From MLIS students to LIS professionals: combining research with professional development and career planning in graduate education.

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Abstract

The academic year 2016-2017 saw the launch of a new core 25-credit capstone module in the Masters of Library & Information Studies (MLIS) programme in University College Dublin’s School of Information & Communication Studies, to replace the previous team project-based offering. With a focus on research, professional identity development and career building, the unique structure of this compulsory module enables MLIS students to immerse themselves in a chosen area of specialisation through research and writing, reflection, and practical career planning. This article describes the impetus for the creation of the capstone module and evaluates the success of its first year.

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Background
According to the *IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library/Information Educational Programs*, “Opportunities to gain and demonstrate professional competencies should be a part of the educational programme. An awareness of professional concerns should permeate the programme” (IFLA Professional Committee, 2012).

Professional identity is “the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others” (Neary, 2014: 14), and encompasses the range of shared attributes, beliefs and values that characterise a professional community and underpin its practices. According to Croxton (2015: 125), “promoting students’ development of identities as library and information science professionals is an important component of MLIS degree programs”. However, the extent to which this is supported in practice is often in question; Black and Leysen (2002) identified the typically short duration of graduate LIS programmes as a significant barrier to socialisation and professional identity formation, and suggested that identity formation only begins in earnest during a graduate’s first professional position: “The short duration of the library-school program does not allow enough time for the development of a professional identity, peer interaction, especially with library school faculty who can serve as role models, or specialization” (pp.4-5).

Nonetheless, in subsequent research conducted by Black and Leysen the ‘library school experience’ was shown to be the second most valued factor in the orientation of entry-level librarians to the profession.

Studies that have empirically addressed this issue also include Croxton (2015) and Hoffmann and Berg (2014: 224) who explored professional identity development in LIS education through online learning and field experiences respectively. While these studies showed that social connectedness, interactivity and collaboration with LIS peers, faculty and practising professionals, as well as opportunities for hands-on field-based experience, are the most valued factors in professional identity formation for LIS graduate students, the role of reflection was also highlighted as an important element:

“In addition to socialization processes, student perceptions of librarianship are shaped as they have opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their experiences of the profession, to adapt and adjust their conceptualizations of the profession, or to experience critical incidents that shape their views”

From a more general perspective, balancing the practical competencies that are a requirement of professional programmes with the development of a critical-analytical approach to professional concerns should be a key objective of educational providers. Foster (2006:492) notes, in relation to teaching programmes for information professionals that “a teaching programme aimed as a preparation for professional practice has [...] to accommodate more than a definitive statement of the subject, it must be an introduction to thinking, asking questions, and interpreting, and should instil the same critical thinking skills that are prerequisites for information literacy”.

Re-designing the capstone module
Providing an authentic opportunity for our students to inculcate a sense of professional identity during their MLIS education partly spurred our decision to overhaul the capstone module. In addition, undertaking the programme re-accreditation process with the LAI in 2016 offered an invaluable opportunity to reflect and re-evaluate our offering in a more holistic way, and provided a clear impetus to initiate significant changes. Prior to 2016-2017, the capstone module incorporated team-based projects, with students working in collaboration with supervisors and external clients to develop research-based solutions to ‘real-world’ problems. However, while this model frequently produced high quality research and valuable practical outcomes, student and staff feedback suggested that the format was not suited to all, and that an individual option would be welcomed. Although MLIS students have always had the option of an individual dissertation, which remains available, we seized the opportunity to create a unique module that would allow students to combine research and writing with professional development, practical workplace preparation and reflection. The module,
IS40720 Capstone, which was launched in September 2016, comprised four components:

- A professional issues paper (70%), supervised by a member of academic staff, for which students must research and write a 15-20-page paper analysing a major current issue or problem in library, information and communication work, critically evaluate its impact on the profession, and articulate innovative solutions for how it might be handled in the future. For this, students were encouraged to focus on an area relevant to their career interests.

- A professional development portfolio (20%), consisting of i) a structured professional development plan, outlining specific career goals, professional activities and plans for CPD post-graduation, ii) a professional standard Curriculum Vitae, and iii) a letter of application for a currently advertised job, matching their career goals and qualifications.

- A reflection on learning (10%) in which students consider how their learning has helped them not only understand the field of LIS, but also their future place in that field.

- A selection of work samples from other modules that best illustrate students’ intellectual engagement with academic content and effectively showcase the professional knowledge and skills gained during the year.

