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Certification of continuous professional development for librarians in Singapore

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Introduction

In an age where knowledge gets obsolete with increasing speed in almost every profession, the line separating professional education and professional practice becomes less and less distinct. The Chinese saying, "to live to old age, one must learn till old age" captures well the intertwining relationship between living and continuous learning. To meet the challenges of knowledge obsolescence, we need to create an infrastructure that allows and encourages practitioners to weave in and out of formal learning environment to keep up with current trends, development and skills. Library school is the first stop of our professional journey. Though we may hop back to it now and then throughout our career, it cannot be the only source of training or professional development. Not only are there other providers, there are also many approaches towards updating one's expertise, for example through self study and research, participation in group activities, people exchanges and visits, etc.

More importantly, it is critical that we formally recognize the whole spectrum of education and professional development that a person undertakes in this warped speed era. If we agree that a basic professional qualification (that entitles one to practice as a librarian) have a limited "shelf life" today, it follows that other certification must come into play at the end of the "shelf life" in order for a librarian to practice proficiently. One could go back to Library school to update one's qualifications or alternatively, as proposed in this paper, one could get certified for engaging in various types of professional development and skills updating activities. We firmly believe that a formal recognition of continuing training and professional development will lead to a whole host of positive outcomes for the library profession here.

Role of the professional association

Continuing training and professional development is of perennial concern in every profession and is a common theme in speeches and exhortations of library association officials and luminaries since time immemorial. Indeed, providing continuing training and professional development activities is one of the key purposes for the existence of many library associations world wide. The approaches taken by professional bodies in supporting continuing training and professional development varies in intensity of involvement and engagement. These include policy formulation, advocacy efforts, coordination of training activities, organization of conferences, prescription of competencies and training requirements, assessment and even certification. An ideal situation would be one where elements of all these approaches are put in place and integrated into a comprehensive framework and programme. However it would be a very difficult undertaking. Even a large and professionally run organization such as ALA (American Library Association) is not able to provide such a framework. Smith (2000) discussed the 1974 report by Elizabeth Stone (1974) that proposed the setting up of a centre at ALA to coordinate and execute a comprehensive approach to continuing library education. Yet no such body exists today after more than 30 years.

Nevertheless it is clear that the national library association of a country plays a critical role in leading the profession towards achieving the objectives of continuing professional development. The type of roles each library association plays will have to take into account local conditions and the state of the profession locally. Today there is an added urgency to this undertaking due to the speeding up of life and the accompanying effect of knowledge obsolescence. The library profession in Singapore has undergone tremendous changes in the last decade of rapid development within as well as outside of the sector. Out of concern for the impact of rapid changes in our society on our profession, both the Library Association of Singapore (LAS) and the

National Library Board (NLB) decided to form the NCLIKPS (National Committee on Library and Knowledge Professionals in Singapore) in 2005 to study, review and make recommendations for the successful development of the library profession. The Committee is made up of key personnel representing various sectors of the profession, including representation from iKMS (Knowledge Management Society of Singapore).

Beginnings

One of the key deliverables of the NCKLIPS was to recommend a continuing training and professional development system that will meet the challenges of the new work environment as well as take into account the current infrastructure of our professional bodies and institutions. After deliberating on this and other related issues such as professional competencies for future librarians, the Committee agreed on a proposal to focus on building an infrastructure that encourage librarians to commit to continuing professional development activities. The key feature of the proposal is the recognition and certification of professionals who attain certain minimum amount of training and professional development activities. As shall be explained later, once implemented, this feature will have wide ranging impact on the profession.

A draft of the proposal was first tabled for discussion at the Chief Librarians' Council in April 2006. The Council's in-principle agreement was sought and given before further work continued. This is important as the proposed scheme can only be successful if major institutions and employers of librarians are committed to it. A meeting was then held with the LAS Training and Development Committee to work out some details and subsequently a revised draft of the scheme was posted on the LAS website for members to view and comment. This was followed by a forum (held in December 2006) for the professional community to provide further feedback on the scheme. The LAS Council then endorsed the scheme and formed an interim committee, the PDS Implementation Committee, to work towards its implementation.

