

LIS: INVESTIGATIONS

Where ALIA's Research Committee brings you news from the world of library and information services research.

Educating for print disabilities

FROM OUR COLLECTION:

Senf, K., Black, F.A. and Mann, D. (2010) Education and Training for Serving those with Print Disabilities: Exploring the International Scene, *Feliciter* 56(3) pp. 102-4.

What, exactly, do members of your library staff need to know in order to serve people with a print disability? What is a print disability anyway?

There are various definitions of 'print disability'. In essence, it refers to people who have difficulty with text-based (print) documents. The reasons for this are varied, with perhaps the most apparent being blindness or a vision impairment. However print disabilities extend to people who have a learning disability such as dyslexia, or a physical disability in which it is difficult for them to hold and/or manipulate a hard-copy book.

Users with print disabilities – indeed any disability – deserve the same rights to access as any other user. Digital technologies have had a positive impact on adaptive and assistive technology, not least of which is the availability of accessible formats and the relative ease with which files can be transferred from one format to another. However funding

(or in most cases, lack of) has meant that many libraries struggle to meet the needs of this distinct user group. The purchase of the technology is one thing. Having staff members who have the necessary competencies to work with this equipment (which can also include knowledge of compatible hardware/software that the client may own) is another.

This brief article reports on research that was conducted

in Canada, with respondents from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. LIS program directors and library managers from these countries were surveyed

49%

of new graduates don't have adequate knowledge of print disabilities.

to "establish the level of knowledge directors and managers encourage and require in their graduates and employees".

Of the library managers who responded to the survey, 98% have library users who have a print disability (the article does acknowledge the biases that are inherent with 'self-selecting' surveys). These managers also believe that their staff should be well-informed with regard to print disabilities, incorporating knowledge on what is involved in serving this user group. In Australia, this would include knowledge of our complex copyright legislation and the circumstances (exceptions) under which printed documents may be made digital (digitised). Unfortunately, 49% of managers responded that the new graduates that they had hired "did not have adequate knowledge of print disabilities".

This is not surprising, given that the majority (approximately two-thirds) of program directors noted that providing information about special needs groups is not a formal objective of their program. Students tend to be made aware of the print-disabled population predominantly through elective options, as opposed to learning it in required courses.

Attempting to incorporate knowledge of special needs groups into already bursting curricula would require an amazing juggling act on behalf of educators. Similarly, as much as our professional ethics and our own consciences may lead us to want to be able to provide access to everyone in a format and on a device of their choosing, funding realities for public institutions are such that this may not happen. However, this does not mean that we cannot do our utmost and use our passion for lifelong learning to determine the best way to serve people with print disabilities within these very real constraints.

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