PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS

Consultation Report
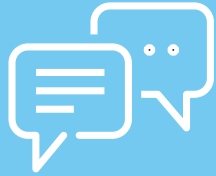
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Introduction

As the professional body for the library and information services (LIS) sector, ALIA exists to support the LIS profession. This is why we are excited to launch the Professional Pathways initiative, to ensure we have a diverse, skilled, valued and supported LIS workforce delivering quality library and information services that anticipate and meet the needs of the population.

In November 2020, ALIA released the consultation draft of the Professional Pathways initiative. The release started an intense period of consultation, during which time hundreds of people across the library and information sector engaged in the process, providing important feedback and addressing emerging issues. The consultation period culminated in the Professional Pathways Summit in February 2021.

This report provides a summary of the key themes that emerged during the three-month consultative process. This process has enabled ALIA to understand more deeply the needs and concerns of the sector we serve, and the challenges we may face. This document stands as a record of both the time, effort and thought that the sector contributed to the consultation, and of the themes that emerged, which will strengthen the project moving forward.

The consultation process

Now is the time for having the hard conversations.

On 30 November 2020, ALIA released a consultation draft[1] of the Professional Pathways initiative on the ALIA website. ALIA used all available channels to communicate the launch to members and the wider public including direct email, a media release, notices in ALIA Weekly, a scrolling news item on the ALIA homepage, change of the ALIA email signature and social media.

The interest in the draft was even greater than anticipated. Between the consultation draft release on 30 November 2020 and the Professional Pathways Summit[2] on 16 February 2021, hundreds of members participated in consultations, sought further information, and gave feedback. The majority of the feedback was received during nine Town Hall online meetings (3 December 2020 – 28 January 2021). These Town Hall meetings were not only open to ALIA members but to anyone who had something to say about the future of the library workforce. The Town Hall meetings included sessions with an emphasis on particular sectors (for example health or academic libraries) or groups (such as students and new graduates). Most sessions were held over the Zoom platform and one session was held using Microsoft Teams to accommodate those who could not access other commercial platforms. A range of different time slots was offered, with two sessions (one in December and one in January) held outside of business hours. The sessions were recorded for internal use only, to allow ALIA staff to review.

Members were also encouraged to email or phone directly (as many did), and to raise feedback around Professional Pathways in other related meetings or events (for example committee meetings). Feedback was received in emails, letters, phone calls, videoconferences, meeting minutes and during conversations.

The consultation period was formally concluded with the Professional Pathways Summit on 16 February, a gathering of library and information representatives from across the different sectors, including subject matter experts, educators, and new graduates.

Data collection and analysis

By the end of the consultation period ALIA had received feedback from several hundred people and groups.[3] To interpret the feedback ALIA staff de-identified and reviewed contributions, and categorised discussions into themes that encapsulated the key needs of the LIS sector and were common to a wide range of participants from all participant groups.

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[1] www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/Consultation_Draft_Professional_Pathways.pdf

[2] www.alia.org.au/news/21941/virtual-summit-garners-wide-support-alia-professional-pathways

[3] 500+ participants, 8 focus groups, 350 survey response, 12 submissions, 50 critical friends, library leaders, employers and educators (Consultation Draft, 30 November 2020)

The report

This report is a high-level record of the consultations grouped into key themes. It is acknowledged that these themes have been influenced by the framing of the consultation draft itself and that any categorisation of the subject matter is always subjective, especially in areas of overlapping interest.

The themes

It is about being brave and changing antiquated systems and practices, about being open to risk and overcoming the 'set and forget' mentality.

Across the online forums, chat messages, breakout rooms, emails and conversations, there was sector-wide recognition of the change this initiative will bring, and enthusiasm for the potential of Professional Pathways. There were also helpful and considered suggestions about ways to strengthen the initiative and cautions about potential unintended consequences if the initiative was not well structured. The following section unpacks some of the major recurrent themes across the consultation.

Professionalism

One theme dominated discussions, informing and shaping all other themes: that of professionalism. Professionalism was the overarching, if not always fully articulated, thread running throughout the whole consultative process. The questions were asked:

What does it mean to be an LIS professional? What is meant by 'professionalism' in the LIS sector? What is professional identity? How do you become a 'professional'? Can you be a professional if you don't have a university degree?

While there was strong support for the concept of professionalism, participants had different understandings of what professionalism means in an LIS context. ALIA membership, ethos, skills, knowledge, academic attainment, social status, and lifelong learning were all raised as components of professional identity. Differing opinions on the process by which you become an LIS professional were raised, with participants having a range of views on the importance of attaining an accredited LIS degree, years of practice and other ways in which people could attain and demonstrate core skills and knowledge, including ethics, through practice.

For many, their professional identity was built on their information expertise and ethics. The importance of trust, and libraries as trusted institutions, was seen as something valuable that relied on people in libraries (and in wider information roles) having the right skills and ethics.