This paper will first provide a brief description of the proposed scheme, known as PDS (Professional Development Scheme). It will then discuss the philosophy and practical considerations behind its design, elaborate on the key components, address some issues raised by members of the community, outline the benefits to and impact on the professional community and finally discuss the likely challenges in its implementation.

The scheme in brief

PDS is basically a simple certification scheme. Members are awarded points on completion of a series of recognized professional development activities. Once the member cumulates sufficient points, he/she submits an application to the PDS Board (to be appointed by LAS) for the award of the status of PP (Practicing Professional). Once awarded, the validity of the status will be for a period of 2 years and the name of the successful applicant will be gazetted and published in the official LAS website.

Points system

To ensure that the applicant participates in a mix of training and professional development activities, the total points acquired must be made up of a minimum number of points from each of 3 activity groups, namely Expertise (or professional) Development (ED), Industry Development (PD) and Self (personal) Development (SD). As the main focus is in updating of expertise, a higher weightage is given to ED, while the lowest is assigned to non-professional related activities (see figure 1 below):

Activity	Abbrev	Minimum points
Expertise Development	ED	500
Industry Development	ID	400
Self (personal) Development	SD	100
TOTAL		1,000

Figure 1

Types of activities

The description of the 3 categories of activities together with some examples are given in figure 2 below.

Activity groups	Example of activities
<p>1. Expertise (Professional) Development (ED)</p> <p>Activities that will help to update and improve the skills and knowledge of practitioners in library & information work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending courses and workshops on topics relating to library & information science • Contributing to the knowledge base of the profession through paper writing for group and conference presentation, publication in professional journals or newsletter • Conducting workshop and courses for other practitioners • Professional reading as entered in a reading log
<p>2. Industry Development (ID)</p> <p>Activities that keep the practitioner informed of current developments in the library and information industry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending and participating in short talks, discussion forums and organized meetings on issues and developments in libraries and information environment • Participating in study visits to and exchange programmes with other libraries • Participating in professional association activities • Attending update sessions and presentations on relevant topics by vendors and other related organizations
<p>3. Self (Personal) Development (SD)</p> <p>Activities that helps the practitioner improve on his work productivity, management skills and general knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending courses and workshops on individual productivity, management skills and other topics for personal development • Participating in any other activities that help improve on general skills and knowledge

Figure 2

The process

The following is the proposed procedure for applicants who wish to apply for the award of the PP (Practicing Professional) status.

- a) Applicants (who must be a professional member of LAS) will keep a Professional Development log book (or forms) issued by LAS (in future, an online registration system could be implemented). Each time he participates in an activity, he will enter the item in the log book and has it certified by the organizer of the activity. He can check the LAS website for the points that will be awarded for specific types of activity. This does not preclude other methods by which the

points for a practitioner's training and professional development activities can be tracked.

- b) At the appropriate qualifying period, the practitioner will submit his log book to PDS Board for endorsement. The Board will verify each log book and certify that he/she has attained at least 100 points in accordance to the weightages in each of the 3 categories. The confirmed total points awarded will be notified to each practitioner.
- c) Submission can be done 4 times a year in Jan, Apr, Jul and Oct. Their status will last 2 years from the date of approval, after which they have to submit fresh application again to maintain their status.

The Board

The PDS Board will be made up of 3-5 senior members of the profession and appointed by the LAS Council. Its role is to verify all applications for PP and recommend its award to the Council. In addition, they will also examine and decide on appropriate professional development activities that are submitted by applicants but not covered in the existing list of qualified activities. At the initial stages of implementation, members of the Board are likely to have the responsibility to answer queries on the scheme. Finally they can make proposals to Council to enhance and improve the scheme.

