The Future of Library and Information Studies Education in Australia

Response & Position Paper
School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to respond to the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) discussion paper *The future of library and information science education in Australia* (2020a). This response considers the methodology used to inform conclusions in the discussion paper, addresses the questions asked, and proposes ways to ensure that the profession and the association remain sustainable into the future.

The ALIA discussion paper

The methodology

We have concerns about the applicability of the research findings to the wider Library and Information Studies (LIS) sector, given the small non-representative sample used to inform these findings. The discussion paper is based on a survey of members undertaken by ALIA from November 2019 to February 2020. A total of 352 responses were received.

The ALIA LIS Education, skills and employment trend report of 2019 identifies 27,500 workers in libraries and information services (ALIA, 2019a). It is therefore possible to estimate that these survey responses represent the views of **1.28%** of the workforce. It is also important to note that individuals with strong feelings about LIS education were more likely to have responded to the survey. While it is of course very important to capture these perspectives, it is dangerous to assume that they are representative of the wider workforce.

Following the survey, focus groups were held in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney without the involvement of major higher education providers for the profession. The discussion paper states that "various future scenarios were explored" (ALIA, 2020a, p. 4). However, these scenarios have not been published with the discussion paper, so it is difficult to ascertain what the focus group participants were responding to.

Both survey and focus groups were based on a pre-published issues paper (ALIA, 2019b) in which a 'vision' is set out following the contrasting of 'the present' and 'the future'. Given this frame of reference for the research, it is hardly surprising that the survey and focus groups confirmed that 'current circumstances' fell short of the vision.

In short, the findings outlined in the discussion paper are broad and draw on a limited sample to inform the ALIA position. In this position paper we expand on the research done by ALIA and propose further research collaborations and approaches to better understand what we argue is a core profession to a democratic, educated and civil society.

The questions

We recognise the concerns highlighted by participants in the research about the "watering down of the profession" (ALIA 2020, p. 8) through the employment of unqualified and/or non-LIS trained staff in an increasing number of roles. This position paper argues for the essential value of higher education to the LIS sector through its ongoing commitment to producing qualified professionals, developing vocationally trained workers, and creating innovative, unique bodies of knowledge through sustained research programs.

1. **What should be the future structure of the Australian library and information profession with consideration to librarians, teacher librarians, library technicians and allied professionals?**

    Detailed studies of the professions in general indicate that a central element of each is an accepted body of knowledge over which the profession claims unrivalled expertise. Abbott (1988, 1998) terms this claimed expertise the profession's "jurisdiction". Coupled with this is a system of certifying individuals that have mastered that body of knowledge, usually taught in a university environment. The intensity of activity in defining jurisdiction varies from time to time: most intense as the

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profession is established, and when it is under some challenge from rival professions, as it was between computer science and LIS (first discussed by Abbott (1988)). It is helpful to think of a profession as an ongoing "project" that can be enhanced or degraded by the collective decisions made in developing and maintaining its own self-identity. To our mind, to take library and information education out of the university environment would challenge LIS occupations' status as a profession. Librarianship has come a long way to change from an occupation to a profession (Goode, 1961) and this has been achieved by the development of its higher education, and close collaboration between professional bodies and the university sector. Such close collaboration requires mutual understanding.

In the case of teacher librarianship, as just one example, there is a growing body of research (see for instance Dix et al., 2020; Merga, 2020) that supports the need for qualifications for teacher librarians to meet the educational needs of staff and students. The demands of embedding pedagogical expertise and curriculum knowledge to deliver targeted library and information services to meet the educational agenda of a school requires deep engagement in theory, research and application that can only be delivered through higher education. The NSW state government requires Masters level qualifications for teacher librarian positions and major government parties in the ACT have just adopted this stance.

We also point to the significant body of research completed during the collaborative *Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the twenty-first century* project, including the publication of a "Framework for the education of the information professions in Australia" (Partridge & Yates, 2012), which has 11 strong recommendations for both educators and the professions.

2. **What should be included in future iterations of the LIS core knowledge, skills and attributes?**

To be able to answer this question confidently there is a need for a strong body of research and evidence to understand the scope of the LIS profession, and the emerging knowledge, skills and attributes required.

