

Online learning in LIS in a Scottish university

10:00-12:00, Tuesday, 14 February 2017

In the library of the Western International School of Shanghai

Interviewee: Ms. Fiona Collins (Head librarian, Western International School of Shanghai)

Interviewer: Yuriko Nakamura (Associate professor, Rikkyo University)

(YN) What was your career development experience until now?

(FC) Started out as a Primary librarian in a British curriculum school in Hong Kong which changed to becoming an IB curriculum school. After 18 months moved to a full IB K-12 school. One year in Shanghai at another British curriculum school then moved to WISS in August 2009. Whole school librarian then Head Librarian, built up a team of 5 librarians and assistants. Currently working predominantly with Secondary. The other librarian is also from the UK, and she is working with younger children.

To me, if the school is an IB school or not has been influenced me in my decision when I moved to another school. IB schools give the students more opportunities for situation-based learning. It's a way of learning, inquiry-based and very practical, letting the students learn concepts and skills. It's also an idea, that learning never stops. Reference from the students are not like in the traditional schools. I had a chance to know about the IB school when I sent my two children to this type of school in Shanghai and Hong Kong and I really loved it.

I finished my online learning in LIS while I was in Hong Kong. I became a member of ALESS, the Association of Librarians in English Speaking Schools in Hong Kong. The group inspired me a lot, actually I am still a member of the association, I decided to organize a similar group of school librarians in international schools in Shanghai. The membership is about 40 people, comparing to the sister groups in HK and Beijing, they probably have about 80 people, ours is small, but active. We have a meeting every month. We invite authors, and lecturers and so on.

(YN) Why did you study through the online course offered by Robert Gordon University?

(FC) Accredited by the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). Living in Asia, option to study online without having to attend face to face sessions. Understand the UK system of study, credits etc. I checked American online programs but I thought studying in the UK education system would be better in case going back to the UK in the future. I could imagine the tuitions of American universities are more expensive than those in the UK, but I didn't check it then. Although I was born in Aberdeen, I was there only for a year, and had never been back there until the last year. I took my students there in 2016, but it was just a coincidence. My education background is in textiles, but I have come so far to this field!

(YN) What motivated you to start studying through the online course?

(FC) I sent my children to an international school in Shanghai first in 2002, and started to volunteer in the school library. I had opportunities to visit the WISS library and thought it was wonderful. I decided to start studying LIS. I had two young children and was not working full time. The option of studying online fit my studies around the rest of my life.

(YN) When did you start and finish the course?

(FC) 2 years, from September 2004 to June 2006.

(YN) How did your study progress? What courses did you take in each semester? Month and year, the title and professor in charge of each class, if possible.

(FC) I took the following courses. All the courses, except “Fieldwork Placement” which lasted 9 weeks were, I think more like individual learning, like correspondence education.

- Technical Services
- Information Management: Policy Processes and Use
- Resource Management
- Subject Specification
- Reference and Enquiry Services
- Research Methods

This was the final module of the program. But I couldn’t find a topic I was really interested in, to be honest, I can’t even recall the topic. This is one of the reasons why I decided not to go forward for the master’s degree. I received a Post-Graduate Diploma and left the program.

- Fieldwork Placement

I volunteered for 2 years in HK and 9 weeks of the work was reported to the university for this credit.

- Information Studies

(YN) Are any classes or events very memorable?

(FC) “Reference and Enquiry Service” and the “Fieldwork Placement” were the most interesting.

(YN) Are you satisfied with the education as a whole?

(FC) Yes, it took a little while to get used to but it was a very flexible way to learn. I have since gone on to more online courses. In 2012, I got a Post-graduate Diploma in Education, and in 2010, I got a certificate for TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). I haven’t felt I needed a Master’s degree in LIS so far. Rather, I would like to study more about Education.

(YN) How was the support for online students? For example, did you have a mentor and how did he/her support you?

(FC) Online forums are a very useful way to maintain contact with our people on the course. At the first stage of the classes, all students introduced themselves in the forums, but I don't recall most of the classmates now. I've met a classmate during my study, and I have kept in touch with her, but she is the only one I remember. I don't think it's a big issue. Each module had a tutor. Some were more responsive than others.

(YN) How do you think about online education now? Good points, and bad points if any or challenges?

(FC) Very flexible way to study, especially if you have a full time job. Whilst you miss the opportunity for face to face contact and networking, it can be easier to manage the demands of coursework with other commitments. You can choose to work when you feel most able both mentally and physically rather than having to attend classes. Time management can be a challenge as you set the pace and time that you work and sometimes other things can take priority. Young people, like teens might find more difficulties because they find it hard to be focused or their level of discipline is not enough. For the people who know this opportunity of studying will change their future, learning online wouldn't be too difficult.

(YN) Working as the head librarian, what kind of knowledges and skills or which areas of study you learned through the online education are useful?

(FC) The "Reference and Enquiry Services" module prepared me for supporting students in schools to enhance their information literacy skills. However, things have moved so fast over the last 10 years that those modules would not be so relevant now. The modules have been updated to reflect this.

Now I am focusing more on providing teacher training in the school. I offer, 3 or 4 sessions every year, for teachers in the library. Things like orientation to the library, expectations for students, academic honesty, databases.

(YN) Studying through the online education offered by a university in UK, do you see any special challenges in a school in China?

(FC) Internet speed, access to certain sites.

All the students of WISS, in the 10th grade, they have to finish an individual project and they have to write a report of 3,500 words. Before the graduation, they have to write a 4,000 word Extended Essay. For these requirements, the students need to conduct their own research. Here, we only have about 30,000 books all together except textbooks in the storage room. Secondary school students tend to start their research on the Internet. We have some difficulties in getting books. In Hong Kong, it's not a big problem. They also have a good public library system. But here in Shanghai, it's very expensive for foreign people to use the public libraries, and we don't have any connection with universities in Shanghai. We only have a networking among international schools in this area. So, the books are more for reading, for reading promotion. Parents sometimes help us to build a good collection

of their languages, such as Japanese.

(YN) What do you think about the current status of the LIS education?

(FC) There are many opportunities for LIS education at the moment. Qualified librarians who recognize the challenges that students have negotiating the digital world are more in demand than ever. There are many more online courses like Coursera and FutureLearn as well as accredited courses like the one at the Robert Gordon's University. Many schools are also now looking for teacher librarians like the US/Australian systems. This could be an option for future LIS courses in the UK.