The feasibility of unionising LIS workers :
a case study of the tertiary education sector in South Africa

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This article reports on the findings of a study that investigated the feasibility of unionizing LIS workers with special reference to the tertiary education sector in South Africa. The primary objectives of the study were to investigate the need for an organisation to address the industrial concerns of LIS employees and to investigate the organization most capable of addressing both the industrial and professional concerns of the sector. The majority of the respondents expressed the view that there is a need for an organisation to address the industrial issues of the LIS sector. The findings also reveal that there is substantial support for the professional association, as opposed to a generic trade union, to address the industrial and professional issues of the LIS sector.

1 Introduction

Historically, in most countries, there has been hostile legal reaction to trade unions, their aims and methods. Some countries had legislation banning trade unions or restricting their activities. In others, judges applied or adapted existing principles to discourage trade unionism. This hostile attitude towards trade unions began to dwindle as countries moved towards accepting unionism as an important element of a democratic society. Laws were passed permitting trade unions to exist. Trade unionism, collective bargaining, strikes and other forms of industrial action became an integral part of the democracy package (Basson *et al.*1998: 3).

South Africa held its first democratic elections in 1994. The newly elected government ushered in a new supreme law of the country in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. This Constitution laid the foundation for a new labour dispensation through Chapter Two, the Bill of Rights. The rights enshrined in Chapter Two, specifically section 23, set the foundation for the transformation of the labour dispensation which is considered by many to be very progressive (Baskin and Satgar 1995; Baskin 1996; Basson *et al.* 1998; Slabbert and Swanepoel 2002; Grogan 2003). However, the progressive labour dispensation is not being fully exploited by the South African labour force, especially by what in the United Kingdom would be called 'white collar' workers. The library and information services (LIS) 'white collar' workers, in the main, belong to two separate organisations with each addressing different issues – the trade union addresses the industrial issues and the professional association addresses the professional LIS concerns.

The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of unionising the LIS sector with special reference to the tertiary education sector. In examining the feasibility, the first objective is to investigate the need for an organisation to address the industrial concerns of LIS employees. The second objective is to investigate the organisation most capable of combining the industrial objectives of a trade union and the professional objectives of a professional association into the objectives of a single organisation to represent the tertiary education component of the LIS sector in South Africa.

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2 Background to the study

It is argued in the literature (Hovenden 1972; Kleingartner and Kennelly 1975; Coleman 1988) that it has become an accepted practice that trade unions represent the industrial interests of the sector while the professional body addresses the professional interests. This two-stream approach is not peculiar to South Africa.

Library associations have played a significant role in addressing the professional issues relating to the LIS sector (Havard-Williams 1972; Sullivan 1976; Fisher 1994; Frank 1997; Oppenheim and Pollecutt 2000). In South Africa, the LIS sector has been represented primarily by three different professional associations to address the professional issues of the sector. However, Kusack (1984: 4) reveals that the number of professional employees within the sector, at the international level, is far fewer than the support staff. Essentially, the support staff outnumber the professional staff. This staffing split is also true for the South African LIS sector. Therefore, there is a substantial cohort of support staff who could see, as preferable, an organisation that would represent their specific support staff interests as opposed to an organisation that would represent the interests of the profession. For instance, the primary interests of the support staff centre around the industrial issues affecting the sector, whereas professional staff interests centre around professional issues.

The South African workplace environment has been dominated by trade unions which have historically addressed the industrial issues of employees. The LIS sector is not precluded from this dominance of trade unions in addressing industrial issues. On the contrary, many professional members of the sector have actively participated in the activities of trade unions. Professional librarians and support staff, in the main, are members of generic trade unions. Simultaneously, a number of professional librarians and paraprofessional staff have found it necessary to belong to a generic trade union as well as to the professional association, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). However, the professional association has, over the years, restricted itself to addressing issues of a professional nature, thereby alienating itself from a large support staff base (Hooper 1986; Louw 1990).

