

## Editorial

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In the search to ensure the most efficient allocation of resources, market economy principles are now being applied in such areas as health, government and education. When such an approach is implemented, activities and projects are justified, not on such grounds as the quality of life will be improved, mankind will benefit, etc., but on financial terms. If the market place does not deem the activity worth doing (i.e., enough people will pay for it) the activity will not be pursued.

Funding of library/information schools, etc., is increasingly being linked to success in the marketplace. Failure to attract the requisite number of students means funding is reduced for the next year, an act in itself making it difficult to provide the necessary resources to attract more students. One very important element in trying to attract students is ensuring they know what the school can offer. Allied to this is the notion of quality and where any particular school ranks in relation to other schools. Stated at its most basic, one factor which will sway a decision to study at one library/information school rather than at another, is reputation. Such and such a school will have a reputation for good quality staff, innovative teaching and good success rates in student employment. Accepting, of course, that such a reputation can be off-putting to some less capable and confident students, institutions with “good” reputations will tend to attract the most and best qualified candidates.

How, though, can students find out about a school’s reputation? There are many channels of information which can be used. Prospectuses can be scanned for lists of publications, research, etc. In the UK, at least, all university departments including library/information schools, are allocated a research rating which is published. The sensible applicant will also attempt to contact professionals of long standing to obtain their opinions. Visits, where that is possible, will also reveal a lot about a particular school. Even the most industrious applicant, however, will only be able to obtain a partial picture of the standing of schools, at least where a number are being compared. That picture, though, will only be held by the applicant, or in exceptional situations when a number of applicants works together, by the group. The fact that the individual or small group of individuals have formed a totally *wrong* impression about a school will have little or no effect upon the school’s reputation.

Consider, though, the situation if ill-informed opinions are broadcast to thousands of people. In this scenario the reputation of a school, built up painstakingly over many years, can be badly damaged because the “no smoke without fire” cliché applies in many people’s minds only too easily. Prior to the introduction, and now widespread use

of the Internet<sup>1</sup>, it was highly unusual for opinions about library schools' reputations to be expressed to anything more than a very small audience. Now through use of LISTservers<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to broadcast simultaneously to thousands of individuals throughout the world. Many LISTs, although not all, do not have any editorial control, although after the "event" people can be moved from the LIST. The dangers are obvious.

JESSE is the list for those interested in library/information educational matters. Two recent messages posted onto the list demonstrated potential problems. In one message the sender asked about the status of a well-known American library/information school because he/she had heard rumours about whether it was going to continue to function. Needless to say faculty at the institution involved were not at all happy with this question being asked in such a public forum. In another message the sender asked for advice on choosing a suitable course. Whilst one respondent to this message sensibly advised the requester on the kind of issues to consider, other respondents touted the merits of their institutions. Inevitably a very distorted picture of the market place was given.

The very nature of the Internet militates against any kind of editorial control over the information being broadcast. Certainly the moderators of the LISTs can, and do, advise members of the matters which are suitable for a LIST and those which are not. Ordinary members of LISTs, too, are not slow to point out when someone "abuses" the unwritten ethics of LISTs. Perhaps, though, further consideration needs to be given to making objective data more widely available. The question, of course, of presenting objective data is a highly contentious one. In the UK, it is government policy to present parents with data on the performance of schools. At the moment this is exam results data. Inevitably this policy was not widely welcomed by the teaching profession and many arguments for not presenting such raw data were put forward. As the data does not take any account of social background of the pupils and no assessment is made, at the moment, of extra curricular activities it can present a less than fair picture of the school. This is, indeed, fair comment but it is also fair comment that at least what is presented is more objective than what, if anything, existed before.

It would be foolish to suggest it would be an easy task to obtain widespread consensus on how library/information schools should be assessed to bring out fairly the true essence and standing of the school. The question, though, to ask is whether we are happy for individual opinions, based on maybe very little objective evidence, to be broadcast widely or whether we are prepared to develop some system which, although it will have limitations, will at least have the merit of objectivity.

*Fred Guy*  
Editor

<sup>1</sup> The Internet (network of networks) allows those connected (there are 20,000,000 users!) to send electronic mail messages to each other and to access data/information held on the thousands of computers on the network.

<sup>2</sup> LIST servers allow members of the LIST to send messages to all members of the LIST and to receive messages from other members. There is no charge for joining a LIST and some LISTs have thousands of members.