range of education and training institutions, many of which are poorly equipped, offering programs that appear to conform, in the main, to a core curriculum that was designed twenty or thirty years ago when conditions were different.

Requirements for Librarians

Information is the key:

1. The nature of information
2. How it is used and managed
3. Systems, mechanisms, institutions and tools to facilitate that use
4. All those factors and facets placed in the larger social, economic, political and technological context of society are necessary to include.

Those components can be placed into the context of required courses that address:

1. Knowledge: areas relating to philosophy, such as the foundation of information in society; environmental and contextual knowledge; and management knowledge
2. Skills: those components relating to communications; interpersonal skills; and technological skills, such as programming, online searching, database management
3. Tools: those units relating to both quantitative and analytical measures (systems analysis, research methods, descriptive statistics, logic) and bibliographical or organizational ones (bibliographic control, abstracting and indexing, data structure, and collection development)

There are four complementary groups of information professionals:

1. Creators – those who can develop and produce information products and services. They must understand technology and exploit its potential. They must make information systems work – and to make them work in the easiest possible way. Switching from one information system to another must be made easy by their work.

2. Collectors – those who can build collections of information users to consult. This is a traditional role of librarians, archivists and records managers. They will try to continue to anticipate future use needs and try to satisfy current needs of users – but also must try to forecast the needs that will develop in the future and collect the materials needed to satisfy that future demand. Most importantly, they must understand the needs of users. They must be aware of the aim and objectives of the organization they serve. These professionals need to be aware of the full range of materials and aware that needs change over time, therefore revision and maintenance is important.

3. Communicators – information comes best when wrapped in a person – and those who claim that all information needs will be met through the networks misunderstand the nature of information needs and information-seeking behavior. As information use becomes more sophisticated users will need recourse to information specialist who can help find answers by tailoring the information to particular circumstances. This requires a high degree of inter-personal skills and must be adaptable to needs of those with whom they communicate. Analyzing requirements, distinguishing between actual and expressed

needs. They, of course must retrieve the required information quickly and efficiently. Some will need a high level of subject knowledge.

4. Consolidators – these professionals make sense of the world for managers and act as filters and researchers, working as part of management teams. Few managers have enough time to spend gathering information and therefore depend on others to make sense of the information so that decisions can be made. This requires skills at collecting information – searching databases and other secondary sources. Knowledge management begins to play an important role here. This calls for a high skill in analysis and synthesis of information, and just as importantly interpreting the information and presenting it, both verbally and in writing as the need arises.

The future

How can one accurately predict the future? I have tried to identify some of the issues and trends that affect the changing role of educating information professionals. Our current challenge is exacerbated by the simultaneous change in both technology and society, demonstrated through the changes in computing and telecommunication, and the increasing strategic importance of information and knowledge. We are being challenged to maintain the best of our profession, particularly the service attitude, while we create an ecological convergence between the traditional profession of librarianship and other information professions and their educational programs. Even now, with so much information available, the concept of "access"" is giving way to "selectivity" in our focus, with the realities of legal, physical, affordable and organized access challenging us constantly. The three areas of greatest movement in education and employment of future information professionals are technology, knowledge management, and a focus from the client center perspective.

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