The generic trade unions have played a parallel role, in keeping with the above mentioned two-stream approach, to that of the professional associations, that is, the professional associations address the professional concerns of the sector and the unions address the industrial issues of the same sector. However, the LIS sector is a single segment of a much broader community that the generic unions represent. It is contended that generic unions are so heterogeneous that the industrial issues of the LIS sector are not adequately addressed. The debate arising from the LIS sector being represented by a generic trade union and the professional association is whether a single organisation would provide better representation of the sector when addressing both industrial and professional issues. Guyton (1975) affirms the role of a trade union when he points out that trade unions have a significant role to play in any environment that has employees, including the library and information environment. He goes on to say, when describing the formation of the Los Angeles Public Library Union, that the formation of that union can be described as a 'unique adventure - a search by a group of librarians for greater control over their own profession and an exploration of unionism as a vehicle for gaining that control' (Guyton 1975: 85). This statement suggests that a single body can address both the professional and the industrial issues of the LIS sector.

The source of industrial and professional protection, for the excluded majority, is a trade union. Workers form or join trade unions to achieve a collective defence and enhancement of their conditions of work:

> It follows in a general sense that forming or joining unions indicates that individual defence, bargaining or regulation is no longer adequate or effective for a group of workers, particularly in matters relating to pay and job security (Thakur and Naylor 1976: 7).

Irrespective of whether the individual is a professional or a support staff member of the LIS sector, the individual has to have representation to address issues such as pay, conditions of service and job security. The latter is crucial in an economic climate where retrenchment is rife.

Trade unions have the capacity to protect the industrial concerns of its members. The stronger the union, the greater the protection for its members. The fact that the larger proportion of the professional body members are themselves employees, means that they need the same industrial protection that their support staff counterparts enjoy. Smith (1968: 717) claims that

> ... the real reason that many professions have remained opposed to unionisation is that their professional associations have performed the crucial function of the labour union; they have established standards, limited membership, improved working conditions and helped achieve a high level of financial reward. And they have done this without striking or threatening to strike ...

If the dividing line between professional associations and trade unions is so thin, would it not make good sense to unite all employees of the profession? Such unity, within the South African context, could see major protection of the employees which could inadvertently lead to the growth and development of the profession. Further, this unity must be viewed in

the light of the potential that such an organisation could have in a country which has made every effort to revolutionise labour relations (Raju 2006).

One of the fundamental provisions of the Labour Relations Act (LRA) is the creation of workplace forums. Workplace forums provide trade unions with the platform to engage in participative management. The fact that library and information workers belong to generic unions negates the possibility of having a sectoral workplace forum which has the potential to develop the profession. Given the provisions of South Africa's present labour dispensation, a professional association would have a limited role to play in addressing all issues affecting the sector (this is further elaborated later in the article). The concepts of professionalism and trade unionism have historically been regarded as incompatible (Hovenden 1972; Schlachter 1976). The continued perception of the incompatibility of professionalism with that of trade unionism will ensure that the sector does not benefit from the provisions in the new labour dispensation.

3 Research design and methodology

The research design, a case study, comprised two significant components, namely, a review of the relevant literature and a survey of employees in the LIS sector of the tertiary educational institutions, by means of e-mailed, self-administered questionnaires.

The review of relevant literature is fundamental as it identifies issues and variables related to the research topic which is one of the more specific purposes of a literature review (Kaniki 1999: 19). The review is an essential component of the research design process as it serves as the starting point for the design of the data gathering instruments used in a study.

The empirical data was gathered through a survey of the employees within the tertiary sector. Given the fact there was a potential for a large number of respondents from the tertiary educational institutions, self-administered questionnaires were used to gather data. There was a balance of open-ended and closed questions. The online method was considered, after an examination of the literature on the method (Sproull 1986; Mehta and Sivadas 1995; Burton 2000; McAuley 2003; Selwyn and Robson 2003), the most appropriate method of delivering the questionnaires. This method was cost effective, in terms of finances and time, in administering a questionnaire. The questionnaire was E-mailed to the research population in a format that was compatible with the method of delivery, hence the hypertext format as opposed to the word-processed format.

The study used the 1 463 questionnaires that were successfully delivered as the sum total of the research population. The total number of responses received was 307. One hundred and eighty-four (184) of the 307 respondents or 60 percent were from the universities and 77 respondents or 25 percent were from technikons (now universities of technology). The other 46 respondents or 15 percent did not specify their institution as they did not select the institution that they were employed at. The national response rate was 20.98 percent.

Whilst the national return rate may be considered to be low, there were significant contributions from institutions within KwaZulu-Natal. Given that there is nothing extraordinary about tertiary institutions in KwaZulu-Natal when juxtaposed with tertiary institutions in the other provinces, the analysis and report on the findings should have national applicability. The authors are located at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and therefore there was an expectation of a good response rate from this province. The response rate for UKZN was 55 or 34.6 percent, Durban Institute of Technology was 32 or 45 percent, Mangosuthu Technikon was eight (8) or 47.1 percent and the University of Zululand was 10 or 41.6 percent. The average response rate from the four tertiary education libraries in the province of KwaZulu-Natal was 41.9 percent.

