

## EDITORIAL

What are library schools to do about information technology? There is no arguing the pervasiveness of computerization in information environments, but what should students learn about it? Some years ago it was fairly common to find that students were introduced to programming during their course. Its proponents argued that information professionals should know something about the mystique behind these amazing machines that seemed to do everything at breathtaking speed and presented the answer to so many problems. The more skeptical questioned how much programming could be squeezed into a one-year postgraduate programme in librarianship and whether the little knowledge acquired would be of much value. As more and more software packages became available off-the-shelf for library applications, the need to develop in-house programs at considerable cost in time and effort was drastically reduced. It seems likely that today many fewer library schools retain programming in their curricula.

There is also a problem with hardware. Should students understand how computers work, or should they take their 'insides' for granted, as with other gadgets like telephones or photocopiers?

The really difficult decisions, however, lie in the realm of technology applications. Should students learn how to use different kinds of information retrieval packages, how to search on many different online systems using a wide range of databases, and so on; or should they be taught the principles underlying such practice at the expense of exposure to the variety of systems and services encountered in the real world? Indeed, can principles be taught in isolation from practice?

A different kind of problem is presented by the increasingly diverse clientele attracted to library schools. Many students still enter a course on librarianship or information studies lacking any familiarity with computers. A growing number of students, however, have already completed courses in computer studies at school or university. This group, of course, is not homogeneous and will range from those with a little background knowledge to those with degrees in computer science. Yet another category of student will have encountered computers in a working environment: online searching, word processing, database creation or whatever. How does the library school cope with this disparate experience amongst the members of one course who perhaps are expected to undertake a collective and compulsory introduction to information technology?

Keeping abreast of technological change is a considerable problem for library school staff, many of whom will have entered the profession before computers had enforced their stranglehold on the information market. They may find themselves compelled to teach subjects in which they have no formal training and perhaps for which they have little affection or enthusiasm. Even those whose interest is directed

towards this aspect of librarianship may feel increasingly at a loss to maintain currency with the latest hardware and software developments.

A number of questions have been raised here, but no answers have been proposed. The editors leave that more difficult task to their authors, who have sought to resolve these and other dilemmas in previous issues of *Education for information* and no doubt will continue to do so in the future.

R.F. Guy and J.A. Large  
Editors