



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Information School.

A spirit of friendly innovation

Celebrating 50 years of library and information science education at the University of Sheffield

Melanie T. Benson and Peter Willett take a look back over past achievements during the first 50 years of library and information science education at the University of Sheffield.

IN 1960, the Library Association approached the University of Sheffield with the idea of establishing what became the Postgraduate School of Librarianship. The proposal was enthusiastically received, and the university provided funding to improve the stock of literature on librarianship as well as to enable the purchase of a large, detached Victorian town-house to accommodate the school and to recruit four new staff.

The first of these was Wilfred Saunders, who took up the directorship of the new school in April 1963. Three points proved to be of particular long-term importance in his planning. First, the need to attract graduates with a first degree in science or technology, in addition to the humanities graduates who had traditionally chosen librarianship as a career. Second, the need to develop a programme of funded and doctoral research comparable to that undertaken by other departments within the university – a decidedly novel idea at a time when there was little academic research in the UK in library and information science (LIS). Third, the need to take account in the teaching of the increasing use of computers in university libraries, first in the USA and then in the UK.

First students

The first students joined the new school in September 1964, working towards a Diploma in Librarianship. With only 23 students in the first cohort, the ratio of staff to students was highly favourable and enabled considerable contact time, giving a close-knit, almost family-like character to the school. The popularity of the science-based part of the school's teaching soon led, in 1967, to a change of name to the Postgraduate School of Librarianship and Information Science. In the following year, at the university's request, the Diploma course was upgraded to a taught Master's degree by the addition of a dissertation to be undertaken during the summer months at the end of the academic year. The courses proved extremely popular, and by 1973 the school had educated some 300 graduates, one third of whom had followed the specialised scientific information programmes. With the success of this specialisation in mind, the school introduced a new MA in Information Studies (Social Sciences), which was developed with funding from the

Nuffield Foundation to remedy a perceived lack of capable social science and law graduates in the LIS professions. By the end of the 1970s, the three programmes were attracting an annual intake of about 60 students.

Moving on

A large-scale review of all of the taught Master's programmes in 1980 resulted in some fundamental changes in both structure and content; the abolition of formal examinations; and a further change of name to the Department of Information Studies in 1981. Saunders retired in the following year, and was succeeded as head of department by Tom Wilson, who was to lead the department very successfully for no less than 15 years. During his tenure, several major changes took place, perhaps most importantly the development of teaching and research in information management. This was undertaken to reflect a growing need, in both the public and private sectors, for information professionals who were not only technologically proficient, but also aware of the swiftly evolving needs of users and how these could be met through technology and information resources. The new focus provided the impetus, in 1993, for a collaboration with the university's Department of Management and Economic Studies (now the Management School) to commence undergraduate teaching with dual honours degrees in Accounting and Financial Management/Information Management, and Business Studies/Information Management.



Initial premises at 16 Claremont Crescent.
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New premises

The steady growth in student numbers, and in academic, administrative and research staff, meant that the department was by now housed in not one but six Victorian buildings that were totally unsuited to an increasingly IT-focused department. There was hence a move in 1992 to its current premises in Regent Court, which provided brand-new, purpose-built teaching areas and laboratories. That year also saw the merger of the MSc in Information Science and the MSc in Information Studies (Social Sciences) into the current MSc in Information Management. In 1994-95, the department ran an MSc course on Electronic Information Management for students from around Europe, in 1995 introduced new MSc courses in Health Information Management (jointly with the School of Health and Related Research – SchARR – and the School of Nursing) and Textual Computing (jointly with the Department of Computer Science), and in 1997 an MSc in Information Systems (again in collaboration with Computer Science).

Research focus

In addition to the move to Regent Court and the merger of the two MSc programmes, 1992 also saw the announcement of the results of the Research Assessment Exercise (or RAE), a review of the quality of the research carried out by all UK university departments. There had been two previous such exercises, in 1986 and 1989 – however that in 1992 was far more detailed and had, for the first time, a review panel focusing specifically on research in LIS. Saunders had highlighted the need for an active research focus right from the very start, and the department was hence very well placed when formal, sector-wide evaluations of research quality commenced. It received the highest ranking of all the LIS departments in RAE 1992, and this also proved to be the case in the subsequent exercises in 1996, 2001 and 2008 – a notable achievement and one that was unique within the University of Sheffield.

Leadership

When Wilson retired as head in 1997, he and Saunders had together directed the department for no less than 34 years, a remarkable achievement and one that had resulted in the department being increasingly recognised as a world leader in LIS education and research. With the university's adoption of fixed terms of office, the leadership has



Article authors Peter Willett and Melanie Benson at Regent Court. Photo © Peter A Bath

changed more rapidly since then, with the heads being successively Peter Willett, Micheline Beaulieu, Willett again, Sheila Corral, Phillipa Levy, and, currently, Val Gillet.

There has been a marked broadening of the course portfolio, with, for example, the introduction of a single honours BSc in Information Management; a distance-learning MSc in Health Informatics (with SchARR); and an MSc in Information Systems Management (with the Management School). In 2009, the department was invited to become the first UK member of the iSchools consortium, a group comprising leading educational institutions throughout the world with a strong commitment to the information field in general and to research in information in particular. Following this, the decision was taken to change the name once again, this time to become the Information School, or as it is commonly called, the iSchool. Then, last year saw the completion of the most extensive alterations to the fabric of the school since its move into Regent Court with a new Digital Media Suite for teaching and research; a new iLab facility to support work in human-computer interaction and information behaviour; new groupwork and interview rooms; and a complete overhaul of the school's largest computer laboratory.

Spirit of friendly innovation

There are now 26 academic staff, around 70 PhD students, and approximately 300 taught undergraduate and postgraduate students – a far cry from the complement of four staff and 23 postgraduate students when the school welcomed its first cohort. However, it is to be hoped that the spirit of friendly innovation that has characterised the school's first 50 years will enable it to grow and to flourish still further as the world moves into an increasingly digitised, information-rich future.

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