There is a distinct pattern of publication on unionisation in libraries. The literature reveals that material on unionisation in libraries was published in spurts, with the latest being in the 1970s. Very little has been written in subsequent decades. This dearth of literature on unionism in libraries is confirmed in a more recent writing by Garcha and Phillips (2001: 122) who point out that, 'a review of the literature seems to indicate that little, if anything, has been published ...'. The paucity of current information reinforces the need for a study such as this one.

4 Findings

The presentation of the findings and subsequent discussion revolves around the issues of (1) the need for an organisation to address the industrial needs of LIS employees and (2) the feasibility of bringing the sector under a single employee representative body. The primary question guiding the discussion of the first issue is: *Do the employees of the sector need an organisation to address their industrial issues?* The principal question guiding the second issue is: *Which organisation is most capable of combining the industrial objectives of a trade union and the professional objectives of a professional association into the objectives of a single organisation to represent the tertiary education component of the LIS sector in South Africa?*

4.1 The need for an organisation to address industrial issues of the LIS sector

Respondents of the survey were asked: '*Is it necessary to have an organisation to negotiate or address industrial issues in the LIS sector?*' A large majority of the 307 respondents, 201 or 65.5 percent, thought that it was necessary to have an organisation to negotiate or address industrial issues in the LIS sector. Twenty-one (21) or 6.8 percent indicated that it is not necessary, while 51 or 16.6 percent were not sure. Thirty-four (34) or 11.1 percent did not respond to this item.

When asked to elaborate on their response, it was evident that there were respondents who were aware of the statutory provisions and the role that trade unions could play in South Africa's 'new' democracy. For example, one of the respondents commented that the Constitution of South Africa guaranteed fair labour practices and that 'all sectors should take advantage of this right.' There were two respondents who cautioned about the wisdom of having one organisation addressing the industrial issues of the LIS sector as the 'sector is too diverse for one set of salaries/conditions of service to apply. What may apply in one sector or in one geographical region may not apply to another, for instances academic [libraries] vs public libraries.'

The respondents also expressed the view that it was imperative that the profession had a clear set of guidelines to address industrial issues which only a unified organisation could do. Such a set of guidelines would assist in strategically tackling bread and butter issues as staff currently feel exploited in that they do not get a salary commensurate with their academic qualifications. One respondent stated that 'a professional body would know the different functions they perform. The level of qualification should be considered in the salary structure'. The respondents also expressed the opinion that standardisation will curb exploitation.

There were those respondents who expressed the view that, at the time of the survey, negotiations were being conducted by organisations whose representatives had no idea as to what is going on in the LIS sector. A respondent sympathised with the fact that it 'is not easy for the [generic] trade union to know exactly [what happens] in the library environment, therefore it becomes all that more important for a library organisation to negotiate on behalf of the sector.' Two respondents pointed out that the void in knowledge prejudices the membership to the extent that members are not even aware of their rights. A respondent suggested that there is a need for the 'right tool for the right job: [the] right negotiator for the people he/she understands and [who has] the background information of the work environment …'.

However, there was one respondent who stated, 'generic employee unions seem to have done quite a good job already'. There was support from eight other respondents on the role that generic employee unions have played. The unions' strength in numbers had played a significant role in addressing the industrial concerns of all workers including those that work in a library and information environment. Over and above generic unions having the necessary muscle in terms of numbers, they had 'experts in their field of industrial relations.' It was expressed that, 'to have a library organisation to address the industrial issue could be counter-productive as the library organisation and the generic union would be in conflict with each other.' However, it was acknowledged that the 'LIS section is one of a few profession[s] which does not have an organisation addressing industrial issues like doctors, nurses, teachers, etc.'.

Having established that there is a need for an organisation to address industrial issues of the LIS sector, the next issue that needed to be teased out is which organisation, that is, the professional association or the generic trade union, is most capable of addressing the industrial concerns given the current two-stream approach to LIS employee representation.

