ISSUES IMPACTING RECRUITMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years concern has been expressed internationally about the future of the library and information services (LIS) profession: recruitment and retention, changing skill sets, and declining numbers of people choosing librarianship as a career are all factors contributing to an uncertain future. One area yet explored in any depth is the topic of why LIS studies are not perceived, let alone promoted, as a good first professional qualification for high school graduates. This paper considers the professional literature that examines the uptake of librarianship as a first qualification by school leavers and discusses, in the context of the Australian library sector, the role of professional associations, library schools, National and State Libraries, as well as individual libraries and librarians. Examples of best practice are presented to highlight the opportunities for inspiring and motivating students through well structured and stimulating work experience programs. The topic is relevant to all librarians who are interested in the future of the LIS profession. It is argued that the focus of the present conference on ‘moving up’ and ‘moving on’ can only have real significance when the profession has a more complete understanding of the barriers to and the opportunities for ‘moving in’.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years concern has been expressed internationally about the future of the library and information services (LIS) profession: recruitment and retention, changing skill sets, and declining numbers of people choosing librarianship as a career are all factors contributing to an uncertain future. While professional bodies have encouraged considerable research into the problems facing the current workforce in order to better understand issues of sustainability, one area that has not yet been explored in any depth is the topic of why LIS studies are not perceived, let alone promoted, as a good first professional qualification for secondary school graduates.

In Australia, the Federal Government is keenly aware of the need to establish career pathways that will encourage the progressive development of employability
skills to ensure the nation is economically competitive in a global knowledge economy. The development of effective career pathways requires an integrated relationship between the schools, vocational education and higher education sectors, along with employers and professional associations. There is considerable scope for the LIS profession to develop career models that might be representative for other areas of employment.

This paper presents a review of the professional literature that examines the uptake of librarianship as a first qualification by school leavers, which has informed the development of a research study of the issues impacting on the recruitment of young people. In the discussion about this research, specific attention is paid to the role that the different stakeholders, for example professional associations, library schools and, collectively and individually, library institutions and librarians, can play to inspire and motivate students through well structured and stimulating work experience programs. It is argued that the focus of the present conference on ‘moving up’ and ‘moving on’ can only have real significance when the profession has a more complete understanding of the barriers to and the opportunities for ‘moving in’.

Regeneration – to re-establish on a new, usually improved, basis or make new or like new; to give new life or energy.

This paper considers the second part of the above definition of ‘regeneration’ – “to give new life or energy”. Over the past several years, there has been increasing concern over the future of library and information services (LIS), with issues such as recruitment and retention, evolving and changing skills sets, and the greying of the profession potentially leading to a loss of vital talent as senior, experienced members of the profession retire.

This issue is beginning to come to the forefront of the library industry in Australia, with about half of Australian baby boomers expecting to retire in coming years. While many library managers are panicking over the potential struggle to fill vacancies and attract the appropriate skill sets required to handle new projects as the profession evolves, there has to date been no single concerted effort to address this across all sectors nationally. Some individual sectoral or regional studies have taken place1-4; the neXus workforce planning project has endeavoured to raise awareness of the issues nationally5 6; and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has convened regional discussions7 and a national summit meeting of key stakeholders to consider education and workforce issues.8 ALIA has also played a key role in contributing to the Local Government Skills Shortage Steering Committee (LGSSSC).

Despite this range of initiatives, the lack of coordination across the LIS sector greatly increases the risk of duplication of effort and means that opportunities to develop models of best practice which could be used to guide recruitment across all sectors are not being pursued. Furthermore, in recent years there have been concerns in the literature that insufficient students are entering the profession, eventually resulting in a shortage of qualified library professionals. Hallam9 cor-
roborates this, stating that the retirement of a large number of baby boomers in the next ten years, coupled with the drop in enrolments, weakens the capacity of the profession to attract the best and most aspiring candidates. Other factors attributed to the lack of interest in high school graduates taking on a career in libraries include low pay scales and the persistently negative representations of the profession. In Australia specifically there has been intense competition for workforce ‘talent’ as a result of the resources boom: in the short term, there was a dip in high school graduates going directly to university, with many young people opting to work in the mines in semi-skilled jobs to take advantage of the inflated wages. The global financial crisis in 2008 has, however, led to market adjustments and a movement back towards higher university enrolments in the present academic year.

