

# Librarians Need Global Credentials | Backtalk

by Kenneth D. "Woody" Evans

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I worked at **Zayed University (ZU)** in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), from 2011 to 2014. I entered that institution as a reference and instruction librarian but also served as campus librarian for a semester. The latter role included managing the day-to-day affairs of the Dubai campus library while a colleague managed the Abu Dhabi campus, plus the responsibility to make systemwide director-level decisions about library policy and materials budgets. ZU was going through shaky times, and there was significant turnover.



We would receive dozens of applications for any open jobs—from part-time paraprofessionals to professional librarian and administrator positions. Many applicants weren't qualified. A number of others were good, and some were very good. Some were experienced librarians with professional degrees from respected universities in India or Pakistan, for example. Yet ZU had modeled itself so closely on Western universities that it had created for itself a serious obstacle: it only accepted librarians with degrees from programs accredited by the American Library Association (ALA), the Canadian Library Association (CLA), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP, the UK's accrediting body), or the Australian Library and Information Association.

This was intended to help with ZU's international reputation and "respectability." The effect was to prevent us from hiring great librarians from our neighbors in the region, while we sometimes brought on less experienced or less talented librarians from the West simply because they were from the West.

This problem is not limited to the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, or Saudi Arabia. Have you ever sat on a hiring committee that passed over Indian candidates too quickly for similar reasons (visa and green card issues aside)? Many of us will be able to relate to this and to the feeling that our institutions should do more to make room for foreign librarians. We all know we should bear diversity in mind when hiring, and how much more of an advocate for diversity can one be than to give a fair shake to, for example, a qualified Sikh woman from a Muslim city in a majority Hindu country who speaks three languages fluently and two passably well, codes in six programming languages, and has maintained collections at her college library with limited resources for seven years?

## AN INTEROPERABLE DIPLOMA

Whatever the view of our individual institutions, the root of this problem is probably our collective lack of international accreditation.

Until there is a body to take responsibility for reviewing LIS programs globally and granting the strong ones accreditation, a large number of librarians will be banned de facto from participating in our increasingly mobile information age economy. Having been a sometimes struggling expat myself (I lived in the UK and in Taiwan before Texas and the UAE), I know a little about trying to find work abroad; it can be a hell of a lot harder than it was for me, especially if you're brown-skinned and English isn't your first language. An international standard for accreditation for LIS degrees would go a long way toward fixing this for librarians in the eastern and southern hemispheres who want a fair shot at jobs in the northern and western hemispheres and in the complex, frustrating, bewildering, and lucrative Middle East.

Others are aware of this problem and are beginning to discuss it. Keren Dali and Juris Dilevko's 2009 article, "The Evaluation of International Credentials and the Hiring of Internationally Trained Librarians in Canadian Academic and Public Libraries," surveys attitudes toward international credentialing and hiring. Also, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) formed the working group LIS Education in Developing Countries, tasked with "design[ing] policy and procedures for assessment and accreditation/certification." Awareness is there, at least in small pockets.

## TURN UP THE VOLUME

What can we do in our state library associations, or within ALA, Librarians Without Borders, or IFLA to press forward for all members of our profession? Or perhaps it's the other way around: Should SLIS departments abroad be making the move toward acquiring Western accreditation? I'm writing this as a plea to librarians anywhere and everywhere to look for solutions.

An international standard of credentialing would have helped those experienced candidates applying for librarian jobs at ZU, but it wouldn't have solved all their problems. The UAE suffers from entrenched racism and classism, and a gold star on your diploma doesn't make those attitudes go away. However, it would be a start. For institutions such as ZU that seek to model themselves on Western higher ed values (not to mention the many Western university franchises that have set up shop in Doha, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi), a fairer and more standard global accreditation system would demonstrate the democratic information age values of our open, pluralist societies.

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*Kenneth D. "Woody" Evans is a Reference Librarian, Texas Woman's University, Denton. We welcome opinion pieces for BackTalk. Please send them to [mschwartz@mediasourceinc.com](mailto:mschwartz@mediasourceinc.com)*

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