Three class meetings during the year with the module coordinator, Claire McGuinness, provided general guidance, as well as opportunities for peer discussion and information-sharing. Academic supervisors, assigned in January 2017, supported students in developing their paper topics. For the first year, we also trialled the use of the e-portfolio application ‘Mahara’, to provide a centralised online platform for students to present a professional development profile. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of active engagement with the profession through attending or volunteering at professional and academic events, such as the newly founded InfoProsNet Careers Expo in the Dublin Business School in May 2017, in addition to a host of free and low-cost LIS seminars, workshops and presentations throughout the year. Membership of the LAI, which is free for LIS students, was also strongly encouraged and promoted early in the year.

Module Evaluation

In September 2017, following the final submission date, we launched a short evaluative survey to gather feedback on the students’ experiences of the new capstone, their views on the module’s effectiveness in preparing them for professional practice, and their broader perspectives on developing a professional LIS career in the current employment market. Exemption from ethical review was granted by the UCD Research Ethics Office. Respondents completed a 13-item questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions, hosted by SurveyMonkey; responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was requested from the respondents. Results were collated and analysed in early October 2017. The total number who responded to the survey was 11, which represented a response rate of 48% of the class cohort of 23. Selected findings from the survey are discussed below.

Career stage of students

One of the challenges of planning and implementing the new capstone module centred on the professional status or career stage of the students, and how to cater for the diverse professional development needs of students at different points in their career and professional identity formation. MLIS students include those just starting out on a career path with little to no workplace experience through to those who have spent years in librarianship practice but are seeking to upgrade their academic qualification. Moreover, a third group comprises students from different professions who have decided to change careers and embark on an entirely new professional pathway; although they may have accumulated years of valuable workplace experience, they must now become acclimatised to an unfamiliar professional culture, with new norms and practices. The capstone, with its emphasis on professional identity development, career planning, and preparation for the workplace, had to be designed to allow students
from each of these sub-groups to benefit; a solitary focus on entry-level professionals would exclude mid- and late-career professionals, whose development needs are no less important than their novice colleagues.

Of the students who responded to our survey, six were seeking their first professional LIS position, three were undertaking a mid- or late-career change, one was an early career professional (5-10 years), and one a late-career professional (10-25 years).

The students were asked to describe their motivation for enrolling on the MLIS. Reasons ranged from seeking a recognised qualification to work in professional grade positions in the LIS sector or to upgrade an existing qualification, to satisfying a long-held personal desire to work in information services: ‘I had wanted to work in librarianship for a long time.’ For some overseas students, the opportunity to travel was a key motivator. For others, the reputation of the programme, and word-of-mouth recommendations were the deciding factors.

The challenge for us was to create learning opportunities in the capstone that could be tailored to each stage, and that would not focus solely on entry-level career development needs.

**Positive Feedback on the Capstone Process**

The students were asked to pinpoint up to three aspects of the capstone that they felt most contributed to their development as LIS professionals. Responses revealed that the individual module components offered several practical and personal benefits that contributed not only to their preparedness for the workplace, but that also supported a much deeper and satisfying engagement with areas of professional specialisation in which they had a particular interest. Several students
commented that the professional development portfolio provided an incentive to set clear goals and to identify the practical steps required to successfully pursue a particular career pathway:

“The professional development plan element of the capstone particularly has helped me to come up with practical steps to take and has helped me realise my strengths, weaknesses and preferences. All of this is very valuable information for the future.”

“The requirement to make a professional plan, as it required me to have concrete goals beyond graduation.”

In developing the structure for the Professional Issues Paper, one of our aims was to support a holistic and reflective approach to career planning. We wanted to encourage students to research and analyse the theoretical, conceptual and socio-political issues currently impacting on their chosen area of specialisation rather than maintain a sole focus on the practical competencies that the work requires. A Masters education requires both perspectives, and awareness of the zeitgeist is a valuable factor in decision-making in any sector. We also hoped that the paper would promote a sense of professional identity, as students immerse themselves in the discourse (and potentially professional networks, online and locally) of their chosen subfields. Responses showed that this largely proved to be a rewarding experience that allowed them to explore areas of personal interest, and to build up a greater appreciation of the important issues in their prospective fields of employment:

“Writing the professional issues paper allowed me to get in touch with real issues in the field and engage in what people are thinking about in the field.”