Despite the support for trade unions, respondents were of the opinion that the professional body was the organisation most capable of representing the industrial concerns of the LIS sector. The support was substantial as 143 or 46.6 percent of the 307 respondents support representation by the professional body to address their industrial concerns. Sixty-one or 19.9 percent believe that the industrial concerns are best addressed by a registered trade union, albeit a generic trade union. Sixty-nine or 22.5 percent were not sure as to which organisation will best address the industrial concerns of the sector. Thirty-four or 11 percent of the 307 respondents did not respond to this particular item.

It was important to get the respondents to substantiate why they supported the organisation they believed would be most capable in representing the industrial interests of the LIS sector. There were 178 or 58 percent responses.

In analysing the data received, the authors have identified core reasons for the support of the two different representative bodies, namely, the professional association and the respective trade unions. Respondents (41 or 23 percent of the 178 respondents) were of the opinion that the professional body had the knowledge and experience of the LIS profession. It was this knowledge and experience, according to the respondents, that gave the professional association the edge over the trade union in addressing the industrial issues of the LIS sector.

On the other hand, one of the core reasons, as proposed by 16 respondents, for the support for a trade union was that 'trade unions have more experience in negotiating salary increases and conditions of service and generally have an infrastructure that will support such activities.' Furthermore, trade unions are statutory bodies and command greater respect from the employers and government. As indicated above, 46.6 percent of the respondents supported representation by the professional body to address industrial concerns of the sector while 19.9 percent supported trade unions.

One respondent summarised a third option, to the above two, when she/he said that the 'best scenario would be for the two organisations [professional association and the trade union] to work together.'

In supporting the professional association as the organisation most capable of representing the interest of the LIS sector, six respondents expressed the view that the professional association was the only organisation that had the capacity to transform the LIS sector. An integral part of this transformation, according to a respondent, was the professional association's contribution to the development of the sector through active participation in the development of the curricula of Information Studies programmes at tertiary education institutions. A respondent goes on to say, 'let the professional bodies have a say about their profession.' Respondents seem to be supportive of an organisation that will be able to contribute more than just addressing industrial concerns relating to salaries and conditions of service.

Some of the respondents quoted specific examples that had influenced their decision as to which organisation will best represent their interests. One respondent stated that 'the [professional association] LIASA should become more involved in trying to set standards of equal qualification levels when applying for professional posts in the library and information profession (that is, is the BTECH [*sic*] equivalent to the BINF [*sic*] from UNISA).'

However, there were respondents (11 or 6.2 percent of the 178 respondents) who indicated that they had not been impressed with the capabilities of either of the organisations on certain issues, stating that trade unions tended to engage in 'politics' at the expense of worker issues while the professional association is accused by a respondent of 'having the tendency of acting professionally even in situations that require more assertiveness and aggressiveness. The professional association seems to restrict itself to playing an advisory role only.'

There were twelve respondents who were of the view that both organisations had an equal but different role to play in the sector. It was suggested by one respondent that 'whilst the professional body will be more interested in the "profession", the union would be more adequate to handle the industrial or worker related problems/industrial issues.'

4.2 Combining industrial and professional objectives

In pursuing the second research objective, the authors explored possible ways forward for the sector. The following options were probed, namely, (1) the professional association should become a statutory body, (2) the current status should remain, (3) a sector specific union should be formed and, (4) the professional association should broaden its constitution and act as a quasi union.

The professional association and statutory status

One of the benefits of belonging to a trade union is that the organisation has statutory status. As an institute with a legal persona, unions command some level of respect and attention from the different stakeholders.

There was a high percentage of respondents who indicated that they thought that the South African LIS professional association should become a statutory body. Of the 307 respondents, 49.2 percent or 151 expressed their support for the South African professional association becoming a statutory body. There was a small percentage (5.5 percent or 17 respondents) who did not support statutory status of the professional association. One hundred and two or 33.2 percent were not sure and the other 37 or 12 percent of the respondents did not respond to the item. One hundred and seven respondents substantiated their responses.

Of the 107 responses, the most frequent response (23 or 21.5%) was that statutory status would ensure that the professional association be taken more seriously by all concerned, which is, employers, government, users and other professions. As an organisation, the association would have a greater impact on the above mentioned stakeholders. The increase in respect and recognition by the different stakeholders would ensure that the profession would transform into a more forceful and assertive profession. Further, two respondents shared the view that it could lead to an increase in funding to sustain the library as an efficient information provider. An efficient information provider would be of benefit to the country as a whole and would assist in improving the rate of literacy in the country. These were some of the positive spin-offs put forward by respondents as resulting from the professional body having statutory status.

