

Foundations built of sand: historical reflections on contemporary concerns in Australian library and information science

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Foundations built of sand: historical reflections on contemporary concerns in Australian library and information science

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ABSTRACT

This opinion piece reflects on some critical questions being asked today about Australian library and information science (LIS). It explores some of the foundations of such questions to provide an historical perspective on contemporary Australian LIS practice. This paper contends that lack of historical perspectives amongst recent graduates contributes to a sense of professional isolation, and there is a need to place contemporary concerns within a broader and deeper professional landscape if the profession is to successfully address contemporary concerns.

KEYWORDS

Librarianship education;
history of education;
information studies; history;
Australia

Perception and reality

Contemporary discussion around education and training for the library and information professions in Australia tends to revolve around some recurring concerns. One concern is that there is an emerging preference for a trainee model rather than an education model amongst employers and leaders in the profession. This has been fuelled by perceptions that senior library administrators prefer ‘unformed’ graduates from other disciplines with skills outside what it is believed the library and information schools in Australia are delivering to their students. In this scenario, these unformed graduates displace those from the library and information schools in the job market and are then trained in the ways of the information professions to suit a particular workplace and its needs. Similarly, there is discussion around the usurping of professional roles by those emerging from library technician training and, ironically, the preference amongst employers for those with no education or training at all.

These perceptions in turn, seem to be underpinned by a questioning of the appropriateness and continued relevance of Australia’s remaining library and information science (LIS) schools, the academics’ capacity to prepare suitable graduates for the professions, and their competence in delivering an appropriately skilled and digitally competent workforce. The implication is that twenty-first century LIS schools are neither attracting tech-savvy individuals nor are they equipped to educate them to meet the needs of the contemporary workforce, and their offerings and expertise is no longer relevant. Concerns, too, are voiced periodically over the need to attract a younger demographic and to discourage or to reject

'book lovers'. Such discussion often includes an aspect of concern that those in the workforce educated at a time before such tech-savviness was necessary are incapable of adapting, and/or are reluctant to adapt, to the new environment, and that a new breed of very different graduate is needed to sustain the profession. When voiced, this aspect of the current professional uneasiness has a strong thread of generational malcontent winding through it. With this, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a faint whiff of ageism, an age-old battle between generations.

Some of these concerns may be because, for the first time, we are seeing the emergence of a generation of new LIS professionals who lack historical perspectives on their professions, a staple of previous generations. With this may come a lack of understanding of the truly great strides the profession has made in a short number of decades. An absence of understanding of historical place may also be contributing to a sense of 'exceptionality' in which new professionals believe their concerns are new, unique and particular to the contemporary context. This in turn may foster a sense of professional isolation from the cultural communality and from a sense of professional lineage and heritage that a deep understanding of a profession's story can bring. Understanding the historical origins of contemporary issues means any actions and decisions made are fully informed by knowledge of deeper professional context and any broader implications. One such issue requiring context to allow for understanding is the shape of contemporary LIS education and professional employment structures in Australia.

Entering the profession: unresolved tensions and historical divisions

Debates around LIS education and its preferred demographic almost inevitably lead to concerns being raised over the most appropriate professional entry point and the place of library technicians in the LIS workplace. This is demonstrated by the periodic calls for the removal of library technician and undergraduate education and for a minimum master's degree entry to professional information work. These calls for a master's entry point are generally based on a belief that such a move will contribute to a more proficient and highly regarded workforce, and will raise the status and the regard of the profession through an improvement in quality. However, this argument is largely at odds with the previous belief in a preference for a trainee model and highlights the complexity around education and training in the profession today. These perceptions and concerns demonstrate a further need to turn the historical lens on Australian LIS education. Doing so will uncover the contribution of our professional structures to these perceptions, and will ensure that graduates have a full understanding of the forces that have shaped not only LIS education, but the profession. In providing such a lens, the perceptions and concerns of current practitioners can be placed in the context of a long history. This long history provides the opportunity to uncover and discuss trends and to place current concerns within a much broader context. In doing so, such concerns can be weighed against the historical evidence to see if they are in fact new, or if they are part of an ongoing professional discourse which shapes, and is necessary to, progress and change.

