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## An experimental science? Some thoughts on the Diploma and advanced study of librarianship in New Zealand

RODERICK CAVE

*It is now five years since the pattern of education for librarianship in New Zealand underwent major change with the establishment of the Department of Librarianship at Victoria University of Wellington and the School of Library Studies at Wellington Teachers College. To mark the anniversary New Zealand Libraries invited Roderick Cave, Foundation Professor of Librarianship at Victoria University, and Jan MacLean, Principal Lecturer at the School of Library Studies, to write about education for librarianship in New Zealand. Jan MacLean's article will be published in the March 1985 issue.*

It is a commonplace experience for the overseas librarian visiting New Zealand to be agreeably impressed by the quality of New Zealand libraries and New Zealand librarians. In NZLA conference sessions and in private conversations they will (usually) say the things we like to hear, and as well as bringing us 'glad tidings' or 'testimony' on aspects of library development in their own societies will leave us with some degree of comfort that the way libraries are run here bears comparison.

In its way this is a very good thing; for a small and geographically isolated vocational group to have the assurance that what it is doing is on the right lines is obviously good for morale. If it leads to complacency, a feeling by professional groups — or no less importantly the individuals who collectively make up the groups — that we

can let things continue to run on as they have always done, then the results are dangerous, and perhaps in the long term disastrous.

When I qualified as a 'chartered librarian' in Britain many years ago, although the core of librarianship's traditional disciplines was traversed at considerable length and in increasing detail in the various courses I had taken, I don't think it is unfair to say that they had not included any research element. Though at Finals level at least there was reference to significant research or new developments or new ideas being developed elsewhere, it was elsewhere: somehow it seemed that if advanced work or research work was needed it would mysteriously arise through the activities of others, possibly from Cleverdon at Cranfield, or Urquhart at LLU (later NLL), or more probably from men with strange names and stranger ideas from across the Atlantic.

Of course I am exaggerating (or merely reflecting my own youthful ideas and prejudices) in suggesting that at the time there was rather little in professional library education in the U.K. to persuade those going through the library schools' programmes that further study would be needed after one had acquired the base-level meal-ticket qualification — needed whether for personal satisfaction, professional advancement or in general terms for advancement of the library profession.

Though I'm describing a system from across the globe, much of it will

sound familiar to librarians who have qualified in New Zealand, though local programmes of library education and training have always had a rather different pattern from the U.K. Despite the differences, the results have been broadly similar, with qualifications which though good in themselves have in practice had rather too much of the terminal qualification about them. They did not in the past open the way to advanced study; their content did not include much which would assist those few brave souls who wanted to undertake it for themselves. Some have, but far more usual patterns have been for a few librarians to add to their base-level Certificate the base-level Diploma, and for others to attend whatever seminars and short courses have been made available by NZLA branches and sections or by other bodies.

Informal programmes of continuing education and current awareness are very useful. But my impression is that those offered have seldom been of an advanced nature, but usually the reverse: programmes which offer an introduction to aspects of library service which have developed since the participants were enrolled in formal education programmes or to some branches of library work which they did not cover in their earlier formal study. A very modest degree of specialisation is possible today in the Diploma programme at Victoria University through its range of options, and some Wellington-based librarians have enrolled in these for Certificates of Proficiency (in, for example, Library

Service to the Disadvantaged; Literature and Librarianship of Science and Technology). But the Diploma (like the Certificate) remains a *generalist* course, and the options offered by the Department of Librarianship are themselves necessarily introductory in nature. Whether studied for the Diploma or Certificates of Proficiency they cannot be regarded as *advanced* study.

