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Exploring the extent to which English LIS Masters programs in the UAE and Qatar meet the skills and knowledge needs of employers in the library and information studies field

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to discuss the degree to which English Library and Information Science (LIS) Masters Programs in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) meet the skills and knowledge needs of employers in the library and information studies field. The development of two Masters degrees are outlined including the historical perspective, the reasons for developing these courses, the content of the courses and the current situation regarding associations and accreditation. This paper also reports on the results of surveys and research that has been conducted to assess what courses, skills and knowledge employers and employees require and need in the diverse LIS field in the UAE and Qatar. The two Masters LIS programs being offered in the UAE and Qatar by the American University in the Emirates, and at University College London Qatar, are meeting quality assurance standards based on Quality Assurance organisations such as the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and are also meeting the needs of the local international library community through development of courses in the programs and continuing professional development courses. Graduating MLIS graduates who measure up to the national manpower requirements is a major instigator driving the direction that library schools are taking. It is also clear, however that there is still need for more library and information science training and education at various levels in order to meet the demands of the market. This paper concludes that the development of a library association in the region is necessary in order to help grow and develop the profession and once developed would be a starting point for discussions on accreditation of LIS degrees in the Gulf region. While ALA assists employers in the United States and

Canada who have job applicants with international degrees in library and information science, the Qatar Supreme Education Council and the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research play that role in the mentioned countries respectively. Ultimately the employer has to match job expectations with candidate competencies using the details of qualifications received. This paper recommends that a list of degrees and what body has accredited them and benchmarking the subject knowledge and skills against the IFLA or American Library Association (ALA) accreditation statements is undertaken through an international association such as IFLA so that employers are better informed as to the quality assurance and standards of degrees around the world.

Keywords: LIS education, UAE, Qatar, Accreditation, Library associations, Skills and knowledge

Introduction

Many people who work in libraries in the UAE and Qatar have received their qualifications from a wide variety of places such as the UAE, United States, Canada, UK, Australia, Egypt, South Africa, to name but a few. Postgraduate qualifications from countries that represent people applying for positions in Qatar and the UAE raises the concern about whether these qualifications meet the quality assurance needs of employers. This includes Asian regions particularly Philippines, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, Middle Eastern regions such as Egypt and sub-Saharan African regions such as South Africa. Employers fill positions with individuals who hold qualifications recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education or the equivalent of the applicable country. For example, the Qatar Supreme Education Council and the UAE Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research have the mandate to inform the validity of qualifications in their respective countries. While that works well, it sometimes places a burden on an employer who intends to recruit for vacant positions to assess the quality and standards of degrees from around the world. *ALA (American Library Association) accreditation FAQ's* for example state that it is up to the employer to determine whether to accept a foreign degree.

The degree to which English LIS Masters Programs in the UAE and Qatar meet the skills and knowledge needs of employers in the library and information studies field is a topic of concern to both educators and employers as well as the graduating individuals. Two library and information science post graduate courses taught in the UAE and Qatar are delivered from institutions that teach curriculum based on international qualifications from countries such as the UK and USA. The approach of this paper is to outline the development of these two Masters LIS courses taught in the two countries in English and how well they meet the growing needs of a diverse international LIS community and graduate students with skills and knowledge required by employers in the region. This is done through discussion of the history of the development of the two courses and the LIS field historically, by outlining the content of the courses, accreditation processes and by reporting on the results of surveys and research that has been conducted to assess what degrees, courses, skills and knowledge employers and employees require and need in the UAE and Qatar. The paper also discusses how the outcome of this research led to the development of the degrees and additional courses being developed to continually support and meet the skills and professional development needs of library professionals in the region.

History of LIS education in the UAE

The UAE highly depends on foreign and Arab expatriates in establishing all kinds of libraries and information institutions. Those expatriates have helped in organizing professional and technical workshops and short training sessions to provide UAE nationals with the required competencies and skills to work in those libraries and information institutions. The need for

qualified librarians has been increasing due to huge & rapid development in all sectors of life in UAE. The UAE government recognition of the important role information plays in the economy and knowledge management contributes to the demand for library and information science education in the country. There have been many calls for developing library and information science programmes in UAE academic institutions to provide the required number of librarians.

Boumarafi (2008) pointed out that libraries and information centres in the UAE required local librarians, suggesting the need for training and professional programmes. She described the history of a diploma programme for girls in the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in Sharjah and Al Ain which was established in 2000/2001, although neither programme flourished. In 2006 the Community College at the University of Sharjah offered diploma programmes to prepare semi-professionals but the programmes lacked library resources, computer labs, and qualified instructors. She estimated that over 230 professionals were needed for academic library positions and nearly 1300 for school libraries plus hundreds of public, special and departmental librarians. She urged the establishment of a Master's programme (Boumarafi, 2008).

