

Defining fundamentals and meeting expectations: Trends in LIS education in Australia

Ross Harvey and Susan Higgins

Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia

Tel.: +61 2 6933 2369; 2467; Fax: +61 2 6933 2733; E-mail: rossharvey@csu.edu.au;

Shiggins@csu.edu.au

Received March 2003

Accepted March 2003

Library and information studies education in Australia is characterised by unresolved tensions, some of which have persisted for several decades. Among its characteristics and conflicts are a multi-tiered system of qualification, a high number of schools per capita with a wide range of discipline affiliations, a wide acceptance of distance learning, pressure for curriculum review, and the perceived need for a national approach to planning for the profession.

Keywords: Librarianship, information studies, education, Australia, distance education, funding, curriculum review

1. Introduction

The current state of Australian library and information studies (LIS) education is characterised by unresolved tensions, only some of which have been accommodated. Our objective in this paper is to ascertain current trends in LIS education in Australia, rather than to compile an inventory of current programs and courses. We focus on a framework of tensions whose accommodation by the Australian LIS community form the trends. Australia has no central data source for LIS education comparable to the statistics compiled by ALISE (the Association of Library and Information Science Educators) about LIS schools in Canada and the United States. Consequently our evidence comes from a range of sources, with varying degrees of validity. Some of it is based on our experience of LIS education in Australia, while other evidence is taken from material produced by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and other sources.

2. Setting the scene

The current state of LIS education in Australia cannot be fully understood without some awareness of its history and of some of the major factors that have influenced

it. As a former British colony, Australia adopted a British model of library education. Librarianship qualifications were first awarded by the Library Association of Australia, then, from 1960, by schools based in universities or other tertiary-level educational institutions. The dominant professional qualification has been, and continues to be, the graduate diploma, equivalent to a full year's study of librarianship following a bachelors level qualification in any discipline. Other qualifications, such as the masters degree, were not of interest to the profession until the 1990s. Bachelors degrees in LIS have been adopted energetically in Australia from 1971. Currently a qualified LIS professional can attain professional membership of ALIA (the Australian Library and Information Association) with either a bachelors degree in LIS, a graduate diploma, or a masters [1].

One factor, funding, predominates in influencing the development of LIS education in Australia. The development of Australian tertiary education has been influenced dramatically by changes in its funding, and LIS education has not been immune from this influence. All of Australia's LIS schools are located in public universities or undergraduate colleges of technical and further education (TAFEs). Government policy over the last two decades has resulted in reduced funding from state and federal sources, which has fallen to about 55 per cent of the total revenue of these institutions. Australian universities receive more from student fees than their counterparts in any other OECD country [2]. The consequence has been the widespread introduction of fees for postgraduate qualifications, and the drive to seek income from students located outside Australia. Funding drives many decisions about LIS education in Australia which in a less imperfect world would be more heavily influenced by pedagogical principles.

3. Tensions in Australian LIS education

Education for LIS in Australia shares many characteristics with LIS education in other countries, but also has some that are specifically local. The common characteristics familiar to most LIS educators, regardless of where in the world they are located, are described by Cronin, writing about information studies education in the United States, in terms such as 'survival of the knowledge base rather than programs', 'repositioning', 'rebadging' and so on [3]. Curry, in relation to Canada, writes of 'new homes, new partners' and 'broader curriculum menus and scheduling' [4]. Tension between the old and the new is implicit in all of these terms. Characteristics which are unique to Australia, or which assume more importance in Australia compared with other countries, also present tensions which, although they are largely accommodated, remain unresolved. The characteristics and conflicts noted in this article are:

- A multi-tiered system: multiple levels of qualification
- Too many schools, too few students?

- Institutional affiliations
- Responding to ‘the tyranny of distance’
- Pressures for curriculum change
- Seeking a national approach: the LISEKA Project.

3.1. A multi-tiered system: Multiple levels of qualification

The multiple routes available to become a recognised professional LIS worker in Australia, combined with a strong LIS technician group, create powerful stresses for LIS education in Australia. As indicated above, currently a qualified LIS professional can attain professional membership of ALIA with either a bachelors degree in LIS, a graduate diploma, or a masters degree.