Six respondents or 5.6 percent (of the 107 respondents) pointed out that statutory status would increase the bargaining power of those employed within the LIS environment. Arguments submitted were that a single statutory body would ensure that salaries and conditions of service would be regulated ensuring consistency, in remuneration and conditions of service, and equity for all employed within the LIS sector. Consistency and equity would ensure a more focused profession, and a focused profession would command an increase in credibility. The fact that the organisation would have legal status would also add credibility. It was evident from a response that the size of the membership was one of the primary factors contributing to credibility. This respondent stated that, 'the South African LIS professional association needs to increase its membership before it becomes a statutory body.'

It was further submitted by four respondents that the professional association, as a statutory body, would aid in addressing labour issues. As a statutory body registered with the Registrar of Labour Relations, the professional body

would be able to represent its members at disciplinary and grievance hearings at the institutional level. Further, the professional association would be able to represent its members at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). This representation is over and above representing members' interest when addressing issues such as salaries and conditions of service. Statutory status accords the organisation the right to engage in this level of representation.

One of the respondents argued that 'there are several pieces of [labour] legislation which can only be utilised by a statutory body. If the professional association becomes a statutory body it could utilise the provisions of the legislation which will have a positive impact on the profession.' Another respondent furthered this argument by suggesting that the professional association could engage in training and development and that would include conducting workshops for the benefit of the staff employed in the sector.

Retention of the status quo and support for one union
When asked whether the status quo should remain, 114 or 37.1 percent of the 307 respondents said **yes**, that is, it should remain. Eighty-five or 27.7 percent replied **no**, while 63 or 20.5 percent were not sure and 45 or 14.6 percent did not respond to this item.

There was substantial support for the employees of the LIS sector to form one union that would address industrial issues as well as professional issues. In fact 148 or 48.2 percent of the 307 respondents supported the notion of one union. Of the remaining 159 respondents, the responses were distributed as follows:
  • Not sure: 59 or 19.2%;
  • Not entered: 41 or 13.4%; and
  • Did not support: 59 or 19.2%.

Broadening of the constitution of the professional association
There were 137 or 44.6 percent of the 307 respondents who thought that the LIS professional association should broaden its constitution and act as a quasi union, that is, for the professional body to address both professional and industrial issues of all who are employed in a LIS environment. Of the remaining 170 respondents, the responses were distributed as follows:
  • Not sure: 82 or 26.7%;
  • Not entered: 39 or 12.7%; and
  • Did not support: 49 or 16%.
Respondents were asked to substantiate their response. Unfortunately, the responses, in the main, were not adequately substantiated. Of the 49 respondents who indicated that they did not support the broadening of the constitution of the professional association, 14 of the respondents substantiated their responses. The core reason for not supporting the broadening of the constitution was the fact that each body, that is, the trade union and the professional association are independent entities and each has specific roles to play. Therefore broadening the constitution of the professional association would blur the independent identities of both the organisations. Supporting this view, a respondent argued that if the constitution was broadened the 'roles [of the organisations] may be diluted in a broader ineffective organisation.' It was also proposed that effective unionism was dependent on large numbers which the LIS sector does not have and therefore broadening the constitution might have a negative effective, and that is, it will create an organisation that would achieve very little.

There was firm belief that the professional association and trade unions were essential in a LIS environment and that they should 'find ways and means of working together to ensure the best of both worlds.' However, it was also argued that there were 'a number of trade unions in South Africa to which a person can belong and the LIS professional association should rather restrict itself to concentrating on the professional development of all its members.' One respondent also indicated that 'the current association can barely cope with the professional issues. I do not believe they have the capacity to take on more.'

Of the 137 respondents who did support the broadening of the constitution, 95 substantiated their responses. There was one respondent whose response sums up most of what was submitted in support of broadening the constitution of the professional association. The respondent argued that the broadening of the constitution would help remove the artificial divide between the trade unions and the professional association and allow the organisation to take full advantage of rights contained in the Constitution of South Africa.

A strong reason for supporting the broadening of the constitution of the professional association was that personnel from the profession would be 'looking after the interests of the profession.' A recurring response was that the people from the profession had a 'sound knowledge of libraries which would ensure fairness, promote growth and development of all including external stakeholders.' Another theme that was common amongst the responses was the increase in

capacity of the organisation to represent the profession to external stakeholders, especially in soliciting funding and changes to laws impacting on libraries, and to represent the interest of the staff when interacting with management.