Identity is about being able to position yourself within your workplace or job and having a firm sense of professional identity to support this positioning.

While there was general agreement that workplaces can gain benefit from a greater diversity of skills, there were questions about how non-LIS qualified professionals will learn and put into practice the LIS ethos, sense of social justice and service delivery. Some people recounted challenges when non-LIS qualified people had been faced with issues around censorship or privacy and had not responded in a way that reflected LIS ethics and ethos. There was also concern that people without LIS technical knowledge and understanding of the LIS frameworks might over time damage the standing of the profession.

One point of consistency was that people believed LIS core values and ethics could be and should be defined and practised by people working in the LIS sector. There was strong agreement that it would be helpful for all people working in libraries to have a pathway to acquire these skills and ethos. There was also strong support for strengthening and celebrating the professionalism of the sector.

For me, professional identity is supported by the unique core LIS skills, LIS ethos and a deep understanding of the profession. But it also includes social justice and service.

While professionalism and an LIS professional identity were almost universally supported, there was concern about the impact of the word 'professional' for people working in roles that are categorised as 'para-professional' roles, such as library technicians. People in these roles can face struggles to have their specialist skills, knowledge and ethically aligned practice recognised when language such as 'professional' is used. There was also concern that these roles are more generally overlooked, despite their essential role

in providing library and information services. People cautioned that careful use of words and clearer definitions would assist the Professional Pathways project as it goes forward.

The changes to library and information services as technology, roles, and scope expand, all highlighted the need for the sector to attract and retain talented people with a wide range of skills. The role of continued professional development was raised in almost every consultation. People were strongly supportive of increased opportunities for meaningful professional development. A core component of professionalism for many people was taking control of your skills and development. Employers were strongly supportive of a culture of lifelong learning and reported a commitment to enabling employees to attain professional development goals.

Advocacy and marketing

What is the elevator pitch?

There was consensus across the board that the LIS brand, the external face of professional identity, needs greater advocacy and marketing, internally and externally. Although 'librarian' is an established, universally recognised and trusted brand, with instant public recognition, LIS professionals believe their skills need to be more recognised, valued and supported in a world where expertise in information management is no longer the sole province of librarians. More external promotion of LIS professionalism could increase demand for LIS skills and for library and information solutions.

Some people contended that the LIS brand itself needs to be re-evaluated and updated. Trust and reliability are central to public perceptions of librarians, which supports the librarian brand. However, the downside of a strong knowledge of the word 'librarian' is that many people associate it with older stereotypes, and do not understand what the job entails, or the skills required.

The public still sees us as a 'bun and glasses' profession. Improving the external understanding of the sector and profession would change this perception, as would increasing diversity, but perhaps most importantly, being known for LIS expertise would lead to our services being more widely sought and respected by other sectors.

Every participant agreed that stronger communications, both within and without the profession, would be helpful.

Partnerships

Together we are stronger.

The need for partnerships between all stakeholders in the LIS sector was a recurring theme expressed across all platforms, including stronger partnerships between employers and educators. Partnerships were considered essential to the effectiveness and sustainability of the changes the Professional Pathways initiative will bring.

There were concerns raised from many different sectors that there is currently a disconnect between what is offered in LIS courses and what is needed for work-ready graduates. LIS educational courses need to be more responsive to workplace requirements and would benefit from stronger links with industry. Suggestions to increase the information flows and cooperation between educators and employers were made. A facilitated, networked response to create an employer-relevant LIS professional framework would go a long way to ensure LIS courses remain credible, contemporary, and available into the future.

LIS education does the 'L' in library part well, and the 'I' in information part less well – more information architecture, data management and analytics, digital information management is required.

Health librarianship and data integrity were identified as areas that are currently lacking adequate academic options and with skills gaps. Many people were keen to explore the potentials of short courses and microcredentials (both at university and VET level) to address skills gaps, emerging areas of practice and specialised skills. There were concerns expressed, though, that these shorter courses could reduce demand for the longer courses. Some educators saw the potential and relayed that this was a pathway that was very much being encouraged in their institutions, while others were more cautious. Consultation with employers, better communications, and workplace support for ongoing training courses (potentially guaranteeing enrolment) was suggested, as was support for LIS-associated areas such as research and advocacy.

We want to be partnering with our educators, not apart from them.

Early career support

The need to feel supported through the student years and beyond was of particular concern to new graduates, and early career LIS professionals, younger generations, and non-LIS staff (library managers are increasingly in this category) were equally identified as groups requiring more inclusion and professional support.

Employers were asked to consider actions to attract and support new entrants into the sector as they built careers. Suggestions included traineeships and internships, mentoring and support for continued professional development. Such a move would not only contribute to the sustainability of the LIS profession but also to sustainable career progression.

Leadership

Are we supporting our next generation of leaders for when we [the current leaders] all retire?