The first tension to note is between undergraduate and postgraduate professional LIS qualifications. Professionally-recognised bachelors qualifications awarded by nine of the twelve Australian LIS schools are accorded the same professional status as graduate diplomas or masters degrees. Holding a masters qualification in Australia is not usually linked to higher levels of pay; pay scales are theoretically the same for all first professional qualifications. There is, therefore, no financial incentive to pay the extra costs incurred in studying at the masters level. The continuing popularity of the bachelors degrees can, in part, be attributed to the existence of a strong LIS technician group in Australia. Bachelors programs provide this group of paraprofessionals with opportunities to upgrade their technician qualifications to a fully professional university-awarded qualification.

The second tension arises from the existence of the technician-level qualifications held by these paraprofessionals. The first of these qualifications was offered in 1970 at Whitehorse College (now Box Hill Institute, a technical and further education provider) in Melbourne, Victoria. As a recent commentator notes, ‘one of the key dilemmas that has faced the library industry since the introduction of accredited tertiary/VET education (i.e. technician-level qualifications) has been the degree to which the two sectors of library employment converge’ [5]. Assumptions made when technician qualifications were introduced about the different levels at which each group would work have not been supported in practice. The tensions are very real, partly because students pay less to complete a technician qualification than a university-based professional degree, and because employers hire technicians at lower salaries than professional librarians. This appears to have been ‘largely undebated’ by LIS educators, indicates Carroll, who suggests that ‘there appears to have been an unacknowledged shift in the distinctions we draw between the nature of educational outcomes for librarianship and training for library technicians’ [6]. The lack of distinction is not helped by ALIA’s recognition of library technician courses, adding further to the confusion of potential students and uninformed employers.

3.2. *Too many schools, too few students?*

Although some LIS schools have closed in the last twenty years, there are still twelve offering professional graduate LIS qualifications (down from 16 in 1990) and twelve organisations offering technician-level LIS qualifications in 2003 [7]. Pawley, Willard and Wilson comment: 'Australia . . . seems very well – perhaps too well – served' [8]. Twelve schools for a population of the size of Australia are probably too many. Comparable countries sustain a lower ratio of LIS schools to population size; Canada, for example, had seven schools for over 30 million people in 1999, and the United States had a similar per capita ratio [9].

There are several possible explanations for this high number of schools, such as the relative unwillingness of Australian students to relocate, or the political imperatives for all states and territories to have a library school, as was the case until recently. But these are only partial explanations which take no account of other factors, such as the availability of distance education programs in LIS for nearly three decades in Australia. The consequence is that several of the LIS schools have low numbers of faculty (in 1999 these ranged from 4 to 14 [10]) and small enrolments, and it is difficult to envisage how some of them will continue to sustain their programs. In the current funding context of tertiary education in Australia, maintaining student numbers is essential for program survival.

3.3. *Institutional affiliations*

What is it that LIS schools are educating their students for? LIS education in Australia faces issues about what Blaise Cronin has called the 'increasing difficulty in maintaining coherence of identity, image, and purpose.' [11] The discipline affiliations and faculty affiliations of Australian LIS schools indicate this clearly. The most common affiliations are information systems, communications/media, education, and business. While some of the affiliations have been motivated by pragmatic, rather than pedagogical, reasons as universities seek to cut costs by grouping teaching areas into larger administrative units, others have been actively sought by LIS faculty. The wide range of discipline affiliations is given in Table 1. These affiliations do not give the full picture. Some Australian universities place a strong emphasis on building a research culture, while others are more firmly rooted in practice-based education and practice-based, context-driven research, and this has affected the affiliations sought with other units within the university.

What is librarianship, or information studies? What skills and attitudes make for successful practice? Do Australian graduates in LIS possess these skills and attributes? These questions have been asked in various forums around Australia in recent years, and continue to be pondered [12].

Table 1
Faculty locations of Australian LIS schools

University	School/Department	Faculty/Division
Charles Sturt University	Information Studies	Science and Agriculture
Curtin University of Technology	Media and Information	Media, Society and Culture
Edith Cowan University	Computer and Information Science	Communications, Health and Science
Monash University	Information Management and Systems	Information Technology
Northern Territory University	Management	Law, Business and Arts
Queensland University of Technology [Gardens Point]	Information Systems	Information Technology
Queensland University of Technology [Kelvin Grove]	Cultural and Language Studies in Education	Education
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology	Business Information Technology	Business
University of Canberra	Information Management and Tourism	Communication and Education
University of New South Wales	Information Systems, Technology and Management	Commerce and Economics
University of South Australia	Communication, Information and New Media	Education, Arts and Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney	Information Studies	Humanities and Social Sciences

Source: *ALIA-recognised courses in library and information studies 2003*, <http://www.alia.org.au/education/courses/>, accessed 11 February 2003.

