Australian Library and Information Association

ALIA Research Advisory Committee submission in response to the Australian Academy of the Humanities Future Humanities Workforce Consultation Paper

May 2019

1. About us

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation and peak body for the Australian library and information services sector.

On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. We represent school, public, academic, research, corporate, law, health, government, National, State and Territory libraries and the people who staff them.

We are the professional body which accredits library and information science (LIS) courses at VET and higher education level, and we have a strong interest in LIS research.

- ALIA is an Approved Research Institute with Deductible Gift Recipient status according to the Australian Tax Office rules.
- We provide several research grants to Members and we encourage collaboration between academics, researchers and practitioners.
- Over the last five years, ALIA has supported successful LIS ARC linkage grant projects as an industry partner and there are further applications in the pipeline.
- We disseminate Australian LIS research through the *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* and we provide opportunities for peer review of conference papers.
- Our ALIA Research Advisory Committee comprises leading LIS academics and researchers who advise the ALIA Board on topics of note.
- We are closely involved in discussions about open access to government funded research, for example, we have participated in the consultation around new data sharing and release legislation through PM&C.

2. About library and information science in Australia

Library and information science (LIS) is an internationally recognised discipline, with a long and successful history in Australia. For example, Charles Sturt University is home to one of the world's largest schools of information studies, with a strong global reputation, and there are other highly regarded centres for LIS education in New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. We have a significant number of LIS PhD students all around Australia, guaranteeing a future cohort of academics, researchers and thought leaders.

LIS crosses a number of areas. We are strongly and increasingly involved in technology and IT-powered content. We are embedded in the education agenda, whether through formal VET and higher education or through informal lifelong learning. The role of information as an asset makes LIS knowledge and skills highly appropriate to business, government and organisations that rely on high quality data. At the same time, we have longstanding connections with arts and humanities, through our relationship to galleries, archives, museums and other cultural institutions. Further factors are the rapidly changing environment for LIS and the impact of digital disruption.

3. Future knowledge, skills and capabilities

Q1. What are humanities researchers' (and humanities graduates' more broadly) most distinctive and important skills and capabilities?

Humanities researchers and graduates have the following knowledge, skills and capabilities which distinguish them from, say, STEM researchers:

- A human-centred approach to problem solving and to community building;
- Critical thinking skills to consider all sides of an argument;
- Qualitative research skills (including data collection and analysis); and
- Written and oral communication skills.

In addition, they have discipline knowledge to explore complex and dynamic social phenomena with an aim to contribute to social progress.

Q2. What are the current skills and capability gaps?

a) In the academic workforce

Currently, there is a lack of interdisciplinary collaborative projects in the area to build solutions for anticipated issues and also a lack of technological knowledge and skills. These include:

- Lack of understanding of, and skills to work with, the fast-moving technological platforms;
- Lack of understanding of, and skills to work with, big data (eg data analytics, statistical literacy);
- Lack of understanding of how to leverage technology for data preservation including collection, management, storage, etc.

These gaps exclude humanities researchers from technology-focused research. Being absent from the technology conversation is problematic in research dealing with human society and does not allow humanities research to fully benefit from technological advancement.

b) In the wider workforce

In the wider humanities workforce, there is currently a lack of professional development training and lifelong learning opportunities, alongside a lack of technological knowledge and skills (digital literacy). These also mirror the gaps in the academic workforce. These

include the three dot points identified in the previous section. Other gaps are:

- A lack of legal knowledge (in particular contract, copyright, privacy);
- Cultural competency; and
- Project management.

Q3. Which skills and capabilities are most valued and where are they used?

a) In the academic workforce

Some of the most valued attributes of the academic workforce in our current environment are human-centred research skills, with specific focus on social impact and social justice. Towards that, the following skills are highly valued:

- More flexibility towards, and openness to, different research paradigms and interpretations;
- Interdisciplinary knowledge and multidisciplinary projects which are useful to explore complex and dynamic social phenomena with an aim to contribute to social progress.

Toward that aim, researchers who are able to contribute through abductive thinking, are comfortable using mixed paradigms, and are able to apply this in transdisciplinary projects, are more valuable than researchers who work only through deductive or inductive thinking, and work under positivist or empiricist paradigms alone.

b) In the wider workforce

The skills and capabilities valued in the wider workforce in the humanities are:

- Writing and communication skills;
- More empathy, openness and flexibility to understand people, ideas and viewpoints – characteristics which are essential for collaboration, teamwork, and building and using networks;
- Knowledge of copyright and Creative Commons principles that is applicable to a data-rich environment.

In future environments, new discoveries may be built on earlier data from another source, or through machine-based information such as text mining, and hence a future workforce would need a wider and broader range of networks beyond their professional and disciplinary boundaries.

Q4. What are the future knowledge, skills, and capabilities that humanities researchers will require?

Below are some of the knowledge, skills and capabilities that will be required of the future humanities researchers:

- Generating research data that is F.A.I.R. – findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable – and conforms with the requirements of the open data movement and future open government legislation.
- Defining, leading or collaborating on interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, cross-disciplinary projects to link arts and science. For example, tracking societal changes alongside major weather events, to find out more about the long-term impacts of natural catastrophes.
- Knowledge and skills to work with big data for the purpose of interdisciplinary collaborations. Big data knowledge and skills enable humanities researchers to:
    - More effectively and informedly contribute their perspective and discipline knowledge to technology/data-oriented projects which leads to more meaningful and human-centred research outcome (eg applying ethics or anthropological approaches to AI research);
    - Benefit from application of big data in humanities research;
    - Gaining a deep understanding of the ethical challenges related to Artificial Intelligence.

