

It may also not be the best way to apply our resources in the pursuit of 'competency standards'. Members of the Board work hard (none harder) on the time and resource-consuming processes of accreditation, the basis for which is often misunderstood, and sometimes openly resented by the academics. The Board itself recognises these difficulties, and has set afoot its own processes of reappraisal and review. The opportunity presently offered may provide us with the grounds for an even wider consideration.

Without pre-empting the Board's conclusions, it is legitimate here to speculate about the processes of accreditation. In general, it is a symbolic rather than an effective process; it is concerned with curriculum content, context and implementation, occurs infrequently (once in 7 years), and relies on the assumption that between accreditation visits, institutions will act in good faith and maintain the levels of provision and support evident during the septennial review. *Courses, not individuals, are accredited*, and while everyone acknowledges that mere completion of an academic course, rigorous though it may be, is not a guarantee of professional competence, the implications are winked at by the Association and the institutions.

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It is, for example, possible for a student to complete a recognised course without being exposed to actual professional practice or setting a tyro's foot in a working library, just as it is possible for her to be taught by a body of academics who themselves may never have worked in a library as a librarian. This may be acceptable for the inculcation of the theoretical base, but something more is required for the grafting-on of professional mores.

Let us assume, for the purposes of argument, that the Association ceases to automatically, and at the expense of its members, accredit courses, many graduates of which do not, as a matter of fact, join our Association. It might in future do so, but only at the invitation, and at the expense of, individual institutions. This would relieve the Board of Education of a considerable amount of expensive and

time-consuming work, would dispel its inspectorial aura, and would (most importantly) free it to address what are arguably more significant considerations — those of competency, and the Association's role in defining, assessing and maintaining competency standards.

This would automatically bring our attention to bear where it ought — on individual candidates who would then, in addition to completing an academic course, have to satisfy the Board as to their fitness to enter upon practice, and (in due course) to continue to practice. It would enable the Board to concentrate on a much-neglected (by both the Association and the institutions) responsibility, that of continuous professional development. Done properly (and there is no point in doing it otherwise), this would bring great benefit to individual members, would improve standards of practice, and would enhance public and political perceptions of our role.

Precise definitions of 'good practice' will not be easy, for our attention hitherto has been fixed on internal (to any given library) processes, many of which are simply invisible to, and do not directly affect, the individual client. And here seems to be an appropriate place to enter a plea for the use of this term, which is more appropriate and richer in meaning, than the more widely applied (and now negatively connotated) 'user'.

A shift to client-centred practice would compel a differing definition of 'competency standards' from those inherent in process-based evaluation, and would require us, perhaps for the first time, to look seriously at ends, rather than means, in the provision of library and information service, and to contemplate the changes in the client's status which result from exposure to 'competent standards' of practice.

The Board itself has moved towards this; its revised introduction to the Association's statements on education for the profession fixes its vision on the client — practitioner nexus. More than this, it constitutes an implicit guarantee that librarians (and the Board has perhaps overlooked this — whether or not they are members of the Association, and whether or not they have completed a course approved by the Association) will perform certain tasks at a professional level and to an acceptable standard. If the Association is to safeguard itself, and its members, and address the public interest, it will perhaps need to do more about defining, installing and applying competency standards for the tasks which the Board sees as appropriate.

This might involve a requirement for professional members to undertake an approved quantum of appropriate professional development experiences in any given period, which in turn would exert pressure on the Board and the Association to address seriously, and with

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the allocation of appropriate levels of resources, the provision of opportunities for all of us to achieve and maintain 'competency standards'. (It might also, in fairness to those who have maintained their membership of the Association and their own personal standards of competency, require us to issue a disclaimer in relation to those who have not done so, and who therefore ought not to profit from any guarantees which the Association might publish).

The potential benefits would be considerable, and would take us much closer to true professional standards of practice than the present system allows.

Let us move to grasp the opportunity. □

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