Overshadowing all these concerns, however, or perhaps underpinning them, is an uneasiness about the future of the information professions and the agencies which employ them. Some view the technological revolution and times in which we live as placing the LIS

professions and their institutions in jeopardy. In this challenging and uncertain future, it is implied, only the fittest, most tech-savvy and most highly educated (usually educated outside our 'inadequate' LIS schools) will survive. In this construction of the professional environment soft skills are heralded as paramount, trumping all else, with traditional professional skills considered irrelevant, old fashioned or unnecessary. With only generic skills considered valuable, the twentieth-century constructions of the LIS profession, its educational structures, and core skills and attributes and the need for a unique professional association are challenged.

Research and reflection

These concerns and uncertainties are often not explicit and lurk as implications and understandings at the edge of discussions around LIS education, training and employment in Australia. With a few notable exceptions, such as the report 'Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the 21st century' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2011), rarely if ever do they receive undivided attention and (even more rarely) the vigorous debate required to resolve them. Occasionally someone will bravely call for change or challenge a perception, but this is infrequent and the challenge to debate rarely taken up. In an industry itself under pressure, and with a workforce often neither highly regarded nor remunerated by their communities, there appears to be a fear that such debate could unravel the fragile structures supporting the profession. Perhaps this is a case of 'better not look too closely or we will find we have built the foundations of our profession on a bed of sand'. There is a question, too, of who can and should independently take up such challenges and turn an impartial, critical eye on the concerns which plague us. In a depleted academic community with a professional association scrambling to survive, who has the resources and the will to dissect and perhaps challenge what has taken more than half a century to grow?

We need also to ask the difficult question of how possible it is in a small community such as the Australian LIS one for any research on the profession by members of the Australian Academy to be impartial. This question needs to be asked unflinchingly to ensure continued vigilance of our research practices. We need to reflect critically on the formal and informal relationships which exist between the academy, association and practitioners to ensure that academic independence is maintained. There are a number of interdependencies around accreditation, a shared interest in the continued survival of the information professional, and the inevitable close professional and personal relationships which exist in a small professional community which make this vigilance critical.

Research is where a deeper understanding of the current professional context should start, but it needs to be independent and unafraid. Good research can uncover the answers to the questions underpinning contemporary concerns. This needs to be research which is supported by practitioners engaged with its aims and with an understanding of the expertise of their academic partners. While there is a view expressed by practitioners that the academic community does not understand contemporary practice, practitioners also need to engage with the research community, uncover what it is they can contribute, and understand and use the available expertise to answer questions. The academy can not only assist in understanding practice, but can also interrogate and reveal the past, present and future. Research can challenge practitioners to think differently and more deeply, and present results that

enable the profession to lead rather than follow, and to know rather than guess. The gaze turned on the profession must be unflinching, unbiased and courageous.

In the past, the profession has opened itself to critical examination; think Munn and Pitt (1935), McColvin (1947), Jungwirth (Victoria Board of Enquiry, 1964) and the controversial sociological examination 'Librarians: a survey' (Encel, Cass, & Bullard, 1972). More recently, school libraries have been the centre of independent investigation through a House of Representatives Committee enquiry into school libraries (Australia Parliament, House of Representatives, & Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2011). Over time these reports have provided critical independent examination, insight and reflection, and an outsider's perspective of the profession and its education. Such examination is brave and possibly confronting, but is also critical for the future of LIS. Through a deep understanding of the profession and establishing partnerships between the academic community and practitioners, much can be achieved in addressing contemporary concerns and shining a light on future directions.