3.4. Responding to 'the tyranny of distance'

For many, perhaps most, Australian university students (including LIS students) distance education is a way of life, not a new venture. Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, author of the 1968 book *The tyranny of distance: how distance shaped Australia's history*, notes that 'In many ways a sense of distance – as well as the distance itself – strongly influences Australian life and especially national politics' [13]. Australia's large expanse and sparse, widely dispersed population have been the incentive to provide distance learning opportunities. More recently, reductions in government funding and the consequent imperative for universities to generate operating funds have led to keen interest in exporting Australian education, including by distance, to the rest of the world. Education is now one of Australia's major exports.

Eight of Australia's twelve LIS schools and at least three of the technician-level programs offer distance learning programs. The largest LIS distance education provider in Australia, also the school with the highest enrolments, is Charles Sturt University's School of Information Studies. This school has offered LIS programs in distance mode since 1974. In 2001 over 1400 LIS students were enrolled at Charles Sturt University, with more than 300 of these based outside Australia. In 1998 its graduates accounted for about 30 per cent of all graduates from Australian LIS schools; in 2000 this had risen to over 40 percent. (These figures come from Charles Sturt University and from ALIA, which supplies to LIS schools the total number of

graduates each year.) We have, then, the situation where a professional librarian who has recently graduated from an LIS school in Australia is very likely to have studied by distance mode. We can expect this trend to increase.

Distance education clearly suits Australian LIS students. It accommodates those who are in paid employment and those who carry out carer responsibilities – many Australian LIS students are working women immersed in their role of caregivers, which they balance with full- or part-time employment in the LIS sector while they study. Opportunities for full- or part-time study in distance mode offer flexibility that enables such students to gain a professional qualification, and opportunity that would be unachievable for them if regular campus attendance were required. Most Australian universities have set up comprehensive services to support course delivery by distance mode, taking advantage of the major advances in communications technology of the last decade.

3.5. Pressures for curriculum change

Australian LIS education is definitely not exempt from the ongoing requirements, familiar to all LIS educators regardless of the country in which they are based, to prepare students for constantly changing workplaces. There are tensions between what the profession thinks it needs, what educators think is required, and student demands relating to such factors as technology, learning environment and circumstances.

The profession, as we have already noted, is complex, changing, and does not speak with one voice about the attributes and skills it expects new graduates to have. LIS educators often feel that they are walking a tightrope as they attempt to accommodate the demands of the profession with their own perceptions of what content is needed in the curriculum – theoretical underpinnings of the profession, and exploration of new specialist subject areas such as leadership, knowledge management, digital libraries and information literacy. Traditional areas co-exist with technical areas because students have the same interests and motivations as their predecessors. Current skills development in desktop publishing, web design, marketing, team leadership, document management and portal management have evolved as a result of technological advancement and workplace demands. In Australia these tensions have led most recently to the Library and Information Science Education for the Knowledge Age (LISEKA) project, which is discussed further below.

A further set of stresses is raised by different concerns on the part of both LIS students and the profession. Farley-Larmour's survey of first-year undergraduate librarianship students in Australia suggests that 'despite changes in the profession in the last decades many students are still enrolling in library and information studies courses with the same interests and motivations as their predecessors a decade or more ago' [14]. This point has also been made for the United States, where Irwin has pointed out that 'the profession is holding tightly to roughly the same required course work that sustained it for a century, while couching course titles

in more technical terminology' [15]. And Australian LIS students have clearly indicated, as noted above, that they are comfortable with distance education, which suits their learning styles and circumstances and accommodates gender issues. A useful reality check for LIS educators in Australia is to keep a close eye on the job market. Sources such as the Web sites of the two largest agencies specialising in LIS job placements, Zenith Management Services Group (<http://www.zenman.com.au>) and the One Umbrella group (<http://www.oneumbrella.com.au>) provide useful information. One Umbrella's list of 'Hot Skills for Today's Job Market' (http://www.oneumbrella.com.au/job_seekers/hot.shtml) indicates a strong and continuing interest among employers in some traditional areas such as archives, cataloguing and metadata, as well as the increasing value of skills such as desktop publishing, web design, marketing, team leadership, document management and portal management.

