Reflections on education of professional indexers

The following papers are intended to introduce the subject of future training needs of indexers as seen by two Australians. The paper by Cherryl Schauder was prepared as background material for the Information Exchange on Future Educational and Training Needs of Indexers held in Sydney in December 1990. The first paper by John Simkin was written following the Information Exchange. It is hoped that these papers will stimulate debate and discussion.

Future educational and training needs of indexers
John Simkin

I have considered the profession of ‘indexing’ and, particularly, the preparation necessary to enter the profession, for a number of years. Most practising indexers in the current tradition have adopted a pragmatic view, learning what they need to know in order to tackle the kinds of jobs they expect to get. I have come to the conclusion that this is not satisfactory any longer.

Indexers and bibliographers have together the responsibility for organizing the totality of knowledge. I am sometimes surprised by the unawareness of some indexers as to the size and importance of this responsibility. It can be graphically demonstrated by considering that within a few years all the world’s recorded knowledge could be available in compact format occupying the space of, say, a small tea chest. Such packages will be accessible via personal computers. Now: imagine that indexing did not exist or was at its present state of development, and imagine yourself gazing at the tea chest knowing that everything you needed to know was there but nobody had thought of any method of access which would sort through and find for you the information you needed, or, at best, had provided a method of access which would give at least 10,000 hits for every inquiry or would take several days of sorting to narrow the search to a manageable number of hits.

In fact, indexing now and in the future must be carried out with an understanding of the whole field of ‘knowledge organization’. Fortunately, many indexers who have come via the ‘pragmatic’ route have acquired in different ways the broad understanding identified above. However, this has been a hit-and-miss process which is no longer enough.

To take our place as professional organizers of knowledge we need to give attention to all the elements which make up a profession.

Individuals should be chosen for the profession because of their orientation and talents; they should be educated and trained in the full range of theory and practice which equips them to ‘think with’ and apply effectively their professional knowledge; professional courses should be planned and accredited at the level that achieves the scope of knowledge needed and the general recognition which a profession needs; the graduates from the courses should be recognized and recognize themselves as entrants to a profession which involves responsibilities and which performs according to principles and standards; the profession should provide itself with associations which preserve and develop the tradition; the body of knowledge should be developed through research. Many of these elements exist: this is evident in The Indexer and in the healthy association throughout the English-speaking world.

We are weak in the education/training/accreditation area. This is not due to lack of thought about these subjects, but because the work so far has concentrated on producing something like an indexing ‘technician’ rather than a ‘master’ indexer or fully professional ‘organizer of knowledge’. Many indexers have gone on to become such professionals by personal effort and by using knowledge gained in other disciplines; having done so they still have no further recognition or formal accreditation such as is provided in other professions by associateship or fellowship in the professional association.

These considerations have led me to conclude that we need professional courses taught at recognized institutions of higher education, accredited by associations which have reached this level of recognition, and, eventually, with opportunities for higher-level academic studies and research.

In 1983, in a presidential address to the Australian Society of Indexers, I proposed a tertiary-level course to be undertaken at a postgraduate level. Another member, Dietrich Borchardt, an eminent librarian and bibliographer, urged the need to establish, as a matter of urgency, ‘a panel of Foundation Fellows . . . [to] ensure that there is an
intrinsically respectable and nationally recognized body of persons whose judgement on matters of indexing can be relied upon'. These suggestions have not been followed, but, I believe, the subject should be kept alive, if only because parts of what should be our profession are being, or have been, stolen by others less able to handle them than we are.

In December 1990, nine Australian indexers and teachers in the area of information services met with Elizabeth Wallis, Chairman of the Society of Indexers, in Sydney for an Information Exchange on Future Educational and Training Needs of Indexers. Background notes were supplied, designed to urge the participants to explore the questions from the viewpoint expressed above rather than to retread ground already well-worn in the United Kingdom and Australia.

During the whole-day meeting discussions ranged over a number of topics directly and indirectly related to the main theme.

These included:

1. **Definition of 'indexer'**
   It seems, lacking any term, that we are stuck with this one. For our purposes it must include such elements as database design and management. Whether we use the term ‘indexer’ or some newly coined one, it will be most useful if we define it in terms of the range of knowledge and skills used by the total range of those who fall within the profession. A checklist is needed.

2. **Indexing knowledge and skills**
   While all ‘indexers’ need a basic knowledge of the items on the checklist, there will need to be ways for individuals to develop advanced expertise in particular elements.

3. **Levels of indexing**
   The idea of courses at three levels was proposed: tertiary, professional level; technician, para-professional level (in Australia such courses would be taught at Technical and Further Education Colleges); and short courses, including those for workers in other fields needing some knowledge of indexing techniques, such as genealogists, teachers, curators, and researchers.