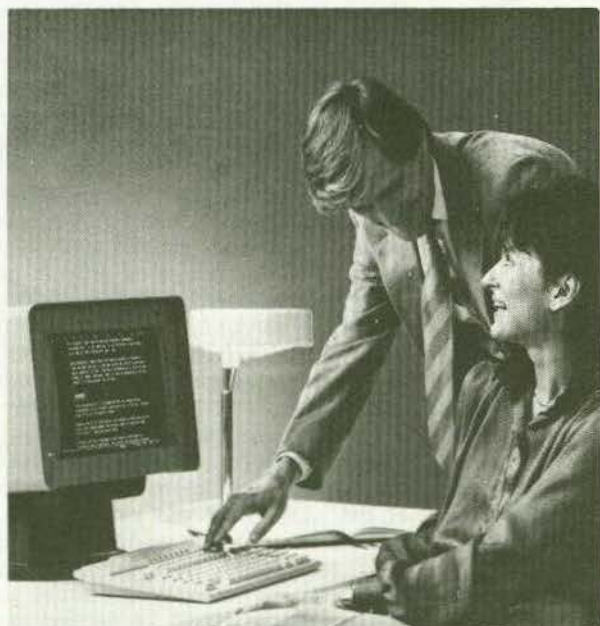
In the past, New Zealand librarianship has done very well by intelligent interpretation and application of ideas developed overseas, particularly in North America and the U.K. I was impressed when I first came here by the healthy state of librarians' current awareness of developments and happenings in Australia, Britain or the United States; an excellent awareness compared with that one would encounter in Britain, where librarians are too inward-looking. Of course it is one way in which our very remoteness is a help; New Zealanders have become adept at gathering ideas from abroad, and the way in which distinguished overseas librarians are brought to conferences is of great assistance in enabling new ideas to spread. But I'm inclined now to think that I was over-impressed: that the awareness, once beyond a relatively small group of (often very senior) librarians, is less widespread than it seemed to me six years ago.

#### Professional reading

How does one keep abreast of new developments and ideas, apart from what can be picked up at conferences or on the grapevine? A few New Zealand librarians clearly read widely

and conscientiously in the professional literature — *The Library Quarterly*, *Libri*, *Journal of Documentation* and so on. Of these 'gatekeepers' I suspect there are too few anyway, and that beyond them as a professional group we make far too little sustained effort to inform ourselves on matters of significance in library development and research abroad.

All of us (myself no less than others) may well feel a little uneasy at questions about our professional reading. There are always work pressures — preparing a report on this, dealing with cuts in that, or backlogs of work in the other — which unless one is very strong-willed will take precedence over scanning a range of what are often dreary periodical articles and even drearier BLR&D reports. But I was more than a little concerned some time ago when I made an informal study of professional reading among the participants in one of our continuing education programmes. These were persons whose presence was in itself an indication of good professional motivation, but even in this group the number claiming to look regularly or even occasionally at anything other than *New Zealand Libraries* and *Library Life* was extremely small. A properly conducted nationwide survey might produce evidence to contradict my belief that we fail badly in this duty, but I suspect it would simply provide more evidence of the importance of the small number of 'gatekeepers' in local librarianship. In Britain, the Library Association has found it desirable to include (in its Code of Professional



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Conduct which came into effect this year) a section requiring members 'to keep abreast of developments in librarianship' as a part of their duty of professional competence. It represents a pious hope rather than a duty the LA is ever likely to be able to enforce, but as a recognition of need it is a small step in the right direction.

## Research

In those parts of the English-speaking world to which we normally turn for professional inspiration, the nature of library education has changed markedly over the past fifteen years. Base-level programmes like the MLS and postgraduate diploma courses often include some elements intended to make their graduates capable of undertaking investigative work on the effectiveness of library service, but far more important have been the research activities of practising librarians. While on leave in Britain eighteen months ago I was impressed by the number of librarians pursuing such work — often part-time — for higher degrees, or simply as what they saw as a necessary part of their professional life. To be sure, New Zealand librarians have often undertaken similar investigations for the betterment of local service, investigations often of very high quality indeed — the McEldowney reports on university library resources 1972 and 1982 being examples — but in general we have not been as thoroughgoing in this as is needful for the continued health of libraries and librarianship, New Zealand style. All too seldom has work undertaken by libraries and librarians locally gone so far as full publication of the results — the methodology employed, the failures and successes — so that we have not been able yet to develop any substantial local body of work.