Summary of findings on the way forward

A summary of the findings on the way forward for the LIS sector is graphically represented in **Figure 1** which shows respondent support, or lack thereof, for the various options.
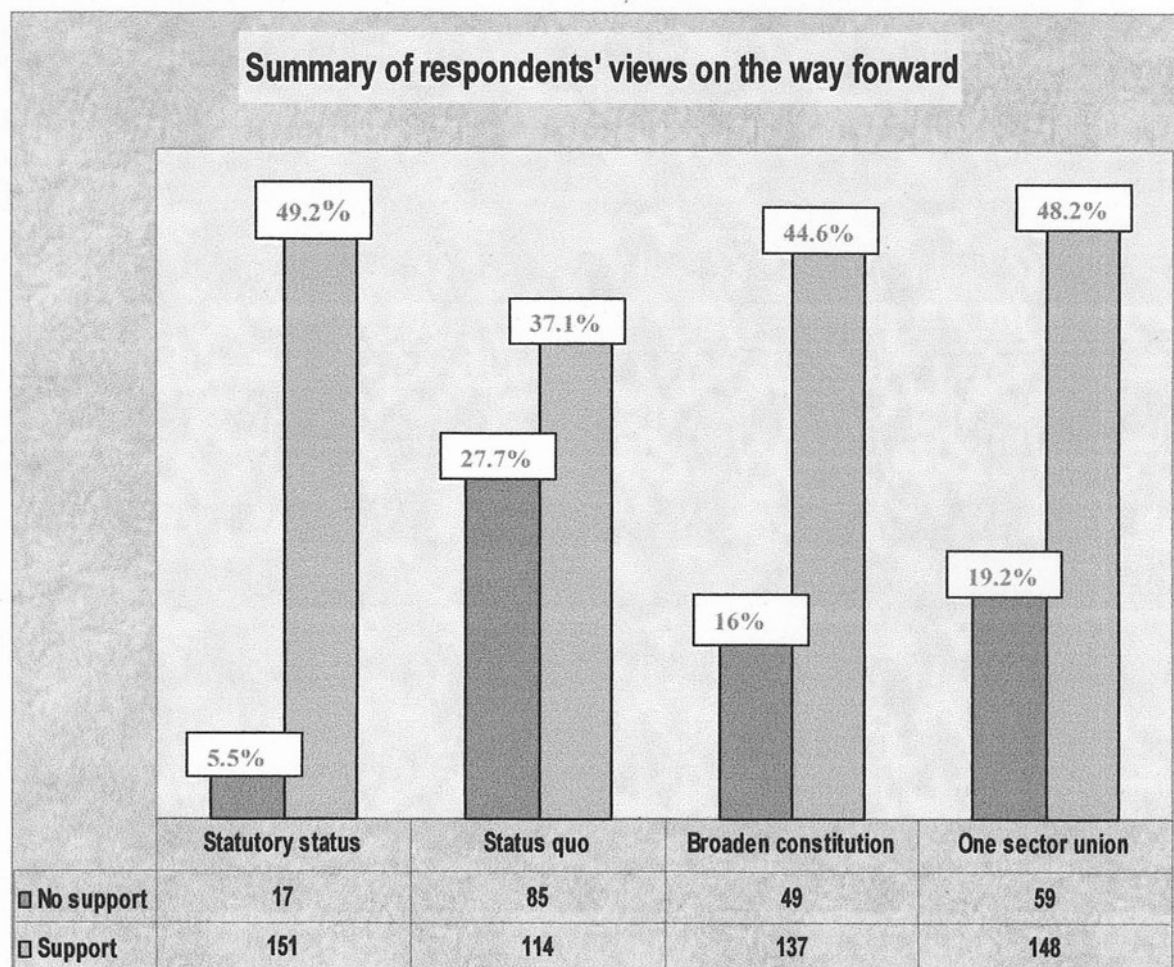

Summary of respondents' views on the way forward

	Statutory status	Status quo	Broaden constitution	One sector union
No support	17	85	49	59
Support	151	114	137	148

Figure 1 (N=307)

5 Discussion

It is clear from the findings that there is a need for an organisation to address the industrial and professional issues of the LIS sector. The question that needs to be unpacked is which organisation is most capable of bringing together the industrial objectives of a trade union and the professional objectives of a professional association into a single organisation for the LIS sector.