“I think just reading papers on professional subjects helped a lot [in] being more aware of the current scope of things.”

The students were also asked to specifically rate how well they felt the capstone had supported its principal objective of encouraging a reflective approach to personal and professional development, in order to prepare them for a professional LIS career. Of the 11 students who responded to this question, most (seven) indicated that they felt the module was either successful or highly successful in achieving this aim with four rating it as ‘moderately successful.’ The accompanying comments highlighted the benefits the students perceived in the reflective component of the module. Several students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in reflection that the Capstone had afforded them, and in particular how this had helped them to identify the knowledge and skill gaps that they need to fill in order to pursue their career of choice. Another benefit was in allowing the students to consolidate the learning that had occurred across an intensive year of study, and to consider the personal and professional impact of this learning. A focus on non-traditional careers for LIS graduates that formed part of the module also opened up new possibilities for several of the students:

“It was useful to reflect on possible careers and to think of our own strengths, weaknesses and interests.”

“The capstone module has successfully encouraged me to reflect on my professional development. It has helped me to identify gaps in my knowledge and how I might remedy this. It has also prompted me to scrutinise my professional interests and personal preferences for my career as an LIS professional.”

“The reflective paper allowed me to look back on all of my modules and really assess all that I have learned over the year.”

One mid-career professional found the professional development portfolio especially useful, and expressed satisfaction in being able to take stock of their career to date:

“Midway through my career, it was lovely to take the time to reflect on successes and gaps in my knowledge and expertise.”

Students who rated the module as ‘moderately successful’ expressed concerns about the timing of the Reflection on Learning component, which is submitted at the end of the year. One suggested that ‘Having more frequent, smaller reflections might have been a better way to inculcate reflection overall,’ thus giving us some food for thought about the module structure.
Room for Improvement

Students were also asked to describe ways in which they felt the capstone could be improved going forward. Some of the students’ comments raised concerns about apparent inconsistencies between academic supervisors in terms of how the Professional Issues Paper should be written, and clearer guidelines were requested to resolve this: ‘supervisors had differing opinions on how this should be handled’; ‘A more unified approach to the paper with more specific ideas of what was required would be incredibly helpful.’ This is a useful point which we have taken on board for the current year. Another comment suggested that more frequent class meetings would provide opportunities for the students to share the ongoing progress with their work. Other concerns focused on the lack of contact with fellow students during the Summer when the bulk of the work is carried out, in addition to the lack of structure which made it difficult to maintain momentum; ‘Perhaps something could be put in place to keep students connected over the Summer period. In some ways, I felt cast adrift once lectures finished.’ As socialisation with peers is an important driver of professional identity formation, we take this point seriously.

One student suggested that the module, at least in its current format, may be of less benefit to professionals already in employment: ‘The capstone was not as useful to those who are already working where they want to be or have their career already decided on.’ Finally, other comments expressed dissatisfaction with ‘Mahara’, which proved difficult to use, due to a number of technical glitches throughout the year.

International Trendsetters?

As Head of School of ICS, the only Information School in Ireland, Kalpana Shankar (one of the co-authors) serves as the School’s representative to the European i-Schools caucus and thus has had the opportunity to discuss the capstone and other dimensions of the MLIS programme with colleagues in other European countries. Although anecdotal, it has been heartening to hear positive feedback from colleagues who see this self-guided approach to a culminating experience in an MLIS programme as an important trend in the field since it incorporates reflection, desk research, evaluation of sources, and planning for Continuing Professional Development while still in school. Furthermore, the new capstone structure encourages students to immerse themselves in professional discourse and further their networks during their academic programme instead of waiting till the academic year is finished. Again somewhat anecdotal, but LIS academics and professionals often express frustration that many of their students do not realise the necessity of engaging in the profession and leave that “for later”, only to find that those networks would have been useful for job seeking and career planning.

Moving forward

All in all, the first year of the new capstone module proved to be a generally positive experience for both staff and students, although there are several issues to be addressed, as highlighted above.

One major change we have introduced for 2017-2018 is the inclusion of an additional component: a 25-item Annotated Bibliography worth 20% based on the research carried out for the Professional Issues Paper. Based on...
feedback, we have also chosen to discontinue use of Mahara. While the long-term impact of the new module will not be evident for several years, it is our hope that the combination of practical career planning, reflection and focused research will give our MLIS graduates an excellent head start in a very competitive employment market.

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References