4. **Indexing elements in existing courses**
   The representatives from tertiary and Technical and Further Education institutions indicated that many elements which could be used to ‘tailor-make’ indexing courses already exist.

At the end of the discussion two tasks were allocated: to devise a survey to investigate the market for indexers, and to investigate industry training schemes which might be used to support some forms of training at the technician and/or short courses level.

In summary, it seems that all the elements for making ‘indexing’ into the profession it should be now exist or are within our grasp. All that is lacking is some imagination—albeit there is little time for reflection in the lives of most indexers—and the courage to assume that we have a right to professional recognition and are prepared to accept its responsibilities. We can disregard any feelings that we may look foolish for being so high-falutin’ as to assume this right and responsibility. We can just devise strategies and get on with them.

John Simkin is a foundation member of the Australian Society of Indexers, a former President, and currently Chairman of the Panel of Assessors.

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**An educational role for the Australian Society of Indexers**

Cherryl Schauder

‘Indexing’ in its broadest sense is the labelling of information so that it can be retrieved at some future time. Information may be published or unpublished. Information is produced in an increasing number of formats—paper, audio-visual, microform, electronic, digitized, etc. Since the purpose of indexing is information retrieval, the information indexed needs to be divided into retrievable elements arranged in some self-evident order. These elements are commonly documents in a collection, citations in a bibliography, letters in a file or paragraphs in a book.

Indexing is a fundamental part of the work of many different professional groups, e.g. librarians, archivists, records managers, database indexers, etc. Indexing is interdisciplinary in that it is a fundamental part of the research process within any field of knowledge.

(My recent study of bibliographic database indexing found that, in England and the United States, indexers were predominantly subject specialists, rather than trained information or library professionals.)

The indexing process varies in levels of complexity but always requires considerable skill in the areas of subject
analysis and terminology control. Approaches in indexing will vary with the kind of information being indexed. Some kinds of records are almost self-indexed; e.g., client files in a registry may require no more than name indexing. However, skill in the often challenging task of formulating names in a consistent manner is still necessary, as is an understanding of the importance of cross-referencing, and of the need for filing rules. The problems involved in name indexing should not be underestimated.

The more complex kinds of indexing usually involve a subject-analysis process, and translation of subject concepts into a vocabulary that will suit the likely users of the index. This subject-analysis process has defied definition despite many attempts in the literature. It is agreed, however, that the process involves a good grasp of the subject matter and likely uses of the indexed information.

The tasks of choosing an appropriate indexing approach, selecting, or creating a suitable controlled vocabulary (thesaurus construction), and of implementing, maintaining and developing an index are all highly professional and complex tasks. In addition to the subject-analysis aspect, indexers need to understand and predict likely indexing problems, given the nature and quantity of the information to be indexed. An awareness of the extent to which computer software systems can assist or replace the human indexer, and possible pitfalls at the retrieval end, involve an understanding of both information retrieval theory and considerable computer literacy.

The extensive body of indexing theory can be seen to fall largely within the fields of librarianship and information science. From the late 19th century, concern by librarians to improve methods of document retrieval led to the development of theory and systems in classification, cataloguing and subject indexing, and this theory continued and continues to be developed with changing technologies. No other field has made such significant progress in the development of a body of theory and knowledge about different indexing approaches. The theory of indexing encompasses typologies in indexing approaches, such as pre- and post-coordinate indexing, controlled and uncontrolled vocabulary indexing, specific and broad indexing, etc. Research into different methods and approaches in indexing falls largely within the domains of librarianship and information science.

Recent years have seen the broadening of library courses to include work contexts outside libraries, such as registries, information centres and a range of database environments. We now speak of library/information courses which produce 'information professionals‘ rather than ‘librarians'. In identifying core skills which need to be taught in such courses, indexing theory and practice is commonly perceived to be of major importance.

A review of subject content of library/information curricula in Australia today would reveal that almost all subjects/elements in such courses are relevant to the practice or theory of indexing. Highly relevant subjects/elements are information retrieval theory, information technologies, cataloguing, classification, thesaurus indexing, thesaurus construction, database design and construction, and online searching.

Partially relevant subjects/elements are, for example, information sources and bibliography compilation, information provision, information contexts, personnel management, organizational behaviour, budget management and marketing of information services.

The main domain of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI) to date has been the area of back-of-the-book indexing. AusSI has played a major role in providing recognition of those who have proven skills in this area.

The term 'book' has encompassed a range of information formats and types, but it has most commonly implied a single published item, monographic or serial, with a collective title.

Librarians and database producers are concerned with the indexing of large collections of published items. Records managers and archivists index collections of unpublished information. The librarian is concerned to standardize, e.g. variations of the same name in a large collection, and has developed a range of cataloguing tools to facilitate this.