The academy and the profession

Another concern in the contemporary Australian LIS community is that critical engagement between practitioners and the local LIS academic community in the research arena is limited. The considerable internationally recognised expertise Australian LIS academics possess is rarely drawn upon by the local community. The reasons why are unclear. Is it because there are too few opportunities presented to the local academic community to engage with their practitioner partners and present their expertise? Could it be that the connection between academic and practitioner in Australia is fractured in some way, influencing perceptions about the relevance and expertise of those delivering LIS education – and if this is the case, the question then must be why? Is it because Australian LIS academics too infrequently choose to present their research to local audiences in venues they engage with? Is it because local practitioners too infrequently engage with the research of their local academic community? Is this because there is no research going on, no research which has any implications for practice, perhaps because the research is outdated or irrelevant? Why has the voice of the academy been almost completely absent at major Australian national professional conferences in recent years? Evidence of this is easy to uncover through any cursory examination of these conferences. Invited experts and academics appear aplenty, yet they are rarely (if ever) drawn from the local academic LIS community. Anecdotally, despite submitting proposals, Australian LIS academics, while often sought after internationally, appear to rarely get accepted in Australian practitioner conferences.

In these 'whys' we can see the reflections and foundations upon which questions about the relevance, expertise and professional competence of the Australian academic LIS schools are built. If students and new graduates do not see their experienced colleagues calling on the expertise of those responsible for their research and education, and partnering with them, how can they have faith in their capabilities? Unfamiliarity with what is actually occurring in LIS schools nationally and internationally, and lack of understanding of the expertise of the local academic community, can only contribute to perceptions and concerns about the quality and relevance of education. This in turn raises questions about the need for LIS education at all, and challenges those who would have a master's degree as the first and

only professional entry point to it. If there are no experts and the academy is not seen as a valuable partner, then why not train within the workplace and learn from practice?

Truth and fiction

Previous research may help us understand why many of these concerns are evident in the profession but the outcomes are at times contradictory and/or confusing. This may be because confounding any discussion in Australia is a long-held stance that we work in a homogenous professional context which has the same needs and expectations for education and training. Klipfel (2014) suggests that, rather than such a homogeneous identity,

there may be no single, common feature unique to what librarianship, in an essentialist sense, *is*; rather, what we have is a number of people calling themselves 'librarians' connected by network of 'family resemblances'.

This concept goes to the heart of our education and practices, and centres the discussion on the purpose of education and its capacity to provide what industry requires. Does the construct of a homogeneous profession ultimately have an impact on the capacity of education and training to deliver suitably qualified graduates? And if this is the case, why do we continue to subscribe to the idea of a one-size-fits-all education model?

The answer to both these questions most likely has its roots in the original rejection by the Australian LIS community in the 1970s of specialised courses being delivered by particular institutions. While there were some attempts to allocate particular workplace sectors, such as public, academic, special, to unique programmes, the temper of the LIS community, Australia's dispersed geographic population and its federated system, coupled with a need to ensure that all programmes were sustainable and delivered to the broadest possible range of potential students and employers, meant this model was largely rejected by the LIS community. Historically, education and training for LIS fell into one of two very familiar categories: a formal traineeship or apprenticeship in an institution by a person educated in another discipline; or the undertaking of such work by the unqualified and untrained amateur. Such distinctions in employment were often dependent on the size and status of the institution in which a person was employed.

One outcome of the move away from the apprenticeship model in the 1970s was that some areas of specialisation have remained under-resourced educationally. In recent times, the increasingly competitive nature of the post-secondary education sectors, and the contraction of both the sector and of education for it, have placed further pressure on the ability of education providers to deliver to niche groups. The size of many LIS schools and the commercialisation of education also make it uneconomic to deliver niche programmes. Specialisations such as law or health librarianship, for example, require training in addition to that which is received in the various education programmes. More broadly, the larger professional contexts such as academic or public sectors have acknowledged differing foci and requirements. Despite this, the professional and educational requirements remain the same for all these specialisms. In the professional context, accreditation, with a few exceptions, does not look outside the generic skills and attributes to sector-specific knowledge or competence. Educationally there are pedagogical and epistemological considerations around the purpose of education and training, and around the implication on employability for graduates specialising in one sector for employment. The difficulties, therefore, in delivering directly to meet both the breadth, and depth, of a non-homogeneous workplace

appear at times to have led to a perception of a lack of job readiness of graduates from LIS schools, and calls for a return to the apprenticeship or trainee model. The consequence of this dissatisfaction can be found in some of the research findings.