It is emphasised that library institutions should not try to handle the magnitude of workforce issues in isolation; strategies need to be put in place to attract the right people to the profession for the benefit of the whole LIS sector. The value of planning ahead is critical. Library managers need to think beyond their immediate local needs and form collaborative partnerships with other institutions, with secondary schools, library schools and the professional associations to inspire and motivate secondary school students to seriously consider a LIS qualification as their first professional qualification.

PATHWAYS INTO THE LIS PROFESSION – THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

While the term ‘recruitment’ is often used in the context of filling a specific position in an organisation, there is also a collective context, where recruitment is about bringing people into a particular industry sector or to a profession in general. Notably, many of the issues that characterise the situation in Australia will be common to other countries. Compared with some other countries, Australia has a ‘blended approach’ to education for librarianship, with both professional and paraprofessional pathways available. Professional LIS education is offered at the university level, with graduates becoming librarians, and at the vocational education level through the institutes of technical and further education (TAFEs) and registered training organisations (RTOs). Diplomates from the vocational programs become library technicians. Courses that lead to entry-level librarianship qualifications are offered at the undergraduate, the graduate diploma and the masters degree level. The current ratio of undergraduate to postgraduate qualifications is about one third to two thirds. There is evidence that the diverse library sectors tend to prefer different types of training, for example the public library sector recruits a higher percentage of librarians with undergraduate qualifications, while academic libraries hire a larger proportion of postgraduate qualified library staff. Geographic differences come into play as well, with the local employment market
generally reflecting the level of courses offered by the universities in the region. Libraries in regional and rural areas of Australia face immense challenges in recruiting and retaining staff: newly qualified library professionals prefer to stay in the metropolitan areas (indeed Gen Ys would rather work overseas than in regional Australia!). Some people may fall into the career by accident and after working in a library for a while, seek to gain the relevant academic qualifications; those in regional areas are therefore more likely to study for an undergraduate degree by distance education. Libraries in regional areas have the motivation therefore to ‘grow their own’. It has been revealed, however, that in terms of staff development, most libraries are addressing short term training needs rather than considering the opportunities for progressive professional development and career growth: the number of library assistants and library technicians offers great potential for up-skilling within the sector, to enable staff to migrate from paraprofessional to professional roles. This is perhaps another approach to ‘growing your own.’

THE MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS

Effective recruitment strategies are critical if libraries are not only going to fill the anticipated vacancies in the coming years, but also create new positions to be able to develop innovative services for the future. As indicated, a collaborative approach with responsibility shared by the different stakeholder groups offers the greatest potential for change. So who are these different parties and what can they do to when faced with these challenging issues of ensuring sustainability in the profession?

The acknowledged stakeholders in the recruitment agenda in the library sector are:

- Professional associations
- Library schools
- National and State Libraries
- Individual library institutions
- Individual librarians.

Some dimensions of the roles and responsibilities of these parties may be distinctive, while others may be shared.

Professional associations

Professional associations seek to promote the professional interests of those in the library and information profession, empowering them to develop, promote and deliver quality library and information services, through leadership, advocacy and
Tania Barry and Gillian Hallam

mutual support. In Australia, there are opportunities for both individuals and institutions to become members of a professional body.

The overarching body for the library and information industry is the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), which has demonstrated its concern about workforce issues through its support for the neXus study which has examined trends and issues in the Australian library and information services workforce.5-6 Others also concerned with these issues in Australia include sectoral groups such as the Australian Law Librarians Association, Health Libraries Australia, Public Libraries Australia and the Victorian Public Library and Information Network, as well as consortia such as National and State Libraries Australasia and the Queensland University Libraries Office of Cooperation. These bodies are not only contextualised by the interests of their immediate membership (e.g., law libraries, health libraries, public libraries, academic libraries, etc.), but also provide an opportunity to establish and nurture the desired collaboration across the different sectors.