The back-of-the-book indexer, however, is concerned with the internal consistency of the index, creating a vocabulary to suit the item in hand and the likely user approaches. Helpful tools may be available rules for formulating names and for filing, but essentially, each index requires an original approach.

These distinctions are, of course, useful only to the extent that they help to answer the question, ‘What is the focus of AusSI?’. In reality, the nature of the indexing tasks of different information professionals are converging; particularly with the use, by all groups, of increasingly sophisticated software packages.

Pure indexing degrees or graduate diplomas, specializing in a range of indexing approaches and technologies, would probably not attract sufficient interest in today's economic climate because employment prospects in the field of indexing are still fairly limited.

Nevertheless, AusSI could consider playing a leading educational role by outlining the core elements required in, for example, a one-semester, four-hours-per-week indexing course, and by providing accreditation for such a course under certain circumstances. Such a course could emphasize deep indexing of discrete items, such as back-of-the-book indexing, but could also include indexing theory and indexing technologies. The Society could stipulate the necessary backgrounds of personnel teaching such courses and could adopt a role in registering personnel who apply to be AusSI educators.

Established departments in educational institutions with an interest in teaching such a course as an elective subject within a degree or graduate diploma could apply to AusSI for formal accreditation. This would involve AusSI examining the staffing and course content of particular programmes, and, if the core elements were covered and staff...
had appropriate backgrounds, the one-semester course would receive AusSI accreditation.

The kinds of organizations which would be interested in offering such courses are those currently involved in offering programmes in areas such as library/archive/publishing/editing/records management/information systems education. The course could include practical indexing skills, computer software, liaison with the publishing industry and managerial aspects. Assessment in the subject could consist of the compilation of an index at a suitable level of complexity. Students who had successfully undertaken an AusSI-recognized course would then receive recognition by AusSI.

Such courses could be offered as single subjects, also, to individuals with a wide range of experience and backgrounds who wished to receive AusSI accreditation. Successful completion of the course would mean that the individual had produced one index of a satisfactory standard. Courses offered as single subjects would need to be as self-contained as possible, not building much on prior knowledge and skills.

The offering of such courses need in no way alter existing methods of registration, with AusSI continuing to recognize suitable indexing experience as one path to obtaining such recognition.

If AusSI should take on such an educational role, there would be much hard work ahead for the Society, with an ever-increasing responsibility to develop and expand its role in nurturing, encouraging and supporting indexers in their work.

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Comments by John Simkin

These two papers contain some apparent agreements and differences, but essentially the two views can be seen to complement each other.

Cherryl and I have both noted that the word ‘indexing’ is open to different levels of interpretation. We have used it sometimes to mean the whole professional area involving the organization of knowledge for preservation and retrieval, at others to mean the core technical skill involved. Generally Cherryl has used it in the second sense and I in the first; neither has been quite consistent. Cherryl has used the term ‘information profession’ for something approximating the broader definition.

Cherryl pays tribute to the tradition of librarianship as having been most active in developing the theoretical base for indexing. This is significant as more recently this tradition has been redefined as ‘information studies’ covering a number of professional areas—librarianship, archives, records management, indexing.

The world of publishing and editing could have developed the tradition which would have included the theoretical base for indexing, but did not. Thus, courses designed to produce professional editors and publishers have not proved useful for us except as a source of ‘enrichment’ or parallel studies.

‘Information studies’ courses are still, in most cases, influenced by their origins and tend to serve more effectively the needs of libraries than of the other professions. However, the indexing base is so strong that the process of orienting studies to the needs of indexers (or of archivists and records managers) is relatively easy.

Cherryl and I describe the process rather differently. I have described the end result with courses of study and professional recognition fully established; Cherryl has proposed what could be used as the first step in the hope that this might be accomplished more quickly. In either case there is a considerable amount of work for the existing professional bodies, because, even with Cherryl’s first step or ‘bridging’ proposal, we must be clear as to where our first step is leading or what we are ‘bridging’ to.

At this stage it is irrelevant whether there is an articulated demand for ‘tailor-made’ professional indexing courses. The profession of indexing exists. The demand for the services of indexers is limited by the lack of recognition of what the profession exists to provide. To plot a clear study route into this profession, a process will be needed involving discussion, definition, articulation, documentation and promotion. I believe that through this process the profession of indexing will gain enhanced recognition and greater opportunities for employment.

It is the job of the existing professional bodies intentionally to produce professional indexers. The steps in doing this are:

1. to define the professional indexer as regards the qualities, qualifications and range of knowledge required, and establish a body of ‘Foundation Fellows’ from those whose experience and/or contribution clearly entitles them to this status;
2. to negotiate with educational institutions to create a clear path to becoming a professional indexer through study;
3. to grant status to those meeting these criteria, and promote this professional status as something worth attaining.

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