The award

The successful applicant will be given the status of Practicing Professional (PP). His name will be gazetted in the LAS website list of PP (practicing professionals) for 2 years and published in the Singapore Libraries Bulletin or other such directories. They will be entitled to use the designation PPLAS (Practicing Professional, LAS) in their official letterheads, name cards, personal stationery and in any other form of official and professional communication with other parties. A Practicing Professional (PP) must renew his status at the end of the 2 years through the same method as described above for attainment of PP.

Incentives

NCLIKPS and LAS would request all employers of librarians to

- a. Tie the annual performance appraisal of their professional staff member with the attainment of PP status
- b. Require their professional staff to attain PP status before they are considered for promotion to a higher grade
- c. Require applicants for professional positions (except entry level positions) in their organization to be PP
- d. Provide incentives for their staff members to attain PP status

Critical success factor

The success of the PDS scheme rests largely on agreement by major employers of librarians to endorse the scheme and to put in place incentives in their organizations to encourage staff members to attain PP status. When the majority of employers require PP status of their staff or potential employees in order to advance in their career or get appointed, PP will become a desired certification for librarians. Over time, this will have a roll-on effect and become the norm for our profession in Singapore.

It is also important for all members of the profession to understand and accept the rationale of the scheme. If we truly believe in giving good service and providing relevant expertise to our clientele in this fast changing world, it is important that we undertake continuing professional development seriously and have something to show for it to our clientele, and indeed to people who employ us.

Considerations behind the PDS proposal

There are several possible approaches the NCLIKPS could take in deciding on the areas in continuing training and professional development to recommend for improvement. For example, we could map out continuing training requirements for the future competencies of librarians that we have identified. We could also recommend instituting regular training and professional development activities or study deeper into training needs. In the end, it was decided that it would be more desirable to create a framework of continuing training and professional development that will have wide ranging impact and yet is simple to maintain. The PDS was conceptualized based on the following considerations.

Firstly, the PDS proposal should be designed to recognize the effort put in by librarians in continuing professional development and training. The recognition by PDS, in the form of PP status, can be seen as proof that a professional has undertaken sufficient effort in keeping himself/herself up-to-date in his professional work, both in terms of skills acquisitions as well as being informed of current developments. As argued earlier in the beginning of this paper, such certification follows logically from our practice of requiring appropriate professional qualifications (e.g. MLS) of a person who wish to enter into the field as a practitioner. If obsolescence of knowledge is taking place at a faster rate, then continuous certification is the means by which we can assure our clientele and users that our professional members are up to the task and competent in dealing with changing issues and challenges that arise in the field.

Secondly, the scheme should encourage all librarians to engage in continuing training and professional development more systematically and consistently. Most librarians in Singapore have good access and opportunities for training and upgrading, but not all take advantage of them fully. Gauging from the attendance of professional activities and training programmes organized locally so far, there appear to be a number of librarians who are not engage in continuing training on a regular basis. Though we do not have local data on the main reasons why this is so, it is likely that it would be similar to those cited elsewhere. For example, a study by Chan and Auster (2003) shows that situational barriers such as feeling old, working part-time, and the organizational climate for updating knowledge and skills have a negative effect on participation in professional development activities on a group of reference librarians in Ontario in Canada. The PDS scheme will improve this situation as it puts pressure on individual staff members to plan and undertake professional development activities seriously in order to achieve PP status to qualify for career advancement and job promotion. It also puts pressure on employers to provide more opportunities and funding to ensure that their staff are qualified to industry standard and comparable with other organizations.

Thirdly, the scheme should help librarians and their organizations define the type of training and professional development activities that the library profession considers to be appropriate for updating professional practice. Although most organizations in Singapore place high emphasis on staff training and many have formal programmes that prescribe minimum level of continuing training for their staff, they are not tailored specifically to the needs of the library profession. The 3 categories of activities and the mix prescribed will help organizations sharpen the training focus. Furthermore, the PDS takes into account non-training activities such as publishing, self-study, professional reading, participation in community projects, etc., which are important component of professional development and which are not normally considered as training activities in an organization's staff training programme.