Professional associations can contribute to the development of career-focused strategies that will attract young people to the profession.

Lobby for internship/graduate recruitment programs

The neXus study into workforce policy and practice revealed that while more than 77% of the institutional survey respondents regarded new graduate or internship programs as very valuable, less than 20% actually offered one. Encouragingly, however, almost all of the respondents indicated that they would be considering such an initiative in the future.6 In 2009 the Queensland University Libraries Office of Cooperation is launching a collaborative new graduate program, with the individual offered the opportunity to have a series of rotational positions in some of the different academic libraries in the consortium. The individual will benefit from gaining a wide range of experience in diverse academic libraries, while the institution will benefit from a programmed approach to managing vacancies within the organisation.

Adopt a holistic approach to marketing the profession to careers teachers

A toolkit designed for individual libraries to use to discuss the profession and its potential would highly increase chances of these being passed on as exciting career opportunities for students. The American Library Association (ALA), in conjunction with the Institution of Federated Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), was instrumental in developing the @your library campaign. ALIA has engaged with the campaign by becoming a signatory to the international trade mark agreement, so that its membership can use the logo and create marketing campaigns. The State Library of New South Wales is perhaps the most active player in terms of encouraging libraries to market themselves. The 2009 program schedule incorporates many different themes, such as Holiday fun @your library;
Issues Impacting Recruitment of Secondary School Graduates

However, anecdotal research indicates that only one library in Australia, Bayside Library Service in Victoria, has adopted the Careers@your library theme to encourage interest amongst potential employees. The website links to further information on the ALIA website. Sadly, however, it must be noted that a few years ago when the campaign was new to Australia, some State Libraries reported that the Careers@your library was the only theme they chose not to invest in. It would be valuable to see these decisions revisited.

Develop positive working relationships with schools through careers advisory associations

An initial inquiry in 2005 to career adviser associations about options for work experience placements was greeted very enthusiastically. Most groups contacted indicated that their members (careers advisers in schools and other educational institutions) would readily promote LIS but that they needed the essential information delivered in an appropriate format. The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA) is utilising the interest in the Local Government Skills Shortage Steering Committee (LGSSSC) to promote the opportunities for work experience to offer exposure to professional engineering practice (IPWEA, 2009).

Communicate that librarianship is not only about ‘reading books’

Professional associations need to convey the significance of a librarian’s skills – aspects such as teaching information literacy and managing information are highly critical in today’s age of instant Internet information retrieval. While traditional collections are still important, the value of a library’s role is also recognised as a place of social capital and in advocating for freedom of information. In the United States, the Institute of Museum and Library Studies (IMLS) has reported that trends in library schools indicate increasing enrolments with a younger student demographic: “Younger students are typically attracted to technology and the ‘new library’… [and] want exposure to multiple digital and technology related courses.” Significantly, LIS courses also provide a sound foundation for the development of transferable skills – the employability skills that can be applied across and beyond the library sector. Pedley outlines some of the roles as being intranet managers, webmasters and knowledge managers. Professional associations can present the profiles of their members who have successfully moved into positions which draw directly on the transferable skills they have acquired during the course of their library career.

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* Career Advisor Associations are peak advisors for secondary school career counsellors and work experience coordinators, providing services also to those looking to enter the workforce or change career paths in Australia. They include bodies such as the Career Education Association of Victoria, the Career Development Association of Australia Inc. and Career Advice Australia (formerly the Australian Network of Industry Careers Advisers).
Advocate the career perspectives of working in libraries

Professional associations, with their role in developing and maintaining the standards that are critical to education and the profession, often coordinate and promote professional development programs to ensure that members remain professionally relevant in a dynamic information environment. By underscoring the value of career-long learning, associations can stimulate interest in employers adopting a stronger role in career development for all staff. In this way they can support the movement to ‘grow our own’: staff who lack credentials and paraprofessional employees can be encouraged to up-skill and study towards higher professional qualifications. The association can draw attention to the opportunities to study and potentially negotiate industry scholarships as an incentive to young people.

