

Introduction and background

A competency index is generally understood to refer to a cluster or group of knowledge, skills and personal attributes (collectively known as competencies) that enable an individual to efficiently and effectively carry out a job or a task. A LIS (library and information services) professional competency index, therefore refers to such a cluster of competencies required of individuals practising as library and information services professionals (e.g. librarians or other information professionals) who hold specified professional qualifications that allow them to practise as LIS professionals, for example, in university academic libraries.

Background

Such a LIS professional competency index was a targeted outcome of a three-year NRF-funded research project which had the following objective: To develop a national LIS professional competency index for the higher education sector in South Africa for the following purposes:

- i). To provide an objective framework against which LIS employers (university library directors) in the higher education sector in South Africa may ascertain existing knowledge and skills as well as identify areas for further knowledge and skills acquisition in their academic libraries in order to efficiently and effectively mediate a rapidly evolving ICT (information and communication technology)-driven higher education library and information environment;
- ii). To provide an objective framework against which LIS employees (professional LIS practitioners) in the higher education sector in South Africa may ascertain their existing knowledge and skills as well as identify areas for further knowledge and skills acquisition for their professional development in a rapidly evolving digital higher education environment;
- iii). To inform curriculum review and revision in LIS education and training as academic libraries in South Africa are a major employer of LIS graduates. It was envisaged that such a LIS professional competency index would provide a useful benchmark against which curricula of LIS schools in South Africa may be evaluated for relevance to competency requirements of a rapidly evolving ICT-driven academic library work environment;
- iv). To be used by the LIS professional body in South Africa (LIASA: Library and Information Association of South Africa) as a framework to guide its registration of identified professional designations in the LIS profession; and,
- v). To encourage the development of similar competency indices for other LIS sectors so that eventually the country may achieve a composite national LIS competency index to be used by LIS employers, LIS employees, LIS education and training providers and the LIS professional body, across all LIS sectors in South Africa.

The Principal Investigator is pleased to present in the form of this publication, such a LIS professional competency index for the higher education sector in South Africa – a first for the country. In working towards this final outcome of the three-year research project the Principal Investigator engaged in a variety of research activities (captured in detail in the papers published/presented from this project - see references provided on p. 8) which directly or indirectly contributed to the compilation of this competency index. Some of these research activities included: intensive reviewing of literature; data collection from LIS professional practitioners via semi-structured interviews as well as a national online questionnaire survey of all academic libraries in South Africa and content analysis of over a 100 academic library

professional position job advertisements for the period 2014-2016; the use of both quantitative and qualitative philosophical assumptions in the study; the use of theories such as the Core Competency Theory (Selznick 1957), Chaos of Disciplines Theory (Abbott 2001) and the Concept of Disruptive Innovation (Shank & Bell 2011) to inform different aspects of the study; supervision to completion of LIS knowledge and skills studies by masters' students which contributed to the research project; and, preparation of journal papers from these studies with supervised students. It is hoped that the final output in the form of this competency index, informed by the intermediate outputs in the form of peer-reviewed papers and completed postgraduate studies, has produced a result that meets the objectives outlined earlier.

Definitions and other clarifications

In the context of this index as well as the research which informed it, 'knowledge' is viewed as relevant conceptual and theoretical understanding acquired through education and experience. 'Skills' refer to the application of conceptual and theoretical knowledge, that is, the ability to carry out a task resulting from sustained effort and practice. In other words, while 'knowledge' refers to what one should know or understand, 'skills' refer to what one should be able to do. 'Personal attributes' refer to one's values, attitudes and personal traits. Knowledge, skills and personal attributes are collectively referred to in this index as 'competencies'.