Fourthly, the scheme should create an industry standard in terms of what it takes to be recognized as sufficient effort in continuing professional development for librarians. With the wide acceptance of the PP certification, potential employers of librarians will have a common

yardstick to determine the professional development effort undertaken by existing as well as potential employees. Also, unlike staff training schemes in an organization, whereby a person's training record is kept in-house and is specific to the organization, the PP certification is portable and can be used wherever the person works.

Lastly, from the point of LAS, the proposal must be easy to implement and does not consume a lot of manpower or financial resources. This is an important pre-requisite given the nature of our professional body in Singapore. LAS operates largely on a voluntary mode and are run by unpaid professionals. Presently it does not have any paid staff or permanent secretariat support unlike other larger library associations in the West and even around the region. There are essentially 2 administrative tasks involved in the running of the PDS scheme. First, a basic secretariat function to receive, verify, process and file all applications and second, the PDS Board in deliberating over the applications and recommending approval to the LAS Council. The secretariat function will be funded by administrative fees (proposed at between \$20-\$50) collected from applicants while members of the PDS Board will be senior members of the profession appointed by Council. It is envisaged that careful planning and design of the application procedures and adequate dissemination of information on the LAS website will minimize administrative work for both applicants and the LAS.

Reaction to the proposed scheme

Feedback from the professional community on the scheme was overwhelmingly positive, based on the 80 members who attended the forum held in December 2006. While there was unanimous agreement on the intent and goal of the scheme, there were also many queries on the details, such as procedures, dealing with unique scenarios and most of all, the rationale for including and excluding activities that were considered appropriate for awarding of points in the scheme. These issues can be grouped into the following categories:

- a) What activities are counted towards the award of points?

There were many opinions of what constitute professional development activities. Some argued that every significant work experience one gets at the workplace would contribute to one's professional development. Thus if I work on my library's project to upgrade the library integrated system, I would have increased my knowledge on library automation and thus add to my professional development. Others wondered if attending a vendor's briefing session on a product under evaluation at one's workplace would also constitute as professional development activities compared with a similar demonstration session organized by the professional body for all members. Subject librarians also raised the question of whether training and development activities related to the subject areas that they support (e.g. economics, engineering, etc), which has no library science content can be considered as valid activities.

- b) How do we ensure the quality of training programmes and determine the value of items in each activity group?

At least one feedback was concerned with how LAS or the PDS Board will determine the quality of the varied number of training or professional development programmes that members can participate in to gain points for the PP award. Some also question how we ascertain the value of an activity when assigning points to them.

Other issues were raised that relate to the procedures and process of the scheme, such as the suggestion to extend the qualifying period from 2 to 3 years and the amount of administrative fees to pay. Questions were also asked on when will the validity of the 2 year start, how and when to submit an application, what kind of documentation is needed, who to appeal to in case of disputes, etc. These administrative and procedural details can be sorted out and FAQs created closer to the implementation date. It is probably more useful to address the 2 main areas of concern expressed above.

Acceptable professional development activities for PDS

There is no doubt that our daily work experience, cumulated over time can add substantially to our repertoire of skills and expertise. However we should make a distinction between expertise gained from work experience and that gained from self-directed effort in updating one's knowledge base and capabilities in this context. The PDS is not meant to measure and certify work experience. It is solely concerned with recognizing the continuing effort put in by a professional with the specific goal of enhancing his/her capability as a librarian. Another difference between the two is that skills acquired from work experience depends on the exigencies of services in the person's work place while that acquired from self directed effort in training is shaped by the requirements of PDS, and therefore more consistent with industry standards.

Perhaps a useful guide for determining acceptable activities for inclusion in PDS is to sieve them through our definition of continuous professional development, which is "engaging in activities with the *specific purpose* of updating, upgrading, increasing competencies and skills, and widening our knowledge of the profession so as to raise the value of our professional work continuously".

Going by this definition, most work place activities would not be counted towards the award of points in PDS, though it must be stressed that it is not because we think it is not important part of professional development. Part of the reason for excluding professional development arising from work experience is because of the difficulty in measuring and verifying such activities on a practical level, given the current capacity of LAS and professional infrastructure.