In 2003, Abu Dhabi University (ADU) formed a Committee chaired by Dr. Jassim Mohammed Jirjees to prepare a study plan for the development of Bachelor Library and Information Science Programme. After completing the preparation of the study plan and getting the approval of Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, ADU closed the programme due to the limited number of applicants. Aman and Mika (2004) provide an account of the steps that were taken in attempts towards developing the library and information science bachelor's degree program at ADU. Zayed University (ZU) also tried opening a programme in archival studies. Pat Wand prepared a study entitled: "Prospectus for an MS degree in Archive Studies in the UAE" designed to develop postgraduate section at ZU in Abu Dhabi to provide an opportunity to obtain that degree. Again, CAA approval, ZU had to close the programme because of the low number of applicants.

In 2008, the American University in the UAE, asked Dr. Jassim Mohammed Jirjees to chair a Committee to prepare for the establishment of a master's degree in LIS (MLIS), and determine the objectives and curriculum for the programme and other requirements. The Committee submitted the completed study to the CAA which invited a Committee of specialists from the United States. After extensive study of the perception problem the programme was recommended for opening at the College of Computer Information Technology in the American University in the Emirates (AUE). This programme will be discussed in more details later on in this article (Ateeq & Jirjees, 2014).

Other universities also submitted proposals to the CAA but the programmes were not approved because they did not meet the set requirements. On Tuesday, 5th May 2015 Dubai Public Library called for a meeting that was attended by many librarians from different Emirates to discuss the proposal of Higher Colleges of Technology to start Library Technician Diploma Programme in the College of Education of HCT in the academic year 2016/2017. The authors believe that even if this programme is approved by CAA it may be added to the list of such programmes that were closed unless there is strong publicity and comprehensive financial support to enhance the number of enrolling Emirati students, and perhaps attract international students in the process.

The state of LIS education in the UAE

Martin (2015), in her chapter entitled the *Library and Information Science in UAE* of the forthcoming IFLA book, described the past and her expectations for the future of LIS education in the UAE. She summarizes the UAE historical development in the political, economic, social areas since its inception in 1971. She mentions that the circumstances of the UAE, while unique in many ways, are reflective of many countries where there has not been a strong history of library services nor indeed a culture of reading, and where there is a paucity of understanding of the value of libraries and LIS professionals. There is however, a current determination to redress this situation in the UAE with the building of new library networks and organizations able to influence library development, and a push to establish high quality LIS programmes to professionally staff the range of library and archival facilities being developed (Martin, 2015).

The UAE focus on a society of knowledge-driven economic, technological, social development and cultural rights, gets a very high human development ranking according to the Arab Human Development Report (2010) which includes rates of progress in all countries of the world. Additionally, the UAE highly invests in information and communications technologies that contribute up to 4.9% in the rate of growth of aggregate output. In this connection, the researchers cite three needs assessment studies done in the UAE alone since 2008 to find out the numbers of qualified professionals UAE libraries information/ archival centres required. The first study showed a need of over 12,000 specialists for various information institutions, libraries, documentation and archival centres in the UAE (Boumarafi, 2008). Another study by a researcher in the National Centre for Documentation and Research in Abu Dhabi 2008 (<http://www.na.ae/ar/>), demonstrated the need to more than 4,000 archivists to meet the needs of the various State ministries and archival departments.(Boumarafi, 2008). During 2013 a ZU Office of Graduate Studies commissioned study by Martin (2015) to determine the viability of establishing graduate programmes in library, archive and/or information management at the university suggested the following recommendations:

1. Establishment of Graduate and/or undergraduate programmes in Information Management

With wide support by employers involved in the surveys and meetings, as well as sufficient potential student numbers to be economically viable (more than a minimum 50 students per year), it is considered that establishment of either graduate and/or undergraduate programmes of internationally recognized standards in the Information Management discipline is warranted at ZU.

2. Masters level programmes in Information Management and Archival Studies

There is an identified demand for a Masters level programme in more general library sciences, information management/ archival studies for current employer requirements.

3. Maintenance of Graduate Certificate level programmes

It is recommended that the Graduate Certificate level of qualification be maintained and promoted as the first stage of a Masters level qualification, to enable students' flexibility in their study commitments.

4. Establishment of Graduate and/or undergraduate programmes in Teacher Librarianship

It is recommended that the College of Education be involved in development of a Bachelor of Science in Education and/or a Masters level programme, with specialization in “school librarianship” or “learning resource management” (whichever terminology is deemed appropriate).

