It’s never too late to qualify

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I started working in school libraries rather late in life after a career break of 12 years to be a full-time mother to my two children. My previous experience was in PA and office management so I already possessed the solid organisational skills that I could utilise to manage a department. In essence, that is all I had to offer the library world – the rest came from day-to-day experiences, learning many new skills ‘on the job’ and facing unusual challenges presented in the most unique way by a multitude of personalities from the cohort we all know as pupils and students! In my first school post, my line manager immediately enrolled me on to a part-time course in the management of secondary school libraries with Somerset College of Arts and Technology, Taunton. This was undertaken alongside the NVQ Level 3 in information and library services and was definitely ‘frying pan into the fire’ as far as a learning curve could be described.

Throughout the two courses and then the subsequent years that followed, my rock and mainstay was the online network of school librarians (SLN). This group still exists today and I have learned so much during all the years of my membership. Everyone supports each other through mutual highs and lows, offering advice and sharing good practice. For instance, if you needed a book of poetry anthologies that contained a poem on a specific genre or an answer to a rather obscure question, then someone within the group would be packing and posting the book off to you and another or indeed, many others, would have the answer to that obscure question!

As time went along, I felt uneasy about my professional progress. I had now gained so much knowledge and experience but I felt the need to pursue something greater. I had been told about the distance learning programme in Information and Library Studies with Aberystwyth University and, after initial enquiries, I discovered that this course was particularly geared to people like me – those who had been working in libraries for a certain amount of years and who held the required qualifications. All it needed was for me to apply …

Students are expected to take between 3–5 years to complete the course and to attend three compulsory study schools. However, after my first year of studies I was experiencing difficulties with personal circumstances and
needed to take time out. The Department of Information Studies at Aberystwyth were very supportive and understanding and allowed me ‘two years out’. When I finally returned to study mode, there was no looking back. I would like to say at this point that I am full of admiration for those who complete the distance learning programme within three years as we all have work and family commitments, with many of the students having responsibility for small children or family members who need their care and attention.

I can highly recommend this distance learning programme. All students have access to the university’s online journals to support the wider reading required in the modules and core texts are available from their specialist library on campus – all you need to do is e-mail the library with your requests and the items arrive in the post a few days later. CILIP played an important part in my studies, with the provision of access to online journals to their members, and their publication, ‘The CILIP Guidelines for Secondary School Libraries’¹ was an invaluable reference tool and remains so to this day.

The modules on the distance learning degree course cover many aspects that help you to grow in the library environment. Here are some examples:

- A module in organisational management, which introduces you to both project management and people management. The exam for this module is undertaken at final study school (Dissertation School) and the assignment for this module is the writing of a business plan
- An optional school libraries module
- Marketing of services (which I had originally assumed was how to promote your service). How wrong was I – I discovered a whole new aspect of how to successfully provide a service and how important it was to listen to the customer. As marketing tells us, it is all about customer needs and providing a reliable service to ensure customer satisfaction.
- Information literacy (as we all know, this equips students with the knowledge of how to access and use information and teaches the transferable skills that that will help them with their information-seeking in further and higher education, the workplace and for lifelong learning).

So, as you can see, the course provides a well-balanced programme of study. Distance Learning students sit an exam at the second and third school after studying a particular module for each. Sitting an exam after so many years was quite daunting but there is plenty of advice on revision techniques available on the online Conference for Aberystwyth students. Those of you who have attended these study schools will have fond memories of the wonderful Marianne Taylor who co-ordinates the schools and tends to our every needs.

I finally graduated in July this year and, as I had a distinctive birthday two months earlier, turning 60 in May, it was my aim to celebrate both occasions together. What made it more special was being awarded a First Class Degree with Honours of which I am extremely proud. However, I am still hungry for more professional development so I have registered for Chartership with CILIP and hope to complete my Portfolio within one year.

At this point I should mention that if you do not have an SLG/YLG locally, then why not set up a local librarians’ network. Several years ago, Wiltshire County Council set up a Forum for Wiltshire Secondary School Librarians which has grown from strength to strength. We now run the Forum between us and host our meetings in our respective libraries, taking it in turns whenever convenient. We share good practice, offer advice, discuss our individual experiences and have since established links with our Community Librarian and Young People’s Librarian at County level.

So, back to the here and now. Whilst currently in the throes of writing up my Personal Professional Development Plan for Chartership, gathering relevant evidence and documents for the Portfolio and working my way through the PKSB (and having a go at re-writing my Information Literacy programme for our new Year 7 intake in September), I realise this is going to be another busy summer of planning, research and multi-tasking. I know I shall find something else that needs to be written about but I have come to realise that this is how I perform at my best – when under pressure – self-induced and totally self-absorbed!

Where will I be in five to ten years from now? Hopefully, I shall be happily fitting my career around the activities that the path of life has beckoned me to become involved with, and that I can continue this with all passion and commitment and to be the all-rounder that I have always strived to be.
Acknowledgments and grateful thanks:
The key people that feature in my career path and to whom I owe a great debt

Mary Crosland – retired Deputy Headmistress who first enrolled me on those important library management courses back in the late 90s and for her continued guidance and support over the ensuing years.

Elizabeth Bentley
School Librarian and Moderator of the School Librarians’ Network, since 1997. Elizabeth works tirelessly to moderate the growing number of members and the hundreds of postings sent to the group on a weekly basis which, by the way, she does in her own time and on a voluntary basis.

Barbara Band
How can I sum up Barbara? Energetic, committed and passionate librarian, and leader of the march and Lobby of Parliament in October 2012 when school librarians, authors, illustrators, friends and family met in Embankment Gardens on a lovely Autumn day to march proudly as a group to Parliament and to Lobby our MPs. The cause? For the Government to make school libraries, managed by qualified librarians, a statutory requirement. (You may have encountered school librarians sporting the T-shirt at various conferences in the past few months!)

Barbara is also my Mentor as I proceed through the Chartership process with CILIP and I am grateful for the support she is giving me.

Marianne Taylor
Learning Development Officer, The Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University, and the Undergraduate Team and Study School coordinator. Marianne works relentlessly behind the scenes to ensure we have the most current module; we have our study school timetables; we have past exam papers with which to revise; we are comfortable with the mode of study we have chosen and that we are staying on task. If not, then she has a wealth of advice ready to impart.

My son and daughter
Both of whom I am extremely proud and who have supported me throughout the duration of my studies with their gentle encouragement and continued confidence that I could complete the degree course.

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Biography

I am the Learning Resources Manager at The John of Gaunt School, Trowbridge, in the picturesque county of Wiltshire. The school is a co-educational community academy with approximately 1200 students on roll in Years 7 to 13 (ages 11-18). I have managed school libraries for 17 years and find the role very rewarding, varied and sometimes quite demanding but never dull! In my first school library post, I managed the library at Beechen Cliff School in Bath (my home town) for just over 9 years and found the change from an all-boys school to co-educational quite different but always interesting. It was during this changeover that I decided I wanted to qualify so I enrolled on to the Distance Learning Degree Programme with Aberystwyth University - I finally graduated this summer with the BSc Econ (Hons) in Information and Library Studies and was awarded a First Class with Honours.