Quality of training and professional development activities

Figure 2 earlier on provides a guide to the type of activities in each of the activity group. A more detailed chart will be provided by the PDS Implementation group, which will be subsequently updated and maintained by the PDS Board. A draft is shown in the Appendix.

It is important to note that the detailed chart will only list types of activities and their associated points assigned but not actual activities available at a particular time. Thus it will not assign points to specific training programmes available. For obvious practical reasons, it is not feasible for the PDS Board to assess and vet every possible training programme. However PDS Board will provide guidelines and criteria on acceptable training providers and programmes to ensure some basic quality assurance. The onus is on the applicant for PP status to match their intended training or professional development activities items listed in the Activity Chart and assigned the necessary points in their application. The job of the PDS Board on receipt of the application is to verify the assignment of points by the applicant and make the necessary adjustments. A well constructed, unambiguous activity chart will minimize any discrepancies between the applicant and the PDS Board members on the assignment of points.

The points assigned to each type of activity is based on a judgment of what would constitute a reasonable level of training and professional activities that will help a person acquire new skills and be kept updated within the qualifying period. The calculation of the points for each activity is done by estimating the amount of time spent on the activity and weighting it according to its importance in contributing to expertise and professional development. Further iterations are done and various possible combinations of activities tested out to arrive at the assigned points. The points allocated in the activity chart shown in the Appendix is a first draft and need to be further refined by the PDS Implementation Committee.

Using this draft, the illustration below provides an indication of the number and type of activities that need to be undertaken for an applicant to satisfy the expertise activity group requirement:

<p>Example 1: Possible combination of activities per year for a person who is more oriented towards participating in training activities and professional reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Participate in half-day workshop on specific LIS area (1)b) Participate in 2-day workshop on specific LIS area (4)c) Participate in 2-day conference (2.5)d) Participate in discussion group & forum (1.5)e) Spend 4 hours per month on professional reading (16) <p><i>Total of 25 points per year, i.e. a total of 50 points when he repeats the same type of activities the following year</i></p> <p>Example 2: Possible combination of activities per year for a person who is more oriented towards writing and contributing in development professional expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Speaker at professional forum (7)b) Write feature article in published magazine (>1,000 words) (4)c) Write and present paper at a conference as main author (18) <p><i>Total of 29 points per year, i.e. a total of 58 points when he repeats the same type of activities the following year</i></p>
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Figure 3

Impact on the profession

The successful implementation of the PDS will have significant impact on the library profession in Singapore. The most fundamental impact is of course an increase in better informed, up-to-date and skilled librarians. Those librarians who have not previously paid attention on continuing training will increase their effort, while those who have will be more focused on their choice of training and development to match that required by PDS. As librarians start to take more serious effort in planning their training and professional development systematically, they will be more aware of industry needs. Greater interaction and networking with other librarians while participating in training and development activities will generate greater synergy and opportunities for growth and cooperation. Thus, overall they will be a general increase in expertise level for the profession as a whole when the PDS becomes widely accepted.

There are also many other roll-on effects for the profession and library and information industry in general. For example, the scheme will attract more training providers to meet the demand for training. It will be more worthwhile for training companies and educational institutions to invest in setting up better training programmes if the market is more sizeable and predictable. The library association or even individual groups of librarians will be pushed to organize and provide more opportunities for professional interactions, such as talks, discussion circles, working groups and training courses. This will generate a hive of activities that will widen the range of professional development as well as work opportunities for librarians. Moreover, the emphasis on sharing of knowledge through various forms of publishing in the PDS activity groups would help to increase the local knowledge base, which is critical if we are to sustain ourselves as a vibrant, recognizable and relevant profession.

The introduction of PDS will also raise the profile and improve the image of our profession as a progressive and responsible body. In recognizing the impact of rapid changes on our professional practice and taking concrete steps to address it, we stand a better chance of continuing to be a relevant and desirable profession that offers value to our users, parent bodies and society at

large. The combined effect for all these changes resulting from the implementation of PDS will yield a local library professional landscape that will be more dynamic and attractive.