Library schools

In Australia, there are no longer any “library schools” as such. Independent “library schools” have been subsumed into LIS departments, to ultimately become nothing more than a discipline stream within a school within a faculty. Many courses may have a common qualification such as a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Information Technology, with students distributed across a number of different streams, only one of which may be the LIS stream. The introduction of (escalating) student fees has had an impact on professional education and on student enrolments. The government funds 75% of undergraduate study costs, with the student responsible for 25% of the costs, either payable upfront, or deferred as a student loan. Postgraduate programs, on the other hand, are full-fee paying, so with no government subsidy, fees for graduate diploma programs are currently about $10,000 to $15,000, depending on the institution. Masters programs range from $15,000 to $30,000. Student loan schemes are available to offset the direct costs of study. The colleges of TAFE and registered training organisations offer paraprofessional courses with a much lower fee structure. Some young people are opting to choose a vocational course to start with, to see how they like working in libraries. This situation can be developed into a strategy for progressive career development, with employers providing financial support for further study.

While professional associations need to address the strategic issues, library schools can offer support to the ideas with some effective action plans.

Curriculum development

As library services continue to evolve, it is essential that students are offered a progressive and stimulating curriculum, in both face-to-face and distance modes, which develops the knowledge and skills to face an ever-changing future, yet at the same time continues to meet the present needs of library employers. Data gathered in the neXus2 study indicates that very few employers get involved with course development. It is marginally more likely that employers are involved in
paraprofessional courses, which reflects the opportunities for students to be assessed in the workplace. Employers have advised, however, that they feel their industry needs are not adequately reflected in the current study programs, with the result that there is a perceived gap between the expectations of managers recruiting new staff and the attributes of the candidates applying for jobs. A training gaps analysis was undertaken in Canada in 2006, with a number of recommendations inviting closer collaboration between LIS educators and practitioners.

**Market the LIS course and showcase the future career opportunities**

Library schools need to consider how best to attract students who wish to work in a dynamic profession, and market the course accordingly. Stronger connections need to be built with high schools and careers advisors, so the focus moves away from an institution as employer, to promote the particular course and career. Teaching staff should make the most of opportunities to work with professional associations to explore the career avenues available within the field that might give other dimensions to the academic qualification. Libraries from different sectors can be invited to exhibit at open days and roadshows, to showcase career opportunities within their institution, making the most of role models. Examples of LIS professionals who have moved onto another career, using their library experience as a springboard, can demonstrate where their study has taken them. This further highlights career options in an extensive library and information landscape. Two-way communication channels can also offer opportunities for outreach to LIS employers to promote the merit of further study within the discipline, by encouraging library support staff and library technicians to study LIS, as well as undergraduates to take on postgraduate studies in information science.

**National and State Libraries: playing a lead role in advocacy**

National and State Libraries in Australia, both individually and collectively, play an important leadership role in the library community. The National Library of Australia is “committed to a leadership role in sharing our expertise and coordinating key projects.” The State Library of Victoria acknowledges that it plays a key role within the public library community, to develop, lead and deliver programs that address the strategic priorities of public libraries. Noted in particular are a number of workforce sustainability and leadership issues. Meanwhile the consortium of National and State Libraries Australasia stresses the importance of collaboratively aspiring “to keep transforming our capability and culture and keep encouraging flexibility and innovation.” Engagement in education and professional development, as well as recruiting and retaining new staff, is critical to achieving these goals in both the medium and long term.

One initiative that has resulted from the workforce sustainability project work in Victoria is the “Destination Libraries” concept, which is described as a working party to promote taking up the LIS profession as a course of study and as a career.
To date, this group has coordinated a successful Libraries Careers Evening as a cross sector forum involving the State Library, public libraries and LIS educators. One idea that was seeded was that school libraries could set up traineeships for their own students. The working party has set up a wiki as a resource for anyone interested in a career in the library and information industry (http://destinationlibrary.pbwiki.com), which offers guidance about career options, working overseas, links to useful career resources and profiles of young people working in libraries. Further communication is achieved through an eList hosted by ALIA.

