

This is the last issue I am producing, since I am standing down from the editorship of LIRN, and have also returned to the British Library (Business Information Service), my secondment to the Library and Information Commission having come to an end. The new editor will be John Sumsion, formerly of the Library and Information Statistics Unit at the University of Loughborough. I am pleased to have a Guest Editorial from Professor Tom Wilson in my last solo issue. Having been Head of Sheffield's Department of Information Studies for 15 years, Tom has now become Research Professor in Information Management, relinquishing the former position to Peter Willett, best known for his work in information retrieval.

Roslyn Cotton
Editor

Guest Editorial

The Humanities Research Board and the future of studentships and bursaries

Most people in the field will be aware that, until this year, the bursaries and studentships for courses in information management, librarianship, and archives management were controlled and distributed by the Department for Education and Employment Awards Branch. Generations of students and researchers have had their grants from, successively, the DES, the DfE, and the DfEE.

All that is now changing: last year, the DfEE took the decision to transfer all of its remaining studentships and bursaries (which cover a number of fields other than library and information management) to the Humanities Research Board (HRB) of the British Academy.

This move was not greeted with enthusiasm, initially: the British Library R & D Department (as it was at the time) was in competition for the awards, but the DfEE took the view that it wanted to transfer all awards to a single agency, rather than splitting them across two. In the course of the debate, the departments in membership of BAILER, lobbied to support the BLRDD's case, feeling that their interests and concerns would be best understood by an agency with a long history of supporting research in the field.

The Departments and Schools in the field were concerned that courses and research in the Departments include very little that can be regarded as humanities research or teaching and that the transfer of the awards to the HRB would merely confirm the HEFC view that the field can be funded as a "classroom-based" subject. The transfer to the HRB was also seen as introducing a period of uncertainty over the future of the awards and over the ways in which they may be allocated.

However, we now have some information on how the HRB may deal with the transfer, since Professor John Laver, Chair of the HRB, met the Heads of Departments and Schools (HoDS) Committee of BAILER in February and provided a great deal of background information and expressed a willingness to enter into a full dialogue with Committee through the mechanisms the Board has in place for other fields.

For the present year (ie. the awards allocated for courses beginning in September 1997) there would be no change in procedures: the number of awards would remain the same and they would be allocated in the same way as in previous years. However, although the total sum available for the awards would be ring-fenced for three years, the Board will wish to review during that period the ways in which the awards are allocated, as well as the rates of grants to students and the ways in

which those rates are assessed. As to the allocation of awards, one possibility would be to introduce an element of competition between students, but even if a system of quotas was to be retained, the Board would wish to introduce an element of peer review into the allocation process. Before introducing any changes, however, the Board would wish to consult fully with the departments involved.

Professor Laver explained that the Board would appoint a new member to take responsibility for this new area; and that he or she would convene a new panel, which would assess applications for the small number of research studentships in information science, as well as advising generally on the development of policy and procedures. The panel would interact with all stakeholders in the field, including the professional bodies that currently accredit courses, and other professional groups as well as with academic institutions. He noted that Board members generally had responsibility for five to ten different institutions with which they were expected to liaise on all matters affecting the Board's activities.

Professor Laver stated his belief that the field was one which must have a significant influence in the information society and he envisaged the Board seeking additional resources, with the support of the community, for both course studentships and research awards. At the end of the three year ring-fenced period the whole situation would need to be reviewed, but this did not mean an inevitable decline in resources for the field. Indeed, he remarked that one of his main aims would be to seek to ensure that this field also had funds for advanced research under the Board's umbrella, in the same way as existing subject areas under its control.

In all, the meeting gave the HoDS Committee cause for cautious optimism, since it appears that any change in the existing pattern of awards will be phased and, hence, allow institutions time to develop relevant strategies, and that Professor Laver himself is fully aware of the social significance of information management and librarianship and is willing to put considerable effort into ensuring that the transfer will ultimately be perceived as successful and worthwhile.

It is worth noting (for those with interests in the technological aspects of the field) that Professor Laver's own research area is in phonetics and speech technology and he has, therefore, a great deal of sympathy with our view of information studies as, increasingly, a field of applied computing. It may well be that the acquisition of the awards by the HRB will provide it with further ammunition for arguing that the humanities in general are fields in which research is increasingly computationally based.

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