LIS education for Africa

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Abstract

As the number of library schools in sub-Saharan Africa decline in

number, new opportunities for LIS education have emerged. The

University of Pretoria's Carnegie-funded Masters degree, with a special

focus on information technology and blended learning, is described as

an innovative educational programme.

Keywords

Library schools across sub-Saharan Africa have declined in number over

the past two decades. Survival techniques usually combined name

changing, shifting focus, re-invention, down-scaling, and migration to

other university faculties. At the same time, the need for competent

information professionals to implement and manage information technology-related projects at African university libraries such as the digitisation of scholarly resources, and developing research and learning commons has resulted in an increase in the number of applications for postgraduate studies at library schools in South Africa. LIS education in South Africa has itself transformed as a result of changes in higher education to undo the legacy of apartheid that, among other things, left behind an irrational geographical distribution of library schools and a wasteful duplication of human and material resources.

New initiatives emerged in these unfavourable circumstances, and the Carnegie Corporation-funded two year Masters degree programme in Information Technology (M.IT) offered by the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria is a good example. The programme targets middle-management information professionals working in libraries at tertiary institutions and faculty members at library schools in Sub-Saharan countries, and seeks to empower them with the knowledge and skills to apply modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) to teaching and learning. They, in turn, will shape and nurture the next generation of academics and researchers in Africa.

The first intake of candidates was in 2011 and although the programme is funded for four years and three intakes of twenty candidates, there is the possibility of renewed funding or incorporation into the University of Pretoria's established academic programmes. Each year's intake of twenty candidates from Anglophone sub-Saharan African countries typically completes coursework modules in the first year, and a mini-dissertation based on applied research in the candidate's institution, in the second year. The curriculum modules, as may be expected, strongly reflects information-technology topics, but these are supplemented by contextual modules such as 'The knowledge society and international librarianship', 'Organizational behavior and leadership', and 'Knowledge management'.

A distinctive feature of the programme is that the teachers are drawn from the university's School of Information Technology, which comprises the three departments of Information Science, Informatics, and Computer science. There are also teachers from library schools in sub-Saharan Africa and the United States of America, as well as information industry practitioners. This blended-learning programme is delivered through face-to-face lectures as well as technology-mediated distance education methods such as real-time video and audio-conferencing, and podcasts that can be downloaded. Candidates also

interact with each other and their instructors via the university's learning management system, and a dedicated support unit facilitates communication and assists with other technical aspects. Block visits by candidates to South Africa's University of Pretoria, as well as to selected universities in sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States of America enrich the teaching programme, and help to build a global network of LIS professionals in the ICT environment.

The programme seeks to maintain the highest standards of academic performance through regular internal reviews, an Advisory Committee, a system of external examination, and compliance with other quality assurance requirements of the University of Pretoria and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The research component weighs 50% of the programme, and expects candidates to apply standard research methodology protocols and techniques to produce mini-dissertations in line with the requirements of the University of Pretoria. There is every possibility that some of the research articles emanating from this corpus of applied research projects will be submitted to this journal, either authored by candidates or co-authored with their supervisors.

The shortcomings of the programme so far have primarily been logistical and technical, relating to travel arrangements and uneven

Internet connectivity and power interruptions in some countries. There is much, however, to commend what the programme has and can still achieve. There are already about forty African information professionals and LIS educators involved in the programme representing Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The programme promises a continent-wide and international network of high-level ICT experts whose impact on African libraries and scholarship will be significant. More relevant to LIS education is a possible reversal in the decline of the number of library schools, the increased use of ICT-skilled academic librarians to teach in LIS programmes, and greater communication and collaboration about information technology-related projects.