That New Zealand librarianship in the past should have looked abroad for ideas on how local service might be improved was natural enough. If it is to prosper in the future, it will do so only if more research is undertaken at home. We are in a very different situation from librarians in Britain, the United States or even Australia, serving a different community with different needs.

Part of the research needed is of course simply to apply the methodology of successful investigations undertaken overseas, to see whether the findings are equally valid in our circumstances. To give but one minor example, some (and probably all) New Zealand university librarians have looked with care at the various reports on information needs of workers in the humanities prepared by the (U.K.) Centre for Research on User Studies, but until somebody undertakes a similar study looking at the problems of New Zealand academics and PhD students, the benefits that can be

derived are relatively small, since the studies were made of researchers whose access to the British Library Lending and Reference Divisions (however inadequate) was taken to be an important continuing part of their work.

Libraries may be among the cheaper services that society receives, but they still eat up a considerable amount of public money. Can we demonstrate that it is really being spent in the best way? It has been suggested by an overseas librarian interested in user charges that our public libraries' rental collections are not really cost-effective when all the factors are taken into account: is this really true? Is the benefit derived from the lists of free disposals prepared by so many libraries in fact sufficient to justify the heavy investment of expensive staff time in operating the scheme? These are not just idle questions to be answered in the next episode of *Soap*; they are precisely the sort of questions which overseas librarians have found their financial masters have asked, and if the librarians have had no data from which to prepare their answers, they have had some unpleasant surprises. Of course it is very difficult to place a value on some aspects of library service — but no more so than on many other services supported by the taxpayer. In times of economic rigour, and particularly at a time when we have the sort of costly change in procedures that automation is bringing, we shall find that our financial masters expect — as they are right to expect — quantified answers to many questions. If we find that their attitude is 'what hasn't been counted doesn't count' the blame will be entirely our own.

## Diploma course at Victoria

Some of these thoughts were in my mind when the syllabus for the 'new' Diploma programme at Victoria was being devised, although others have grown with the five years' experience we have now had with it. A radical restructuring of courses, of the sort adopted by a number of overseas schools who have seen their function as being to produce Information Managers (or whatever), seemed — as it still seems — inappropriate for the only postgraduate programme in the country. Instead, we laid down the foundations of a course which though in some ways quite different from the 'old' New Zealand diploma course, bore a very close resemblance to the postgraduate diploma courses offered at library schools in other Commonwealth countries.

On the whole, I believe the structure of the Diploma course has proved sound. There is the persistent problem that a single academic year is not now (if it has ever been) long enough to deal with all topics of importance at the length one would wish. The need to

incorporate new matter, particularly of course on library automation, raises questions on what is to be discarded from the common core; questions which are not easily answered. The transition from the 'old' diploma course to the 'new' has proved rather slower in some ways than expected, as a result of students' own conception of the course's requirements: the Bibliography which was so large a part of the 'old' has never had the same importance to us — but it did to some of our earlier student groups, with the result that they took on loads which were neither intended nor desired as part of the assessment pattern.

It is in assessment that Victoria's Diploma is most different from those of many other schools, very few of which operate without final examinations counting for at least 50 per cent of the marks. I am not going to argue that end-of-course examination as the assessment measure is other than a very faulty mechanism for deciding who shall qualify as a professional librarian: the skills it tests are not necessarily the most desirable. But in-course assessment only is also a faulty measurement, unless the balance of term papers, research project reports, tests of mastery and so on is very skilfully achieved.

The enormous advantage of continuous in-course assessment is that it allows remedial work to be done, so the number of ultimate failures should be small if initial selection for the course was sound. In my more pessimistic moments I despair of ever achieving a means of assessment which will save the library world from our releasing into it, as Diploma holders, persons who seem to us very ill-suited for work at a professional level, a means which will not at the same time fail some who have excellent qualities. The answer I believe is that success (whatever form of assessment is used) is a mark of academic ability not professional potential, and that to the potential employer the student's academic record should be of no more importance than the references the Department will provide on request. (I sometimes wonder about those libraries, some of them quite large, which never ask for references... but that is another matter!)