There was discussion about the importance of ensuring that up-and-coming LIS professionals have the opportunity to gain the broad management and leadership skills which would enable them to compete successfully with external candidates for the top positions in their organisations and outside the sector. It was noted that master degree courses include management content, but some people raised concerns that this was not at the right stage of people's career journeys for this material to be impactful. Mentoring schemes, leadership courses, and opportunities to gain experience were all identified as areas that could be improved. Some people noted that people needed to be open to moving out of their organisation, or even outside of the sector, to get the experience they needed to progress.

When management positions come up in my local council, I want the library manager to be as competitive as the swimming pool manager.

Diversity

There was little argument that the profession would generally benefit from more diversity. Four areas identified as particularly important for the future sustainability and wellbeing of the LIS sector were cultural diversity, diversity of backgrounds and skills, age diversity and gender diversity.

Do we look like the community we work for?

People considered that greater cultural, age and gender diversity would reflect the shape and needs of the communities the library sector serves, helping to ensure that services were anticipating and meeting the needs of the community. The importance of attractive and supportive pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was noted as being particularly important, especially considering the significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections held. More skills diversity would make the profession more adaptable to external workplace change and support the sustainability of the LIS sector through such changes.

People raised concerns that greater diversity of skills and background, especially if people were entering the profession without LIS qualifications, may impact the core LIS identity and professionalism.

Bringing non-LIS people into libraries means we have a commitment to actively including them by recognising their value and contribution to the sector.

Specialisations

Discussions about LIS skills invariably led to debate about specialist skills: whether specialist skills should be built onto generic skills or whether training should offer specialisation from the start. This debate was of special concern to health and academic librarians who work in knowledge-intensive environments and must perform quite particular tasks, such as literature searches using evidence-based medical techniques and other forms of research support. Teacher librarians were recognised as another group requiring special attention. Health and teacher libraries were identified as sectors that had done excellent work in their areas of specialisation that other groups might emulate.

In my job as a school librarian, I also act as literacy support, IT helpdesk, video production, administration, and event management. They didn't teach all of that at library school!

It was agreed that, without doubt, LIS professionals require a diversity of skills in the modern workplace. However, the balance between generic and specialist skills was a recurring tension. There was also debate about the extent to which transdisciplinary skills were important, and at what stage of the career/ education these should really be emphasised. A reexamination of skills and clarification of the core skills was welcomed as a suggestion.

Where's the balance between creating 'shelf-ready' librarians and 'place-specific' ones? Can microcredentials address this problem?

Continual training to learn new skills then refreshing them was a constant refrain, heard in almost every consultation. Some people noted that a key part of the professional

identity was taking control of your professional skill maintenance and development, and that continuing professional development was necessary, not negotiable. There was a desire for employers to challenge themselves to do more to actively support continued professional development, including practical help such as time and resources, and actions to show that skills and professional development are valued.

Change and sustainability

There was a consensus that for sustainability into the future, positive change is needed. However, people differed on what positive change looks like across the sector. The need for bravery to change things that don't work, or that don't work well, and 'failing forward' were raised, often seemingly in response to a perception that LIS workplaces could be overly process-based and risk-averse. Others raised the idea that opportunities for more practice-based or workplace-based research could create new solutions and growth,

Terminology was the concern of a number of people looking to the trends in the wider workforce. Simple steps like rebranding 'information literacy' as the trendier 'media literacy' may lead to more opportunities. The need for language to describe transferrable skills was raised. People had differing opinions on the terminology of 'librarian', 'information professional' or 'knowledge manager' for job titles.

With change, there is always the potential for unexpected consequences, but it was proposed that now is the time for having the hard conversations, while members and stakeholders are engaged and listening. The strong commitment and appetite for action emerging out of the Professional Pathways Summit create the opportunity to make a real, sustainable, difference. Change brings opportunity.

COVID has, I think, highlighted the value of librarians. Health librarians have been tapped on the shoulder to find rapid evidence in a fast-changing pandemic environment. Public libraries have promoted social cohesion and have bridged social isolation more than ever this year.

Acknowledgments

A huge thank you to all the people who have contributed to the consultations, both in response to the consultation draft and also to those who contributed to the shaping of the draft. Thank you also to all those people who continue to provide feedback, question, suggest and generally engage with the project. We are listening.

A special vote of thanks to ALIA President Viv Barton, whose Presidential theme of education was the catalyst for the project. And a final thank you to Kate Bunker, ALIA's former Director of Learning who led this initiative to the consultation stage.

Further reading

This paper should be read in the context of other reports produced by ALIA, including:

- The future of library and information science education in Australia[4]
- The future of library and information science education in Australia: discussion paper[5]
- ALIA President Viv Barton's Professional Pathways message[6]

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[4] read.alia.org.au/future-lis-education

[5] read.alia.org.au/future-library-and-information-science-education-australia-discussion-paper

[6] youtu.be/vgh_1H9k-nw