The competencies reflected in this index (that is, the first level of entry [and sometimes the second] – highlighted in bold) emanated from the research project, referred to earlier, which sourced data from LIS professional practitioners from South Africa's 23 (at the time of the data collection in 2015) academic libraries and from content analysis of all professional position job advertisements that appeared in the period 2014-2016 in the *Mail & Guardian* weekly newspaper, on the LIS professional body listserv (*LiasaOnline*) and on the websites of South African public higher education institutions. In order to make the index more usable and meaningful, at the time of compilation each competency was provided with a narrative to explain the competency or its different aspects, to embed necessary definitions for clarification of concepts, to contextualise it (where necessary), and sometimes to even conflate it with other overlapping competencies to avoid unnecessary repetition or duplication. To do this the compiler drew from her own logic and discretion; from her experience as a researcher in this area as well as from her experience in and with academic libraries; from general literature such as relevant dictionaries, handbooks and websites; and, from other related competency statements. While the narratives or competency explanations are provided (in some places in more detail than in others depending on the competency, its complexity and its degree of importance to academic library services), it is not the intention of this index to drill down to operational/granular levels and to describe job functions in detail. Rather the intention is to generically scope competencies reflected in the outcomes of the research from which they emerged so that the index may serve the purposes for which it is intended. The result, it is hoped, is a streamlined and logical presentation of a LIS professional competency index, free of duplication and contradiction, which meets the objectives for which it was prepared.

Structure of the index

The research which informed this index (Raju 2014; 2016) as well as studies conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) (Orme 2008), in the United States of America (Choi & Rasmussen 2009), in Norway and Thailand (Nonthacumjane 2011) and in Australia (Haddow 2012), amongst others, all establish that a blend of discipline-specific, generic and personal competencies are required of the modern LIS professional practising in a higher education library in the digital age. Hence this index is structured in terms of these three categories of competencies. Further, in the South African study (Raju 2016), professional or discipline-specific competencies emerged as the most required competency category, followed closely by generic competencies with personal competencies lagging behind in third place. This trend is a reflection of findings in other studies too (Orme 2008; Partridge, Lee & Munro 2010; Partridge, Menzies, Lee & Munro 2010; Haddow 2012, amongst others) where it is revealed that while generic competencies (that is, life-long learning competencies that apply to all disciplines or professions) are highly sought after by LIS employers, discipline-specific or professional competencies (that is, those competencies that are specific to the LIS profession), are “still valued by LIS employers” (Raju 2014: 167). To reflect this trend emanating from the index compiler’s own research as well as from the literature, the index assumes the order of discipline-specific competencies first, followed by generic and then personal competencies. It is for this reason, too, that the level of detail in the competency narratives is much greater in the discipline-specific category – after all this is an index to serve the LIS sector.

Finally, in terms of structure, the competencies in all three categories are ordered as closely as possible to the order of importance in which they emerged in the research study (Raju 2016). In other words, the competencies in greatest demand by employers (as reflected in job advertisements) and most emphasised by professional LIS practitioners in the online questionnaire survey, appear earlier in the index lists. However, in some instances aggregation of competencies and other adjustments were necessary to avoid duplication and to make for a more streamlined and logical presentation of the index. But as far as was possible, the order of the competencies reflects the original findings from the research from which they were drawn. Those appearing lower down in the lists, are important but not as important as those that dominate at the top of the lists. The same applies to the ordering of the three competency categories – for example, while personal attributes are important to complete a LIS professional’s competency profile for an 21st century academic library, they are not as important as discipline-specific and generic competencies. The compiler believes that understanding of this feature of the competency index is important in extracting maximum benefit from its use for the purposes for which it has been compiled.

Validation

Despite this index being grounded in empirical research, the compiler thought it useful to engage in a process of validation, for purposes of ascertaining the accuracy of the workplace

professional competency requirements and to enhance the general quality of the index. This involved requesting LIS practitioner experts to serve as expert reviewers of aspects of the index in which they held expertise, as well as a LIS scholarly editor to review the index in its entirety for logic, coherence and unity (see pp. iii-iv for names of these reviewers). Necessary adjustments were made as per suggestions by the scholarly editor and the expert reviewers.

Theory and practice

For clarity and understanding, the index tends to use examples, which from time to time would need to be updated as trends and technologies change, particularly in library and information services which have been heavily impacted by technology, specifically rapidly evolving information and communications technology, hence, the need for the index to be updated from time to time. In the meantime, it is hoped that what has been presented as a first iteration of a LIS professional competency index for the higher education sector in South Africa would be used by LIS employers and employees for practical purposes (to benchmark existing competencies and to ascertain the need for further knowledge and skills acquisition), by LIS educators (for curriculum development purposes) and by LIS researchers (as a basis for further research [empirical or theoretical] in the area of workplace competency exigencies). The Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) too may find the index useful for its oversight of LIS education and training in the country.

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