**Individual libraries and librarians**

As an extension to the collaborative work in Destination Libraries, individual libraries and librarians can play a valuable role at the grass roots level. The energy and support of individual librarians and their employing library have made a significant contribution to the success of the Destination Libraries project. Together, libraries and librarians can make things happen, by finding ways to promote librarianship to groups within the community and by working with high school libraries to develop a shadowing or mentoring program. Importantly, they have the capacity to create structured work experience programs which can create a positive experience for secondary school students which can ultimately influence them to choose librarianship as a potential course of study (and perhaps also encourage their friends to consider the same!). Individual librarians can provide ongoing mentoring to work experience students to enhance their understanding of the employment opportunities that are available to those undertaking a library qualification.

**WHAT ABOUT WORK EXPERIENCE?**

The paper so far has provided a broad overview of the issues that information professionals and organisations are currently facing within the library and information sector, and has put forward a number of ways that major stakeholders can work towards recruiting to the profession. However, although recruitment and retention involves working with, and mentoring, LIS students and new graduates, so that they are happy with the choices they have made and are more likely to ‘move on’ and to ‘move up’ in the profession, it is argued that recruitment needs to go back a step and specifically target secondary school students, to encourage them to ‘move in’, to bring new blood into the profession.

One of the challenges facing the library profession in Australia, as in many other countries, is how to best approach the issue of encouraging secondary school students to undertake library and information studies as a first qualification, with particular focus on providing useful work experience opportunities to students in order to have them give serious consideration to librarianship as a stimulating and
rewarding career. Work experience is offered to students in Australia as way to allow them to explore possible career paths they may be interested in, giving them the opportunity to see if the reality matches their expectations. The program is generally available in Year 10, when students are between 15 and 16 years of age, and runs for one or two weeks. As well as exploring workplace situations, work experience also broadens students’ experiences and gives them a better understanding of career opportunities available to them.

Ideally, a student’s placement is within an organisation that has a direct bearing on the career path the student wishes to follow. All too often however, with the case of placements within a library, the library is chosen for expediency, speed and ease of access, rather than a desire to choose librarianship as a course of study. Whilst persistent negative images of the profession still linger, coupled with the unexciting perceptions of the role, low pay and low prestige also tie in with students being reticent about considering a career in libraries.18 This can effectively block their interest in spending their work experience placement at a library.

The situation is exacerbated by library managers themselves. An anecdotal study on work experience placements within libraries in Australia undertaken in 2006 showed that the majority of libraries are unwilling to take on Year 10 work experience students. A variety of reasons were given for this, however the predominant one was the perception that work experience resulted in extra work to host a student placement, but with little practical work to really offer them. Of those students who were able to be placed in a library, many were given repeatedly mundane tasks to do, such as shelving, stamping, folding notices or filing. When asked why this was the case, the responses were usually that these tasks required little training and even less supervision, so were easy to pass on. Whilst no one would argue the importance of everyone in the library taking on shelving as a critical part of collection maintenance, doing it for extensive periods as a way to minimise responsibility does nothing to promote librarianship as an exciting career prospect and does everything to perpetuate the myth about the boredom supposedly inherent in the profession.

Best practice models

If we want to change the future of our profession, then we need to rethink and redesign the experiences secondary school students have when placed in a library for their work experience program. Students need to feel that they are, in a sense, part of the team for duration of their stay. Three examples of work experience programs currently in operation in Victoria, Australia, are presented as models of best practice.

Vision Australia Information Library Service

Vision Australia Information Library Service is the only national public library for the print disabled community in Australia. Staff at Vision Australia make an active
effort to work with secondary schools in their local areas in order to draw attention to opportunities within their organisation. In preparation for a work experience placement, a program is drawn up to ensure that the student has the opportunity to do a variety of tasks that are within their capabilities. Vision Australia will also take on students with disabilities, making sure that these are discussed with the work experience co-ordinator prior to commencement.