The need for an organisation to address industrial issues of the LIS sector

The majority of the respondents expressed the view that there is a need for an organisation to address the industrial issues of the LIS sector as a whole. Some of the respondents argued that it is a statutory right for them to be represented by a trade union to ensure that they could benefit from the provisions of the legislation. One of the employee respondents pointed out that 'the LRA states that the employer has a duty to bargain, however, we [the LIS sector] don't have an organisation that will use the Act to the best benefit of the profession'.

Despite the statutory right to belong to a trade union, it would seem that the views of the majority are guided by the need for uniformity in representation as such uniformity would provide clear guidelines and direction for the profession as a whole. Such a view would imply that there is representation by a single body. However, there are respondents who highlight the fact that the profession is fragmented and that the diversity of the profession makes it extremely difficult to have standardised salaries and conditions of service. Employees from the different sectors within the LIS environment, for

example, the public library sector and the academic library sector, have different needs and therefore should have different conditions of service.

The authors argue that the fundamental function of personnel working in a LIS environment is to make information available or to engage in activities that will facilitate access to information. Therefore, it is essential that LIS personnel get similar levels of pay and are subjected to similar conditions of service. The Bill of Rights within the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa 1996: 9; Finnemore 1999: 45; Grogan 2001: 13-14) guarantees fair labour practices which entails equal pay for equal work. Further, the personnel should be subjected to similar conditions of service to eliminate discrimination, for example, against women, and to uphold the constitutional guarantee of fair labour practices.

Having made the case for an organisation to address the industrial concerns of the LIS sector, it has to be established which organisation is most capable of addressing that need. The trade union movement has accomplished the task of addressing the industrial concerns of the LIS sector, albeit via generic unions. However, one of the respondents sums up the position by suggesting that there is a need for the 'right tool for the right job: [the] right negotiator for the people he/she understands and [who has] the background information of the work environment …'. Essentially, the respondent argues that generic unions do not have relevant knowledge of the sector to adequately represent the sector. Another respondent points out that there are other professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching, law and such that have statutory bodies to represent the interests of the profession.

The findings reveal that 46.6 percent of the respondents supported the professional association as the organisation most capable of representing the industrial needs of the profession while only 19.9 percent supported a trade union to represent their industrial needs. The respondents recognised that each organisation had its own strengths and weaknesses: the strength of the professional association is the depth of the knowledge and experience of the sector, and the strength of the union is the depth of its experience in negotiating salaries and conditions of service for its members. The respondents valued the knowledge and experience of the sector as opposed to experience in negotiation. They seemed more comfortable with the professional association as they believed that the professional association could articulate their needs far better than an experienced trade union official who lacks the knowledge of the sector.

Thus far the discussion has centred on representation by one or the other body. There were a number of respondents who tabled a third alternative, and that is for both organisations (the trade union and the professional association) to work together. It would seem to the authors that this suggestion is a modification of the current status with the trade unions addressing the industrial concerns while the professional association addresses the professional concerns but in a more formalised context. It is assumed that there would be a formalised agreement between a **single** union and a **single** professional association: some sort of memorandum of agreement. In pursuing such a proposal, both organisations must have statutory status. The authors pose the question, why not one professional organisation with statutory status? If the strength of the trade union is in its experience in industrial matters, sooner or later the necessary negotiation skills will be acquired by the LIS employees within the professional association. The authors are aware of branches or the national office of national unions being headed by LIS personnel. It is being suggested that the sector does not lack the experience or the capacity to pursue the option of the professional association seeking statutory status to represent all aspects of the profession, that is, professional and industrial aspects.

The fundamental purpose of having representation by a single organisation is to unify the profession to project a consolidated profession, with certain levels of diversity but with a single representative body. The literature reveals that a unified profession fosters closer working relationships between individuals within the profession (Stockham 1979). Unity in the profession also provides a single platform for the sharing of knowledge and experience through workshops and conferences. Staff training and development becomes much easier if it is implemented and supported by personnel who have the relevant knowledge and experience of the profession.

The statutory provisions in the labour dispensation are biased towards trade unions. Therefore, it becomes even more compelling for representative organisations to become statutory bodies to reap the benefits of a progressive labour dispensation. Maximum utilisation of the dispensation can only contribute to the growth of the organisation and the profession.

