The Future of LIS Education

Background

ALIA Vice President and President-elect Viv Barton has taken education as the theme for her presidential year, from May 2020 – May 2021. It is a topic which goes to the very heart of ALIA, as the professional body for the library and information sector. In 2018, the ALIA Board appointed the ALIA Education Advisory Committee, comprising leaders from education and institutions across the sector, to provide advice to the Board on ALIA's education policies and guidelines.

We currently work with LIS educators to shape quality contemporary courses in library and information science; we accredit higher education and vocational education institutions to deliver these courses; we provide a framework for ongoing learning through our PD Scheme; we offer a range of opportunities through ALIA Training; and we encourage professionals to include a relevant specialisation in their annual professional development commitment, as they work towards becoming a Distinguished Certified Professional. What might the future hold for us?

Australian **Library** and **Information** Association

alia.org.au

Context

The education sector is undergoing a period of transformation. Public universities face the challenge of balancing revenue generation with social good; TAFE institutions are being restructured into regional, state and territory systems; many organisations are exploring the opportunities presented by online course delivery, while also investing in modern campus facilities.

Change is being driven by the high-volume disciplines such as medicine, engineering and business. By comparison, library and information science is a relatively niche field with only a fraction of the number of students.

ALIA is a member of Professions Australia. Through this alliance, we are working to leverage the power of other industries to achieve our goal of robust and meaningful accreditation outcomes, supporting a strong library and information profession.

These conversations are happening not only in Australia, but in other parts of the world including the UK and US.

Education does not stand still. Curricula, modes of delivery, course duration, recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, employer engagement and the focus on the student experience help create a shifting landscape, which requires industry bodies to be on constant alert regarding future pathways to professional status.

Activity

ALIA is investigating the issues with which our educators, employers and students are grappling. We are approaching the project from the perspective of 'what does good look like' and comparing this vision with our current circumstances to identify ways we can move from where we are now to where we need to be by 2025.

Project phases

Stage 1: Publication of this issues paper, based on conversations with educators, sector focus groups, discussions with employers and other stakeholders.

Stage 2: Survey of the sector to gain further insight into the issues.

Stage 3: Scenario exploration sessions with educators and employers.

Stage 4: ALIA Education Summit, 4 May, ICC Sydney.

Stage 5: Publication of a draft LIS education strategy and action plan.

Stage 6: Implementation of the action plan from late 2020.

Stage 1	Issues paper	November 2019
Stage 2	Survey	November 2019 – February 2020
Stage 3	Scenario exploration sessions	November 2019 – April 2020
Stage 4	Education Summit	4 May 2020
Stage 5	Draft LIS education strategy and plan	June 2020
Stage 6	Implementation of the action plan	From late 2020

ISSUES

Themes emerging from discussions with ALIA Members and the broader sector

The ALIA Learning team has been engaged in purposeful conversations with ALIA Members, students, educators and library leaders, in order to understand the issues facing the sector and these are the themes we have identified:

1. Pathways to becoming a library and information professional

We know that our new generation and mid-career library and information tier contains people with the talents and attributes to step up as future leaders. Leaders benefit from maturity of thought, enthusiasm, energy and charisma.

The past

Before library and information science became a discipline taught by universities and TAFEs in Australia, becoming a professional meant undertaking a combination of study and work experience and passing an examination, set by the association, in order to become a registered library professional.

The present

Registration was replaced in the 1970s by course accreditation, when the association passed the responsibility for organising the study and work experience to other education providers – and this is the system we have today.

Most ALIA Members have become library and information professionals through university or TAFE study. They have spent time and money earning their degrees, postgrad qualifications and the titles of Librarian and Library Technician, which they hold with justifiable pride and a strong sense of achievement.

The library workforce is no longer (if it ever was) exclusively made up of LIS-qualified professionals. We now welcome people from many different backgrounds – IT, the arts, marketing, customer service and so on. Anyone can become a general Member of ALIA; those who have VET, undergraduate or post-graduate qualifications in related topics can become professional Allied Field Members.

The future

In the current environment, professions across all industries are having to decide where to take a firm stand and where to allow for a little flexibility. Every sector, whether law, medicine, engineering or information management, is engaged in an internal debate about what it means to be a professional. Whether professionalism is exclusively about education and qualifications or whether it can include knowledge and skills developed through experience in the workplace.

With people increasingly moving freely between different careers, we may need to consider entirely new pathways to achieving professional status. It is a challenging topic for those who have hard-earned qualifications; for professionals who have committed to ongoing learning, and for academics and researchers in the field. At the same time, it can be frustrating for people who have dedicated their working lives to the sector but are not considered professionals as they lack the necessary formal study. This is a hard conversation, but as a sector, it is one in which we need to engage.

From 1 July 2020, all new Associate, Library Technician and Allied Field ALIA membership will include automatic entry to the ALIA PD Scheme. This commitment to ongoing professional development and lifelong learning will ensure that our members remain responsive and up to date as new skills, technology and mindsets are required in a rapidly changing world.

2. Sustainability of LIS education

The student experience

As described in the preamble to this issues paper, library and information science is a niche discipline in terms of the number of students we attract. Fewer than 2,000 are studying LIS subjects at levels from Certificate II through to Masters. Just over half of these students are studying at the VET level, and the remainder are studying at the higher education level. Two-thirds study part-time and approximately 60% hold Commonwealth supported places.[1] Anecdotally we know many Library Technicians go on to complete undergraduate LIS studies.

Undertaking LIS study is a major financial commitment. Without the benefits of economies of scale in most institutions, fees for LIS students can be substantial, especially when compared with potential earning power. Repayment of student debt has become an established reality for many.