Research does support some of the common concerns and perceptions. One is that academic libraries employ non-LIS graduates more frequently than other sectors (Genoni & Lodge, 2008; Hallam, 2009) and that possessing a qualification in a subject area such as health or law is becoming more common (Genoni & Lodge, 2008, p. 1). To address a perceived educational gap, reports such as 'Victorian public libraries: our future our skills' (Hallam, 2014) have attempted to identify sector-specific attributes and competencies and professional development (PD) needs. There is an underlying implication that LIS education has not met these needs. Professional organisations such as the Australian Library and Information Association have undertaken to deliver sector specific PD in areas of 'need', working with areas such as law and health. Has this concern with skills gap contributed to a perception that the trainee route is more useful in delivering what various sectors need in information professionals? Experience over education has also been highlighted by Hallam who found that extensive industry experience correlated with formal qualifications (2009, p. 23) in LIS workplaces. Where does this place formal education and training?

The larger question is perhaps not whether traineeships or PD resolve the education gap or contribute to perceptions around traineeships, but what is it we want education to deliver, and is it able to do so? We know that until the 1970s apprenticeships or traineeships were the primary model for education and employment, with examination rather than accreditation the key to professional status from the 1940s onward. Historically, the profession advocated over many decades for a right to a place in the academy, seeing formal education as the key to professionalism, alongside the development of a cohort of support workers who would assist them. Can we retain the concept of profession without professional education? Of course we did so in the past. Has anything changed, or is this a failed model that needs to be revisited?

The role of training and education

This leads to complex questions about the nature of education vs. training, a challenge that has been present in Australian LIS for nearly 50 years. There are more questions than answers here, and they are not easy or comfortable questions. In the foundation years of formal LIS education in Australia, librarians estimated that 'two third support staff to one-third professional staff represents an economically and professionally sound ratio' (Hagger, 1971, p. 14). Does the sense of the usurping of professional employment stem from an historic disconnect between training and education? Do we need to re-examine the balance of qualified librarians needed in relation to technical and non-trained staff in the contemporary workplace, and what are the implications of this for our professional and educational structures?

As stated previously, the central issues we need to focus on as a sector are our common understanding of what we hope education delivers to those who undertake it, and whether this can be delivered in a one-size-fits-all model. Educators argue that they are working hard to deliver graduates who provide the future of the profession; that their role is to inspire and induct their students into the 'library faith' or its twenty-first century tech-savvy equivalent. The role of education is to open up possibilities, provide an arena for creative argument, and develop a sense of professional citizenship and awareness. Effective education

is an enabler, an inspirer. It cannot focus solely on making graduates job-ready; it must also make them future-ready and willing to take risks, and it must be creative. LIS education therefore has to be a real and dynamic partnership between educators and the workplace if it is to deliver. Once again, engagement and communication can assist in reassuring our students and new graduates that in collaboration they are receiving the education and training they need.

What about the perceptions that there is need for a new type of graduate, or that libraries and other information agencies are transforming in a way unheard of in prior decades? Australian commentator and educator Boyd Rayward believes that 'despite the undeniable magnitude and complexity of the changes that we are confronting, these changes are essentially new only in their velocity, convergence, and technological expression' (Rayward, 2014, p. 705). Rayward's comment reminds us that previous generations of LIS professionals have confronted change and have in fact shaped the profession, its education, systems, ethics and agencies over a relatively short period. We need to be reminded that former generations, some still in the workforce today, faced enormous challenges and found solutions. Think of the introduction of DDC and other standardised practices where none existed, the development of a public library system and a school library system, the establishment of a national library, inter-library loans, professional education, the standards and principles which govern our practice, the Australian National Bibliographic Database, Kinetica, the introduction of revolutionary learning epistemologies, and the advent of new technologies. In each of these can be found the celebration of professional success over new challenges, opportunities and technologies.