Combining industrial and professional objectives

In taking a close look at the 'best way forward' it was found that the support for the current professional association becoming a statutory body was marginally greater than the support for the formation of one LIS sector union to address industrial issues as well as professional issues. In the context of the response rate, there was a great deal of support for a change in the status quo. In the context of the small percentages, it is surprising that the difference, in terms of support, between the options of statutory status and a quasi union is relatively large given the options are fairly similar.

The lack of support for the retention of the status quo is based on the employee respondents' dissatisfaction with levels of representation by the generic unions in representing their professional interests and with the dissatisfaction with the professional association in dealing with their industrial issues. Academic library support staff, according to the authors' observations, tend to be highly unionised and therefore have first hand experience of their generic union. It would seem that personnel within the LIS sector possibly continue to belong to trade unions and the professional association because there is no alternative. These generic unions have been representing the LIS sector for many years now and should have established themselves as **the** organisation to represent their interests. By the same token, the professional association has been representing the professional interests of the sector and should have long become a statutory body to exploit a progressive labour dispensation when representing the industrial interests of the sector.

There was substantial support (48.2 percent) by the employee respondents for a sector specific union. However, Raju (2005) points out that the trade union officials, of the four national generic unions that are currently servicing the tertiary sector, are unanimous that a sector specific union would not provide better representation than a generic union. The trade union officials argue that unionism is essentially about numbers and the sector does not have substantial numbers. Therefore, a sector specific union would not be viable as it would not have the necessary numbers.

Further, the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) national policy of one union for one sector negates the drive for one union for the LIS sector whose workforce is currently represented by in-house unions or one of three national unions – National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU); National Tertiary Education Staff Union (NTESU); and National Union of Technikon Employees of South Africa (NUTESA). Most of the so called progressive trade unions are members of COSATU and therefore having an affiliate would go against the policy of COSATU. It would seem reasonable to conclude that it would not be feasible for the current national unions to accommodate a sector specific union. Therefore, it would not be feasible to have a sector specific union in the current labour movement environment.

The respondents, through the survey instrument, expressed the view that the trade union has performed well in addressing the industrial issues of the sector. However, they have their reservations about the trade union representing their professional interests. It is assumed that the respondents' support for the professional association becoming a statutory body is based on the trade union's success in addressing the industrial concerns of the sector and the professional association's success in meeting the professional issues of the sector. In expressing their support for a change in statutory status, the respondents distributed their reasons between their professional and industrial concerns illustrating there was sufficient concern or attention for both professional issues and their industrial demands. Further, the respondents were aware of their constitutional rights and their rights as employees. They expressed the view that only a statutory body could utilise the provisions of the legislations to the benefit of the employees, the profession and the country.

The reasons put forward for supporting the broadening of the constitution of the current professional association so that it could act as a quasi union are, in the main, not very different from those reasons forwarded in substantiating their support for statutory status. It is also argued by the same respondents that the professional association and the trade union are essential in a LIS environment and that these organisations should find ways of working together. Given that the organisations have demonstrated the ability to work together, it is argued by the same respondents that it would be better to have the professional association broaden its constitution to take on the functions of a trade union.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

The respondents in this study have expressed the need for an organisation to represent their professional and industrial concerns. It has been established that two-thirds of the respondents were of the opinion that it was necessary to have an organisation to address the industrial concerns of the sector. Further, a unified organisation would provide a clear set of guidelines that would assist in strategically tackling bread and butter issues. It was perceived by some of the respondents that this unified organisation would increase the credibility and status of the profession.

The study has also found there to be no compelling factors that pose barriers to the unification of the sector under a single employee representative body. A substantial percentage of respondents believed that this unified organisation should be the professional association as opposed to the trade union. These respondents were of the opinion that the professional body had the knowledge and experience of the LIS sector to further the interests of the said sector.

Given the view that the organisation most capable of bringing together the objectives of a trade union and the professional objectives of a professional association would be the professional body, it is recommended that the professional body invest energy in a concerted effort to acquire statutory status. Statutory status could be achieved through registration via the LRA 66 of 1995 or the promulgation of an Act specific to the discipline. In terms of the former (existing legislation), the LRA makes provision for the registration of a group of employees to regulate relations between

employees and employers. In terms of the latter, the sector would seek the enactment of a new legislation whose primary objective would be to protect the interest of the public and regulate those that enter (for employment purposes) the profession.

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