Course intakes are not directly linked to industry recruitment requirements and recent graduates report difficulty gaining employment, especially at the level they feel is appropriate to their qualification. It should also be noted, though, that regional libraries – school, public, university, TAFE and special – report difficulties recruiting qualified staff.

Many courses are now delivered wholly online, which means students lack the daily peer-to-peer engagement which has previously been an important part of the experience. This can reduce the number of staff in libraries who decide to take up professional study and lead to lower completion rates.

The educator perspective

In 2012, there were 30 institutions providing 49 higher education and VET courses. In 2020, there will be 20 institutions and 28 courses (excluding those which are teaching out). Only one institution will be providing teacher librarianship qualifications compared with three in 2012.[2]

These statistics are the hard figures that demonstrate the degree of instability for our LIS university academics, researchers and TAFE teachers.

Smaller courses are under constant scrutiny from senior management. There is economic pressure to ensure courses are not only breakeven but also generate a surplus for the consolidated revenue of the institution.

There has been an increased level of casualisation of the teaching workforce, with more LIS lecturers employed part time, on short term contracts and on a needs basis. However, in universities, there is increased pressure to carry out original research and be published.

We have seen a reduction in administrative support. We know that course co-ordinators struggle under a workload in excess of the time allowed[3] and part-time markers are the norm.

Against this backdrop, educators are naturally uncertain about the future of their courses, which creates a disincentive to investing time and effort in forward planning and the development of new and innovative content.

Some senior educators will be retiring over the next two years. While there is a healthy flow of LIS doctoral candidates in the system who could replace retirees, this also provides an opportunity for institutions to review staffing structures and potentially reduce the number of full-time positions.

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[1] https://www.alia.org.au/employment-and-careers/alia-lis-education-skills-and-employment-trend-report

[2] Ibid

[3] https://read.alia.org.au/alia-statement-support-role-course-coordinator-vocational-education-and-training

3. Employer engagement

ALIA accredited institutions are required to have active relationships with employers to ensure that course content continues to reflect the realities of the workplace and that graduates' knowledge and skills will be relevant and valued. In practice, the level of connection is variable, with some course advisory panels meeting regularly and others only once or twice a year.

We expect educators to initiate contact outside the course advisory panels, but with the constraints on time and resources described in the previous section, this can be a challenge.

In the best cases, there is a strong connection between the institution and local employers. Employers advertise positions with a requirement for ALIA accredited LIS qualifications; staff from libraries teaching into the LIS course; there are industry placements for students; there is special support for staff studying LIS qualifications; it is easier for libraries in regional and remote areas to recruit professional staff from the pool of new graduates.

Where employers feel a sense of disconnection, the LIS qualification may be less respected. In-house programs may be used more extensively to train non-LIS qualified staff to perform tasks previously assigned to Librarians and Library Technicians, thus undermining the value of formal professional study. The demand from employers for new and different skills – for example, soft skills to support management and leadership development – will go unheard.

While online study makes sense in theory and is a practical response to the 'tyranny of distance', it can create unanticipated consequences for the LIS profession. In the Northern Territory and Tasmania, where there are no longer local institutions providing LIS education, we have reports of a decreased focus on academic inquiry and professional issues; fewer career development and professional learning opportunities; less opportunities for staff to engage with and mentor new professionals; problems recruiting qualified staff; a shortage of staff with specialist skill sets, and as a result an increase in the number of staff without LIS qualifications or skills.

Our larger libraries invest in studies, including original research, desk research and program evaluation. Reports are often commissioned from non-LIS consultancies. At the same time, there are LIS academics and researchers starved of funding for important research projects. There is clearly a disconnect here, which it would be in the interests of all parties (including ALIA, as an Australian Research Institute) to address.

OUR VISION

From these themes, we have identified ten desirable characteristics for an LIS sector with a strong professional focus.

1. Leaders in the LIS sector are committed to a sustainable, evolving library and information profession.

2. Educators are secure in their positions and have the time, resources and administrative support to maintain their currency relating to library practice and explore new content based on innovation in the sector nationally and internationally.

3. There is an active dialogue between educators, employers, students and new graduates to shape the future of LIS education.

4. Courses are developed with and for employers.

5. Education is closely linked to employment outcomes and this is reflected in the student intake in terms of attributes, interests, diversity, as well as the matching of numbers of students to the predicted number of positions available.

6. There are different pathways to professional status, which value LIS qualifications and acknowledge new ways of achieving the required knowledge, skills and competencies.

7. Study is affordable, flexible, supported and achievable.

8. A flexible qualifications framework covers the required knowledge, skills and competencies, moving through certificate to Masters based on four elements: conceptual thinking, LIS practice, LIS-specific knowledge and skills, and broad knowledge and skills, with options for recognition of prior learning and micro-credentials.

9. Ongoing professional learning is a requirement and is integrated into the pathways to professional status.

10. There is an active exchange between academics, researchers and employers to expand the reach and impact of LIS research, and maximise the return from the available funding.

From this we have drafted a vision statement of:

" A secure future for current and next generation LIS professionals, supported by an employer-driven LIS learning framework, including meaningful and affordable qualifications and ongoing learning, delivered through a robust education infrastructure. "

STATUS

In order to assess our current position and the size of the gap between where we are now and our vision, ALIA is undertaking a survey.

http://bit.ly/2pGjxwl

The results of the survey will form part of the body of information to be considered by invited participants at the ALIA Education Summit on 4 May, at the ICC Sydney.