The AUE programme started in the academic year 2011-2012. Accepting students holding a Bachelor's degree from different scientific disciplines, it is the first of its kind in the UAE. It prepares students for the challenges of the knowledge era that they will face in a wide variety of professional and managerial positions in library and information institutions by providing them with the skills, knowledge, professional attitudes and the ethical base necessary for professionals in a constantly changing world. They are educated for work involving acquisition, organization, storage, and retrieval of recorded information in institutions such as academic, public, school, special libraries, archival settings as well as other information utilities in both the government and private sectors. The analysis and design skills are emphasized in the programme curriculum through an evidence-based approach to practice.

The MLIS as shown in the below tables comprises of 30 credit hours at Core level and 6 credit hours at Free Electives level. The curricula provide students with a solid conceptual base and practical experience. The programme is organized to provide integration of structure and function within the LIS field, and a continually expanding level of theory and practice, throughout the course.

Table 1: Core Requirements Courses (9 Courses/30 credits)

No.	Course Title
1	Introduction to library and information science
2	Information and communications technologies in libraries and information centres
3	Resource management in libraries and information institutions
4	Information Storage and Retrieval
5	Collection Development and Management
6	Research Methodology
7	Knowledge Organization and Representation
8	Internship
9	Thesis

Table 2: Elective courses (2 Courses/6 credits)

No.	Course Title
1	Information Sources and Services
2	Electronic Publishing and Information Industry
3	Introduction to Archives and Records Management
4	Marketing Libraries and Information Services
5	Digital Libraries
6	Special Libraries
7	Metadata
8	Information Technology and Archives

Eleven students have graduated from this programme so far, but enrolment of new students remains low. The programme director has written recently about library science education in Iraq, Yemen and the UAE (Ateeq & Jirjees, 2014). In the UAE, he identifies difficulties in establishing MLIS courses as: the need for diverse faculty expertise in a range of library science and archival fields, the need to offer affordable programmes, and the need to continually update teaching and learning methodologies including provision of opportunity for students to undertake internships in outstanding local, regional and international libraries, information and archive centres. Students wishing to undertake the AUE MLIS programme are required to demonstrate a reasonably good level of English, and be able to commit time outside of their normal working week for the academic work required – issues of skill levels and commitment to the rigors of a Master’s qualification likely to influence development of any similar programme in the UAE (Martin, 2015). In the future the MLIS courses will need to continuously keep updated with teaching and learning methodologies. There is also need to increase the number of faculty members with different specialties in the field of LIS especially archives and provide opportunities for students to participate in international placements. More emphasis should also be put on teaching information resources relating to the Arab civilization and culture to make the program more relevant to the local context.

The state of LIS education in the Qatar

The state of Qatar is rapidly growing both economically and socially. Education is one area that forms part of Qatar’s national vision. The *Qatar National Vision 2030* states that Qatar aims to build a modern educational system that provides students with a first rate education comparable to that offered anywhere and that they aim to provide educational and curricula training programmes that respond to the current and future needs of the labour market. In order to meet and support the current and future labour needs of the Qatar National Library and other libraries, many of which are still in a state of rapid growth, a MLIS programme commenced in October 2013, the first such postgraduate programme to be delivered in the country.

Previously an undergraduate LIS programme was delivered through Qatar University, but it ceased in the mid 2000’s. This programme is delivered by University College London – Qatar (UCL Qatar), in partnership with Qatar Foundation and Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) and is conducted in English. The courses taught in the degree were developed to mirror the programme in London and are mapped against the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals’ (CILIP) *Professional Knowledge and Skills Base*. Any new

electives that are developed are also constructed based on subject knowledge and skills outlined in the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education Subject Benchmark Statement for Librarianship benchmark* statement. The subject benchmark statement outlines the broad areas of knowledge that characterize librarianship including: creating and capturing information; managing and exploiting knowledge and information; managing and developing collections; using information technology; ethics and information governance; and reading, literacies and learning. The program is the first MLIS degree in the Gulf region to be accredited by CILIP. The students in the programme come from a range of countries and diverse cultural backgrounds including Qatar, Egypt, America, Jordan, Yemen, Canada, Nigeria, Pakistan and India. The following table outlines the programme modules for the current and next academic year.