Progress and achievement: a celebration

Librarianship is developing, continuously shifting and morphing to meet the changing demands of each era. The profession has survived and, despite current uneasiness, will thrive in the future. In the current climate, it is important to look at where we have come from and situate both the present and future in this wider vista. Doing this provides a very different landscape from the narrow sense of immediacy that is often used in discussion and examining the way forward for the profession. This is not to deny the rapidity of change and contemporary technological imperatives, but it does call into question the specialness of the contemporary environment. In this wider perspective we can view not only our failures but also our progress and our triumphs. We can look at one example to explicate this: the case of the public library.

When the Munn-Pitt report of 1935 and the McColvin report of 1947 were written, there were almost no suburban public libraries in the country. Those that did exist were underfunded and understaffed. The people staffing them either had little or no professional training, or were considered enthusiastic amateurs with little or no formal education at all. Jump a few decades forward to 1963 where in Victoria, for example, there were 50 public library services or systems with staff who had opportunities to undertake professional training and examination. Today in the same state there are hundreds of libraries and service points providing access to millions of people. Since the 1970s, we have also seen the growth of academic and school libraries, qualified staff, and a system of tertiary professional education. While the speed of change may possibly be greater today, as Rayward suggests each

generation has contributed to this growth and change and was cognisant of the road to be travelled. In 1969, Reid wrote of the future needs of the profession that:

librarians will increasingly become less concerned with as defined an immediate physical area – the library – and will become more and more concerned with the co-operative use of the total informational, educational and cultural records of the nation. And it is not likely that this concept will be contained within purely national frontiers ...

If, as I believe, we as librarians will be working in libraries without walls, then two particular skills will require greater and more complex levels of instruction than are encompassed in the present curricula of library schools. The first skill is a humane and a technical understanding of the vast range of new media of communication and the second is the organised sociological understanding of the libraries' public. (Reid, 1969, p. 62)

Reid stated that the future needs of the profession were:

- (1) To increase our knowledge of the use of the new media and their effect on the library function.
- (2) To develop library school curricula so that:
 - (a) Acquaintance with new media is more than cursory and to some extent inclusive of actual 'hardware' and 'software' practice.
 - (b) A competent introduction to sociological skills be provided.
 - (c) A basic understanding by the student of statistical method is developed.
 - (d) Some educational skills are taught so as to fit the librarian in his role as communicator.
- (3) To plan and institute research into the kinds of demands made by the library's public and the non-demands of the non-public (Reid, 1969, p. 73).

Reid's words serve to remind us that what is old can be new again: contemporary concerns have their reflection in the past, and if we examine and understand where we have failed or succeeded, we are equipped to go forward. In a report on vocational education, Beddie highlights the value of such an approach: 'we can use history as a policy tool for uncovering trends, explaining institutional cultures and preventing the re-application of ideas already tested' (2014, p. 4). It is essential to have a deep as well as a broad understanding of the history and context of our profession if we are to effectively research and debate the industry and be fully cognisant of the forces which have shaped our institutional cultures. There continues to be questions and concerns that need answers. To truly understand the now and to prepare for the future, a wide lens must be trained on the profession to provide context and perspective. We need to give new and current students and graduates a sense of historical place, a sense of professional lineage and a passion based on a deep understanding of past achievements, current actions and future possibilities. This wider perspective suggests that while we live in a time of rapid change it is not unique, and the profession, in partnership with education and training, has proved resilient, adaptable and innovative for a 100 years or more. It also suggests that in difficult times support, communication and engagement between educators and practitioner are essential, and that the future may depend on understanding not just now, but the past.

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Notes on contributor

Mary Carroll is a senior lecturer and Course Director in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University. She has published in the area of the history of librarianship, vocational education and library education and LIS pedagogy. Her research has investigated the provision of information infrastructure by private training organisations in Australia (a project funded by a National Centre for Vocational Education Research (ACER) Early Career Grant), the history of LIS education and the intersections between libraries and education.

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