

STATUTORY STATUS

IS IT THE SAVIOUR?

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Those that are brave enough to pull their heads out of the sand will admit that the library and information services profession is in distress. The closing down of library schools, the appointment of unqualified staff to provide information services and to engage communities in critical issues such as information literacy, the 'greying' of the profession and the lack of holistic coordination of the profession, all contribute to this distress. Furthermore, the library and information services (LIS) sector by its very nature is fragmented in terms of the clientele that it serves. Compounding this fragmentation is the different categorisation of staff that it employs.

These fragmentations are exacerbated by the diversity in terms of representation of staff. There are a number of trade unions and staff associations that represent the interests of the workers within the sector. The professional interests of the sector are represented by the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). However, LIASA is a voluntary organisation and its current low membership raises questions about its representivity of the LIS sector and allied professions. Despite having one of the most progressive constitutions for a professional association within the sector, LIASA cannot, and does not claim to represent and/or protect the views, functionalities, interests and such of all within the sector.

LIASA has acknowledged and debated the issues that are contributing to the distress of the profession. Given this lack of comprehensive representation, its fragmentation, continuous erosion of the credibility of the profession and personnel that work within the sector and other negative factors, it becomes abundantly evident that the sector is in need of reform or revitalisation.

The LIASA Executive is of the view that a statutory body representing the LIS profession as a whole will set standards which would ignite a positive growth and development path for the profession. It is anticipated that this upward movement will be beneficial to the profession and the country as a whole, because information, which is the business of libraries, is essential for all forms of development. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that

statutory status is not only a significant issue for the profession, it is in fact a national imperative.

The purpose of seeking statutory status is to acquire a status that is protected by the laws of the country. The intention is to create a statutory body that will develop from new legislation that is specific to the discipline. There are already a number of statutory bodies representing other different employment sectors and the communities that they serve. The objectives of these statutory bodies carry common principles which include:

- ❖ promoting the specific discipline
- ❖ regulating the entrance of personnel into the specific sector
- ❖ determining standards of professional education and training
- ❖ setting and maintaining excellent standards of ethical and professional practice.

Studies conducted reveal that statutory status will ensure consistency and equity within the sector which will have a positive domino effect towards a more focused profession. It is the view of the LIASA Executive that a focused profession would increase credibility and command greater respect for the profession, for those that work within it as well as for the services that it provides. Enhanced credibility will naturally lead to an increase in prestige of the profession and the net effect of that would be the positive growth of the profession.

It must be noted that LIASA will NOT be that statutory body. The statutory body will be over-arching; all personnel within the LIS sector will be members of this body. Given the fact that this statutory body will be for the wider LIS community, it is important to solicit the views of all within the LIS profession. However, such an exercise will be too time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, a sample population from all nine provinces will be drawn and surveyed. The results of the survey will determine the way forward. In the event of the results being positive, that is, there is support for the formation of a statutory body, the process of enacting a relevant legislation will be initiated.

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