Editorial

This issue of Education for Information is devoted to a single theme: the role of undergraduate (in contrast to graduate) programmes in library and information studies (LIS). The general pattern in higher education is to begin the study of a discipline at the undergraduate level. Graduate programmes are then available for those students who wish to pursue that discipline further, normally in master's and/or doctoral programmes whose degrees are awarded in part or in whole by the completion of a thesis or dissertation.

LIS has rarely followed this pattern. In some countries, LIS can be studied only at the undergraduate level, with no opportunities for graduate-level study. In other countries, the first-level qualification is at the master's level, with no undergraduate programmes being offered. Yet another model is the provision of both undergraduate-level and master's-level programmes, but with both having equal status in the eyes of the professional LIS associations and (at least theoretically) for employers. As a consequence, the holder of an undergraduate LIS qualification typically cannot progress to a master's degree because in practice there is considerable overlap in coverage between the two types of programme.

This anomalous state of affairs has frequently drawn forth debate. In the United Kingdom, for example, undergraduate programs have long been offered by most LIS schools, but the relative merits of their graduates compared with the LIS master's (or in earlier times post-graduate diploma) graduates from the same institutions has been the subject of controversy. In the United States, in contrast, graduate programmes have long dominated the LIS educational scene, only to be challenged in recent years by the emergence of several undergraduate programmes. Here there is discussion about the availability of distinct employment niches for these different types of graduates, and concern that undergraduate qualifications may damage the prestige of graduate ones. Furthermore, would LIS as an area of study have enough academic substance to necessitate two consecutive (rather than parallel) levels of study (bachelor's and master's) and still remain relevant to employers?

This debate is linked to the fact that most LIS programmes can be classed as professional rather than academic – they are producing a product intended for a specific employment market. Does this market prefer to have entrants with an undergraduate qualification in an academic subject followed by a LIS graduate qualification, or would an entrant with a LIS undergraduate qualification be able to do the job just as well (and presumably cheaper because of being younger and having spent less time in full-time education)?

Undergraduate LIS programmes in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the

United States are the focus of this Issue. Several specific undergraduate programmes are presented by authors to provide a flavour of their objectives, content and teaching approach. In contrast, other articles offer an overview of the history and current state of undergraduate programmes in a particular country.

LIS education in many respects can be seen as standing at the crossroads, realising that it must quickly choose a route if it is not to be left stranded in the middle of nowhere. The difficulty is in deciding on the route to follow, given the fact that the available maps are incomplete and not necessarily reliable. Furthermore, is there only one correct road to take, or can different travellers select different directions and yet still reach the final destination – survival? In the ensuing debates, the role of under-graduate programmes has an important place. It seems that their place in many countries as the poor relation of graduate programmes may be changing – a change not entirely removed from the financial advantages perceived in many universities for large undergraduate classes compared with more labour-intensive graduate teaching and supervision.

Andrew Large