Table 3: Compulsory Modules Requirements Courses (90 credits + 60 credits dissertation)

No.	Course Title (Compulsory modules)
1	Cataloguing and Classification
2	Information Sources and Retrieval
3	Collection Management and Presentation
4	Introduction to Management
5	Principles of Computing and Information Technology
6	Professional Awareness
7	Dissertation

Table 4: Optional Modules (30 credits)

No.	Course Title (Optional modules)
1	Digital Resources in the Humanities
2	Historical Bibliography
3	Information Literacy Education
4	Services to Children and Young People
5	Manuscript Studies
6	Interdisciplinary Methods for the Study of Cultural Heritage
7	Library Systems and Data Management
8	Introduction to Archives and Preservation
9	Islamic Manuscripts

Since the beginning of the programme, feedback has been sought from the local library community on what their current and future skills and knowledge needs are. In response, several new courses in the MLIS programme and short course programme have been developed. The programme is constantly evolving to meet the needs of an international and multicultural library community. A survey conducted in 2014, (Johnston & Williams, 2015) sought to gauge the current landscape of library students, professionals and managers in Qatar and gather information on the future skills and knowledge needs of library

professionals in Qatar. The current landscape indicated through the survey that the library university sector contains the highest proportion of librarians, followed by school libraries, the national library, with the smallest proportion in public and special libraries. This proportion is expected to change in the future with the continued growth of the National library. The survey also indicated that most currently employed library professionals reported having obtained their qualifications from either the United States or the United Kingdom which would indicate that a sizeable number of respondents have worked abroad prior to moving to their current positions in Qatar. However, a small percentage also stated that they obtained their LIS qualification in countries in the region such as Egypt or Qatar.

Respondents to the survey also indicated their reasons for choosing to undertake their LIS degree at a specific institution. These main reasons included: the reputation of a particular LIS course or university and the proximity of the educational institution to where they lived. Some respondents also commented that there is a lack of choice for LIS courses in the countries where they live or lived and that studying online was one choice that allowed for students to study anywhere and at one's own pace. Another important consideration for future librarians in the country in choosing a degree is the accreditation status of the degree. An environmental scan of job advertisements in Qatar including the Qatar National Library, international and local universities and school libraries indicates that a requirement of librarian positions in the country is an ALA or equivalent accredited Master's degree.

Library managers in Qatar were also surveyed to find out what future roles would be needed in their institutions. The types of positions that library directors and managers felt they would need were: subject liaison, reference, and instructional librarians; librarians with Arabic language and/or Arabic cataloguing skills; and a need for digital librarian type roles such as research data managers or data curators. These types of roles also mostly mirror the skills and knowledge library professionals feel they need more professional development (PD) or training in. Library students and professionals felt that they needed PD in areas such as information literacy, copyright training, management and leadership development, RDA and Arabic cataloguing. To meet the needs of both the library directors recruiting for positions and the professional development needs of current library professionals, the library programme at UCL Qatar introduced a number of new electives in the degree and short courses in the short course programme some of which were delivered this academic year such as information literacy education and data management and open access with courses starting next academic year in library systems and data management, archives, Islamic manuscripts, RDA and Arabic cataloguing.

The introduction of short courses such as data management and open access and RDA have and are being introduced in response to the needs of library professionals and also in response to the lack of local professional development opportunities in the country and region. Over half of the respondents in the survey Johnston & Williams (2015) surveyed, stated that there were not enough professional development opportunities in the country and they often rely on alternative options such as online training and travelling overseas for training. Some PD in the form of conferences and workshops is offered in the region, in particular by the Arabian Gulf Chapter of the Special Libraries Association and also the Information Literacy Network of the Gulf, but often this is not enough to meet the growing professional development needs in a rapidly changing field. School librarians in particular feel that often professional development opportunities do not cater to the K-12 school librarian and are most often geared towards university librarians. In response to this a recent partnership between the Education Development Institute, also part of Qatar Foundation, and UCL Qatar has been formed to

deliver a short course programme to school librarians in the skill areas that the school librarians have indicated they would like training in such as information literacy and reading development.

There was also acknowledgement of the need for an association to help preserve Arabic literary culture and heritage and also for a professional association, perhaps one that operates in tandem with Qatar National Library, to be involved in the establishment of a national library strategy and of national standards. Currently more informal groups such as the Information Literacy network and Arabian Gulf Chapter of the Special Libraries Association provide some of these functions across the Gulf region but there is no overarching coordination of professional development or development of national standards. There are however future plans to form a Qatar library association which at this stage will be only for Qatari librarians. This shows an interest and support for development of an association in the country. Its growth and progress will be watched with interest.