Building a research element into a base-level qualification like the Diploma course, has not proved simple, partly because the University's regulations on work for assessment are not very hospitable to group projects. There have been some interesting bibliometric projects undertaken by a number of groups, one of which has been published.<sup>1</sup> But the actual benefit (as a learning experience) for the individual student has to be balanced against the very considerable input of time into tedious investigation of minutiae — time often better spent on other things. Though very successful and useful for some students, for

others such work has (I suspect) been counter-productive. Research ought not to be a substitute for thought, but except as mere academic exercises it is supremely difficult to devise real-life projects of equal value for 45 persons of differing background, experience and ability, which will require them to think as well as investigate, and to have it all neatly completed in the short time available. Rather than attempt such exercises with all students, therefore, the encouragement of individual or small-group work through 'special topics' or 'research papers' has been the way in which most of such work has been undertaken recently.

Although with one exception — the 'clawing-back' of a greater part of aspects of automation into the core courses from options — the syllabus and underlying philosophy<sup>2</sup> of the Diploma course today is very much the same as when the first students started their study at Victoria in 1980, the actual content of the courses has changed almost beyond recognition. Changes in teaching staff have produced change. Introduction of a much greater range of methods and facilities, varying from the recently moved and enlarged printing laboratory at one end of the spectrum to Richard Hipgrave's highly successful DIALOG search simulations at the other, has been a positive development. Feedback from employers, whether through the very valuable Joint Advisory Committee of Librarianship, or the NZLA Education Committee or individually, has been of great assistance, as has the help

of the University Teaching and Research Centre with our evaluation of programmes. In this last respect, it is the students themselves who have often been particularly perceptive and helpful in their comments; we have been blessed in the membership of the Student Group Committee, named variously 'Square Brackets' or 'Parenthesis'. In 1985 for the first time there will be part-time Diploma students taking the course over a two-year period alongside those studying full-time, a development which increases the range of possibilities for those contemplating library education at this level.

Clearly if librarianship is an experimental science, as Urquhart<sup>3</sup> argues, there is more prospect of worthwhile investigative work being undertaken at the Master's level than within the structure of the base-level Diploma course. For many in library work a taught Master's programme would probably be preferable to the thesis alone or thesis-plus-coursework which is at present available, and in due course no doubt the Department will work towards developing one. But the present Master's programme has a lot of flexibility built into it: it can include a 'refresher-course' element, and most importantly it offers graduates (and in some cases non-graduates) with the Certificate a more appropriate means to better their qualifications than the Diploma course does.

At this stage it is clearly too early to gauge what impact the Masterate will have on librarianship in New Zealand:

I must confess to some disappointment that a dwindling band of librarians still appears to consider the Diploma a preferable qualification. Time will, if overseas experience is any guide, prove very clearly that for senior posts persons with a post-experience Master's degree, and who have themselves done solid work in research for the betterment of library service, will be preferred over those whose formal professional education has not gone beyond the base-level qualification. The steady increase in MA enrolments, the modest but gratifying provision of scholarship assistance for such work, suggest that although in the foreseeable future the Diploma will remain the mainstay of the Department of Librarianship, the Master's students will assume a greater importance in its work and in library development in New Zealand.

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2. Cf. the writer's *Factor, Treasurer, Dispenser* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1982) and 'Education for information and library work in New Zealand', *Unesco Journal of Information Science, Librarianship and Archives Administration*, v. 4, no. 3 (1982), pp. 177-184.
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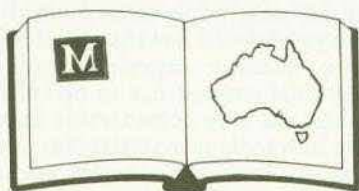
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