Challenges

As highlighted earlier, the critical success factor for the implementation of PDS is endorsement by the majority of employers and wide acceptance by the professional community. Judging from the feedback received from both major employers and members of the community, there is general consensus on the intent of the scheme and its proposed framework. Points of disagreement will probably arise from the details of the scheme, such as the type of acceptable activities that are recognized for awarding points and the number of points to be awarded. The details are important and it will take some time to sort them out. There will naturally be conflicting ideas of what are considered to be appropriate professional development activities and how they can be valued and measured. As decisions on these details affect the type and intensity of effort that participants of the scheme have to put in, there is a danger that these disagreements may cause employers or individuals to reject the scheme totally. The practical approach is to compromise on some of the details and let the scheme be implemented and make the necessary adjustment over time when issues become clearer.

Therefore, much effort has to be put in to get all members of the community to be involved in understanding, contributing, working out the details and giving the final touches to the scheme. LAS, together with the PDS Implementation Committee and subsequently the PDS Board will have to play a major role in getting the scheme off the ground.

Though most librarians have adequate access to training funds in their organization, some are worried that more competition for funding will diminish their chances of meeting up with the PDS requirements. Though employers have the responsibility of providing sufficient training funds, the scheme will also have to address this concern by ensuring that there are sufficient types of activities that do not incur heavy expenses.

Conclusion

For the library profession, continuing education and professional development has always been a central focus of our work. We organize our libraries and implement services that help other people pursue their continuing education goals and independent learning efforts effectively. For example, books and resources are arranged and cataloged systematically to enable people to prescribe their own learning programmes and self development path. We provide reference or instructional services to help people utilize information resources for their learning effort. If we are good at helping other people pursue continuing education, it should be easy for us as a profession to appreciate and engage successfully in our own professional development effort.

The library association of the country has an important role and responsibility to ensure that its members are continuously trained and professionally updated to help users, the public, organizations and society to benefit from the information and knowledge economy. The PDS is an important response to one of the major consequences of rapid change in the information and technological environment (i.e. knowledge obsolescence) that affects every profession. It seeks to extend the education and learning effort of a professional throughout the lifespan of his/her professional life by establishing a framework which encourages and demand continuing professional development. If it is successfully implemented by LAS, it will also have far reaching impact on the profession locally, leading to a more vibrant and dynamic professional landscape that is of great value to the society we live in.

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Appendix

Draft of Activity Chart for Expertise Development (ED) Group (for illustration purpose only) – subject to change

	Points
Participate in course/workshop/online learning on specific LIS area (half day /3hrs)	1
Participate in course/workshop/online learning on specific LIS area (1 day /7 hrs)	2
Participate in course/workshop/online learning on specific LIS area (2-4 day /14-28 hrs)	4
Participate in course/workshop/online learning on specific LIS area (5-10 day /35-70 hrs)	10
Participate in course/workshop/online learning on specific LIS area (more than 10 days / 70 hrs)	18
Participate in LIS Conference/seminar (half day)	0.5
Participate in LIS Conference/seminar (1 day)	1.5
Participate in LIS Conference/seminar (2 day)	2.5
Participate in LIS Conference/seminar (more than 2 days)	3.5
Chair conference session and seminar	2.5
Speaker at professional forum or seminar	7
Participate in discussion group on professional matters	1.5
Write & present paper at a conference as main author	18
Write & present paper at a conference as joint author	15
Prepare and present poster session at conference	10
Publish scholarly article in non-refereed journal or publication	15
Publish scholarly article in refereed journal or publication	20
Publish research report (book form)	20
Write feature article in published magazine or news bulletin (>1,000 words)	4
Write feature article in published magazine or news bulletin (>2,000 words)	8
Conduct professional course or workshop (half day)	10
Conduct professional course or workshop (1 day or more)	17
Per year of professional reading - 4 hrs per month (presented as certified reading log, contributed annotated bibliography or reviews in LAS website)	16
Participate in discussion groups or learning circle on LIS topics	4