Analysis of how and why the courses are different, and how this impacts on quality assurance processes

Between the two universities, the core courses and the optional ones, as depicted above, differ substantially. The UCL course offerings are based on those offered in London, but with a Qatar focus for relevance. The School of Information Studies at UCL in London was created in 1919 and opened its doors to the Doha course with its inaugural intake in October 2013. On the other hand, the AUE course was launched as a completely new UAE-based creation in 2011. The history of its development is therefore much shorter than that of the UCL. It is in that regard that one has to understand the range and development of course offerings. Additionally, the UCL Qatar qualification has received independent CILIP accreditation which fulfils the role of international quality assurance. With no association for professionals that is equivalent to CILIP, the UAE one accomplishes that with the CAA (2011, p. 3) stipulation that this is done:

with reference to the Guidelines of Good Practice of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Guidelines for Quality Assurance from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the common core standards for quality review endorsed by the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE).

The CAA standards also include reference to licensed institutions being required to use, and refer to the UAE Qualifications Framework in their courses/program development and promotional arrangements and activities. The learning outcomes implemented should be consistent with those detailed in the Qualifications Framework Emirates (QFE) for respective qualifications (www.caa.ae).

The UAE course is offered on a full-time basis while the UCL one offers both full-time and part-time options. Again, this is a reflection of how much the courses have been time tested. Confronted with graduates from both institutions looking for employment, the onus is on the employer to consider the courses studied for proper fit with the job specifications as well as adherence to national policy to prioritize hiring nationals ahead of anyone else. Part of the problem is also that there is no comparison of international degrees or international benchmarked standards or determination of the quality of LIS degree worldwide. This perhaps begs the need for global quality assurance and quality control in LIS education because the challenge is not unique to only these two countries. IFLA has promulgated a standard for LIS educational programs now in a second edition (Smith, Hallam & Ghosh,

2012) while some, e.g. ALA, ALIA (*Australia Library & Information Association*) and CILIP have established practices.

While UCL has a 60-credit dissertation requirement, the AUE course requires a 6-credit thesis. By way of clarification, in the UK, a thesis is for doctoral studies where a focused piece of original research is done, while a dissertation is part of a broader post graduate or masters research project. Using a USA meaning results in almost the opposite. In that sense, one may conclude that AUE uses the American meaning of a thesis which is expected to be very short. In essence, the expectations of work input for the research project is reflected by the credits accorded to each.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The two MLIS programmes being offered in the UAE and at UCL Qatar are meeting quality assurance standards based on QA organisations such as the United Arab Emirates's CAA and the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and are also meeting the needs of the local international library community through development of courses in the programmes and continuing PD courses. It is also clear, however that there is still more need for training at various levels in order to meet the demands of the market.

One area of importance to the future needs of professional librarians in both countries is a library association. There are currently no national professional associations and librarians feel that they are needed for supporting librarians working in the two countries and to help grow and develop the profession. They would also enable the co-ordination of professional networking and communication, help manage PD, provide training and workshops, and exchange good practice. On-going discussions about future plans to form an association or group in both countries reflect an interest and support for the development of these.

Another area for future debate is about the prospects of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or regional accreditation for LIS programmes. As ur Rehman (2012) points out, there are a number of hurdles before this can happen, including that some programmes in the region already go through outside international accreditation and they may not want to go through two accreditation processes. Other hurdles include getting the proposal for a GCC accreditation through the administrative hierarchies of the different universities, including responsibility to fund the committee or process of setting up the accreditation, and the overarching association or ministry for administering or conducting the process. The development of associations and accreditation go hand in hand and many associations are involved in the accreditation of library science courses. As ur Rehman (2012, p.71) points out, "an accreditation initiative requires wholehearted support from the professional community. As there is no history of active professional associations in the region, the culture of professional participation is weak". The Special Libraries Association Arabian Gulf Chapter (SLAAGC), the Federation of Library Association and Information (AFLI), as well as the Information Literacy Network (ILN) do not have the mandate to do this. Therefore the development of a library association in the region would be the first recommended step in the on-going development of the library and information science field in the region.

Further clarification is needed in an international library setting as to what constitutes "equivalent". Many jobs in the region require an ALA or equivalent degree, however there is no guidelines on what degrees from which countries are considered to be "equivalent" to an American qualification. The *ALA accreditation FAQ's* state that, "ultimately, it is up to the

employer to determine whether or not to accept a foreign degree as equivalent to an ALA-accredited master's. There is no set of courses or tests to take to be 'accredited'. The employer therefore has to match job expectations with candidate competencies using the details of qualifications received. Thus, it is recommended that a list of degrees and what body has accredited them and benchmarking the subject knowledge and skills against the IFLA or ALA accreditation statements is undertaken through an international association such as IFLA so that employers are better informed as to the quality assurance and standards of degrees round the world.

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