The survey and focus groups outlined in the Discussion Paper are not rigorous or comprehensive enough to serve as a basis for future planning.

3. **What shape could a future qualifications framework take, to encompass a variety of formal and informal professional learning?**

First and foremost, we argue that for LIS to remain a profession that is respected and highly regarded by our peers in allied and wider fields, it is essential for there to be a higher education requirement. The Australian Council of Professions defines a "profession" as a group of individuals who possess "special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level" (2003). Tertiary education is part of the minimum requirement for having a profession (Preston, 2019), sometimes based on a professional postgraduate course work and not simply a four-year undergraduate degree (Preston, 2019).

Higher education programs in Library and Information Studies are designed to provide graduates with the specialist knowledge and skills that are considered prerequisites for professional membership. The particular specialist knowledge and skill set required for professional membership is guided by the "Foundation Knowledge, Skills and Attributes relevant to Information Professionals working in Archives, Libraries and Records Management" (2015), which is currently being updated by the three professional associations, including ALIA. We note that ALIA is drafting "Foundation knowledge and competencies for entry-level library and information professionals" (ALIA, 2020b).

We also acknowledge the importance of ongoing professional learning and development to *maintain* skills and knowledge.

4. **How can the sector support our LIS educators and what measures should we put in place to ensure the future sustainability of the LIS profession?**

As members of the LIS higher education community, and as members of ALIA, we believe that these are mutually dependent entities; each depends on the other for leadership, guidance and

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collaboration. This dependency also includes an ongoing flow of ALIA members to higher education, and graduates to ALIA membership.

We argue that one of the key steps that needs to be taken by the profession is to take the time to understand the context of higher education, and the role of higher education in the designation of a profession. As the Australian Council of Professions (2003) affirms, only a university higher education qualification will provide job ready graduates with the "special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level". This is required for information workers to be considered members of a profession. Any future scenario that does not include professional-level education will remove the possibility for the industry to be considered a profession and will do a great disservice to all current and future library and information workers. In turn there will be no need for a professional association like ALIA.

Issues arising from the discussion paper

While it is difficult to address the scenarios proposed in the "Future" discussion paper without being provided access to them, as members of ALIA we respond to two possible scenarios based on the content of the "Future" paper: the de-professionalisation of the library and information sector, and a revitalisation of accreditation requirements.

De-professionalisation

Whilst not stated specifically, there is an implication in the "Future" discussion paper that the sector could move away from an accredited university level education as a requirement to be recognised as a professional member of ALIA (2020a, p. 12). This may be similar in intention to the membership model recently proposed by CILIP, though the educational implications for this model are not clear either.

> Textbooks define a full profession as an organized body of experts who apply some particular form of esoteric knowledge to particular cases. Full professions have systems of instruction and training together with entry by examination and other formal prerequisites. They are believed to possess and enforce some kind of code of ethics or rules of behaviour (Abbott, 1988, p. 431).

Where Abbott uses "esoteric", other sociologists refer to "abstract" or "theoretical" knowledge. This is why most professional education is in universities. This esoteric, theoretical knowledge is the foundation of a professional education. More practical aspects of a professional's work, known as training or continuing professional development, begins during education but occurs throughout a professional's working life as professions constantly evolve.

If the responsibility to educate library and information workers is removed from the higher education sector and placed instead in the hands of employers and ALIA, who are offering only single topic, vocational level professional development opportunities, there is a very real danger that we will no longer be considered members of a profession. If professional status is to be removed from library and information workers, they will instead be considered members of a vocation supported by vocational education only (TafeCourses.com.au, 2020).

This in turn will dissolve the distinction between the two traditionally discrete levels of skilled library workers - library technicians and librarians. Such a scenario could also result in lower levels of pay for library and information workers, and de-value the qualifications of the thousands of already qualified LIS professionals.