Q5. What can the humanities contribute to the data and digital literacy agenda over the next decade?

Humanities has a significant contribution to make in the discourse around big data and data literacy though humanising big data; this is about making meaning out of data and the outcome of data-oriented research to improve lives of individuals and societies. This requires:

- More proactive collaboration with data-oriented projects;
- Developing more digital humanities projects;
- Unpacking big data challenges for consumers using qualitative and human-centred approaches; and
- Enabling and empowering the public to be data literate (especially around privacy issues).

4. Early Career Researchers

Q6. What are the best practice models for supporting ECRs?

Some of the best practice models for supporting ECRs acknowledge and consider the limitations and challenges that ECRs face, such as:

- Timelines from research projects to publications (often books and monographs) are generally longer in the humanities and social sciences than in science, IT, and other disciplines), and hence affects ECR. A model of ECR training and mentoring that provides for this extra time needed in establishing oneself would be useful; some universities do this through providing some teaching relief in the first year, but often, the first year is a transition year with a huge academic learning curve anyway, so it would be useful to offer some teaching relief for the first three years.
- ECRs often do not have the industry connections to gain access to systems or resources that will help them in their research. All ECR programs should include mentoring partnerships, preferably with mentors from other organisations and

universities. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) has an excellent mentoring program for libraries. It would be good to have something like that for ECRs, which promotes communications between ECRs, and can be used as a platform for inviting established researchers as mentors.

- Some universities have an annual postdoctoral recruitment round, but without the assurance from the university that the ECR would continue to have employment after the postdoc tenure is finished, they often become casual academics or research assistants at the end of their postdoc contract. In the humanities area, without the support of the faculty within which the postdoc will be embedded, it is impossible to even put in an EOI for it, and faculty often filter out postdocs that they consider 'not useful' in their teaching program. With more and more humanities departments shutting down, it is harder to find postdoctoral positions in the humanities.
- There should be a facility to have a named postdoc or ECR within larger collaborative ARC grants etc, rather than push them to apply for DECRAs. DECRAs have become impossibly competitive, with junior postdocs competing with experienced ECRs (4+ years) with several publications. Internal or organisational ECR grants can also be another mechanism for ECRs to gain experience in conducting research, writing grant applications and being mentored.
- ALIA's Research Advisory Committee advocates for researcher-practitioner collaboration projects through its research grants, but we need more such grants across the spectrum. This could be done through encouraging different organisations within the industry to fund research positions for ECRs to investigate problems and opportunities in their practice.

Q7. Do ECRs in the humanities experience different or additional challenges compared to their peers in other disciplines?

Yes, ECRs in the humanities do experience additional challenges compared to their peers in other disciplines, as their research is often future-focused and may or may not reveal immediate benefits to industry or funding bodies.

Publication expectations can be the same for ECRs in the humanities as the expectations for other disciplines in their institutions. Due to the nature of research in humanities (see also Q6), this can be a challenge in terms of performance assessment and promotion.

Humanities researchers have produced excellent collaborative digital humanities research projects that are in the form of digital libraries, databases or other 'objects', yet often they are not considered as research outputs by their universities. Very few universities have a structured system for the recognition of such outputs as NTRO (non-traditional research outputs).

Q8. Do ECRs experience different or additional challenges compared to mid-career or senior staff?

Yes. ECRs start their research career within a usually very small research network. Depending on which circle of researchers they are connected to, they may not find an opportunity to be linked to major national and international collaborations and cultural institutions. This does

not allow them to establish a competitive track record when applying for ARC or other major research grants.

Q9. What do ECRs see as challenges in their career progression?

Recent ECRs in the humanities have experienced the following challenges:

- No room for promotion from junior positions as senior academics remain in place longer of late and this is not a growth sector in terms of hiring within universities, although there is a need for both graduates and researchers within the broader professional sector in humanities.
- A limited number of opportunities for ongoing academic balanced research and teaching positions. Many new PhD graduates work for several years as teaching fellows or casual academics with no research workload allocated due to the lack of ongoing positions; and yet, by the time they do get an academic position with a research workload, they may already be out of the five years ECR status and lose eligibility to apply for DECRA and even internal ECR funds. For some, the only way to progress their career is through moving laterally into teaching and learning or administrative positions within universities, and this is often a loss of expertise and coherence in the discipline area.
- Replacement of humanities programs and faculties with STEM-related programs and faculties. Universities have been known to consider some of the humanities faculties as 'boutique' outfits and have dismantled them in favour of new digital and social media programs. These new programs often attract people from the IT discipline and soon, the core humanities values and human-centred research approaches are lost.

Q10. How do we better track the career trajectories of ECRs?

Most ECRs keep track of each other's trajectories. However, there is no means currently of extending this into a nurturing community of practice. Rather, within the current competitive environment, ECRs see each other as competition rather than colleagues and collaborators due to the limited number of positions available.

5. Workforce diversity and gender equity

Q11. What are the most pressing inequities in the humanities workforce today?

ALIA is about to publish the *Galleries Libraries Archives Museums and Records Workforce Diversity Trend Report 2019*, which illustrates issues for the GLAM sector in terms of age (older), gender (female dominated), workers identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (under-represented) and born in Asia or speaking an Asian language at home (under-represented).

6. Summary

On behalf of our members, representing library and information professionals, libraries and information services, academics, researchers, research practitioners and the LIS community

Australia-wide, the ALIA Research Advisory Committee welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to *Future Humanities Workforce Consultation Paper*.

We would be pleased to be involved in further discussions about Future Humanities Workforce project.

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