One part of this tension is the role of the professional association, ALIA. ALIA is the only professional association in Australia which represents LIS workers, and has been attempting to expand its areas of influence to accommodate those who work in other parts of the information sector beyond libraries. One indication is the Association's change of name in 1988, from the Library Association of Australia to the Australian Library and Information Association. Another sign is its effort to seek formal alliances with related professional groups, demonstrated in the recent memoranda of understanding with the Australian Society of Archivists (signed 2002) and the Australian School Libraries Association (signed 2001). The most direct role played by ALIA in LIS education has been in the course recognition process it manages. Programs offered by Australian LIS schools are assessed in a process similar to that applied by the American Library Association to North American LIS programs, thus providing a strong quality assurance mechanism. Through this process of assessing curriculum against the criteria in its education policy statements, ALIA normalises curriculum offerings across Australia to a certain extent.

4. Seeking a national approach: The LISEKA Project

What is a relevant education for LIS workers in an increasingly networked Australia? In an attempt to answer this question, and perhaps also to boost a declining membership, ALIA began the LISEKA Project in 2001. Its aim is to develop a national approach to career-long education of library and information workers for practice in the 21st century. The project is based on the belief that an effective framework for the future will require partnership between a wide range of stakeholder groups and individuals. Consequently the project, while led by ALIA, will seek strong involvement from outside the immediate sphere of ALIA and build on input from other interest groups, employers, educators and so on [16].

The Project outcome sought is 'a workable framework within which education providers, individuals and agencies can work in partnership towards the goal of

ensuring effective and appropriate career-long education of library and information workers for the 21st century' [17].

An Ideas Forum held in November 2001 was attended by a wide range of invited stakeholders, including representatives from LIS schools, ALIA groups, the National Library of Australia, the Council of Australian University Libraries, the Council of Australian State Libraries, organisations representing public libraries, sister associations such as the Australian School Libraries Association, the Records Management Association of Australia and the Australian Society of Archivists, and recent graduates. From this forum three models were developed. These were circulated among the membership of ALIA and the broader LIS community, from whom input was invited.

- Model 1 ('the status quo') suggested no significant changes to the already existing activities of ALIA in relation to its course recognition activities.
- Model 2 ('career-long learning') proposed that demonstrated ongoing education and development activities were required in order to remain a professional member of ALIA.
- Model 3 (the 'practising professional program') was the most radical proposal, with ALIA being the broker for a range of educational activities.

In this third model, professional membership of ALIA could be attained by a number of routes, only one of which encompassed gaining one of the existing professional degrees offered by Australian universities.

A progress report, issued in September 2002, on the first stage of the LISEKA project presented the main outcomes of the response to these three models. There was strong confirmation of the role of ALIA in setting and monitoring educational standards for the profession, 'with continuation of course recognition by ALIA'; the need for more work on defining professional roles and standards was identified, for example by developing 'future-oriented statements of knowledge skills and attributes of practitioners at different stages of their career'; more flexible strategies for recognising professional standing were seen to be needed; and the promotion of the value of continuing professional development was identified as important [18]. A second stage of the LISEKA project, to develop and implement an educational strategy for ALIA which builds on the outcomes of the consultation stage, is now under way [19].

5. Conclusion

We have attempted to summarise trends in Australian LIS education by describing the tensions which predominate, and by noting the features which are unusual in comparison to LIS education elsewhere. The landscape in recent years has been one of change, with funding issues, increasing study by distance, and continuing curriculum review as the main features, and with no signs that the tensions will diminish.

It is sobering to read earlier comments about the future of LIS education in Australia. Rayward noted in 1989 the detrimental effects of the small sizes of LIS schools, the creation of new alliances for administrative rather than pedagogical reasons, and the progress towards LIS linking with other disciplinary groups [20]. Maguire's concerns in 1996 include the size of LIS schools – small staff and student numbers – and she comments that 'the LIS knowledge base is diffuse' [21]. In some areas of Australian LIS education there has been little change.

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