Revitalisation of accreditation requirements

Also implicit in the "Future" discussion paper is the need for ALIA to reflect on the requirements for an accredited professional. Along with compliance with the Australian higher education system that guides the level of learning at under- and postgraduate level[1], educators in the LIS higher education sector are also

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[1] The Australian Higher Education Standards Framework and Australian Qualifications Framework

accountable to and guided by the requirements set out by the key accrediting bodies, and need to also be responsive to what Partridge and Yates name "the broadening employment landscape for the LIS sector", including "knowledge management, records management, content and data management and web development" (2012, p. 83). Much is asked of individuals when they are to be considered members of our profession. Foundational knowledge and competencies must be demonstrated in the following areas (ALIA 2015):

- The information environment
- Community engagement
- Literacies and learning
- Information services
- Resources
- Digital technologies
- Leadership and management
- Research
- Professionalism
- Behavioural skills.

While much of the feedback included in the "Future" discussion paper notes "the ethics, values, principles perspectives" needed in qualified professionals (and which in turn can be linked to the ongoing diversity discussion), many of the requirements set out for accreditation reflect technical and domain knowledge. It is unclear in the discussion paper how the role of these accreditation requirements has been explained to frame the topic of accredited higher education, and how this influenced responses to the unspecified scenarios.

It should also be noted that many measures are taken to ensure that the graduates of accredited courses are job ready. Extensive industry consultation, thorough course reviews, inclusion of ALIA members and employers as sessional academics, course advisers and guest lecturers are among such measures, as well as mandatory professional placements and study visits for students in accredited degrees. These placements and study visits, hosted by numerous qualified professionals and institutions across Australia, are strongly indicative of the programs' close relationship to industry,

Looking to the future

We note that there may well be more positions in the library and information sector than there are ALIA members, but it is not clear that this gap (if there is one) is growing, nor what the nature of such positions are. We share ALIA's desire to ensure that the profession and the association remain sustainable into the future. To this end, we propose a focus on the following three key themes going forward.

A collaborative and dynamic approach to LIS higher education

There is the potential for innovative collaborations between higher education institutions and ALIA to further develop the profession through partnerships and shared service models, recognising the different nature of education and training, and their respective providers. This approach has the capacity to take advantage of the current government's approach to developing job ready graduates through short courses and micro-credentials. Core to this is the ability to navigate these collaborations through the higher education frameworks, and for the accreditation requirements to shift in response to the dynamic needs of the LIS sector.

Advocacy for higher order qualified LIS professionals in relevant sectors

Much of the "Future" discussion paper looks to vocational and applied level training as an alternative pathway to library professional status, without acknowledging the need parts of the sector have for higher level qualified staff. This includes for example the North American model of doctoral qualified faculty employment within academic libraries (Ridley 2018), and special libraries in the health and sciences industries who are key members of research teams and producing high quality research outputs.

From this, there is the opportunity for the education needs of the profession to be further articulated by the sector, and for ALIA to advocate for add-on and higher level qualifications requirements in specific contexts, such as the North America model of teaching/research academic library staff who hold an accredited MLIS and a PhD. This in turn ensures an ongoing and engaged research community in a nation that has not

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traditionally prioritised the PhD as a professionally relevant qualification (Macaulay et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010).

Rigorous, evidence based research into the value of the LIS profession

There have only been two major research projects investigating current issues in the LIS sector in the last decade, both funded through Australian government schemes.

Year/s	Title of research project (funding body)
2013 - 2015	Building the basis for evidence-based library and information practice: a qualitative study (ARC Discovery DP130102710)
2011	Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the 21st century (ALTC)

Given the importance of ongoing investigation into key issues facing the sector, especially in light of the current global climate, it is proposed that a strong, ongoing partnership be formed between ALIA and higher education institutions to enable a series of rigorous, evidence-based research projects and evaluations of the sector and profession.

Conclusion

Any future scenario that does not require formal education focussed on the LIS field will remove the possibility for the industry to be considered a profession and will do a great disservice to all current and future library and information workers.

Our profession has demonstrated through over 60 years of professional education in Australian higher education institutions that to gain knowledge and skills across its breadth an individual needs a depth and quality of education that cannot be provided solely in a workplace (Wilson et al., p247). This education must be informed by research, close consultation with employers, global contextualisation and a level of interdisciplinary knowledge and connection that is best fostered through a university environment.

If we want to be considered alongside established professions such as law, accountancy, teaching, engineering and medicine, we need to continue and build the higher education requirements for professional level work within the LIS sector. Removing the requirement of a degree qualification will return our sector to where it was in the early twentieth century, and devalue the hard earned qualifications of all current LIS professionals.

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