Initially, students are given an overview of the organisation, and how the library is placed strategically, along with a tour of the building and facilities and introductions to departmental contacts. Staff explain the program to the student, introducing the work placement person on site, who is usually a team leader or manager. The latter is critical if the student is to maintain a sense of belonging during their program. The program generally encompasses a range of activities:

- Information Access (learning about alternate format access to information and the technology used);
- Circulation (assisting with post, returning and sorting books or packing magazines);
- Reader Services (sitting with staff members who are talking to clients);
- Collection Services (assisting with and learning about cataloguing);
- Transcription (learning about computer aided transcription);
- Audio production (assisting with CD and cassette duplication).

The tasks given to the student are designed to give them a sense of the work environment and the typical duties in a busy library service:

_Bayside Library Service_

Bayside is situated south east of Melbourne on Port Phillip Bay. The Library Service has four branches (Beaumaris, Brighton, Hampton and Sandringham), with three of them being open seven days a week. The work experience program was devised several years ago and runs at all of the branches. Despite the added workload for the staff, the consensus is that this is a valuable program and the importance of accommodating as many requests as possible cannot be underestimated.

At Bayside, work experience students come under the charge of the circulation supervisor at the particular branch and a schedule is devised for them that is similar to the desk roster. For the first few days they are rostered specifically to learn tasks they will be performing throughout the week, such as shelving and assisting with storytime. This stops the feeling of isolation that can occur when there is not enough prepared for the student to participate in, which is frequently the case in other work placements. Students get involved in:

- Assisting with storytime;
- Circulation: assisting with the courier run, issues, returns, memberships, reservations and information enquiries;
• Databases: an overview of databases available to members via the library’s website;
• Children’s services: an overview of children’s services provided by the library to the community;
• Repairs and processing;
• Collection management: participation in book buying.

This range of tasks alters on an hourly basis, to allow for variety and to give the student a greater understanding of roles within the library.

*Eastern Regional Libraries*

Eastern Regional Libraries is a co-operative venture of three outer eastern metropolitan councils in Melbourne: Knox, Maroondah and Yarra Ranges, serving a population of 386,000 residents across the three municipalities. The Library Service has thirteen branches, with five of them open seven days a week.

Branch managers are the first point of contact for all work experience placements at their branch. Eastern Regional has put together extensive guidelines and procedures which allows for a systematic approach to the program and guides the direction of students during the placements. Assessment of a student’s capabilities is made to determine what activities can be undertaken safely. Students are always given tasks which are interesting and which give them a good understanding of the public library environment. The daily roster of tasks is devised to provide students with as wide a range of experiences as possible. Supervision is essential at all time and typical duties include:

• Work room duties: for example deleting items from the database and an overview of book processing;
• Youth services: searching for suitable activities and themes for future programs;
• Information and circulation: checking in the branch run, checking out items under supervision and computer bookings;
• Information desk: finding holds, observing information requests and observing database use.

The provision of such varied and interesting programs by these three library services allow the students to take part in, and learn about, most of the processes within the library, allowing for increased understanding and support. This results in a heightened sense, on the part of the student, of the value of libraries in the community and the parent organisation. The work experience programs are clearly designed to promote an awareness of the diverse roles and career opportunities available in libraries. The student placements also have the effect of allowing staff to take part in mentoring and professional development in a new way.
CONCLUSION

It is acknowledged that multiple factors impact on the decisions made by young people about their future careers, including the influence of parents, teachers and friends, their impressions on the field of work and employment prospects, as well as the interplay between their personality and their career goals. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to consider the complexity of the specific issues associated with career choice. However, within the context of the LIS sector, further research is currently underway, with the aim of developing a model that can be utilised in libraries across all sectors to implement successful work experience programs that will not be onerous to the hosting library, the student, or the participating school.

Our future lies in attracting new people to the library and information sector: we need to place a high importance in mentoring the information professionals of the future. We should invite secondary school students to ‘move in’, encourage them to ask questions and offer ideas, and then act upon those ideas that have merit for the library and the industry as a whole. We can talk to them about why we took up librarianship as a career, what we have gained from it, as well as outlining the variety of jobs on offer and the various pathways available. We can, and should, actively seek ways to demonstrate the importance of our standing as information professionals in today’s information age. After all, we owe it to ourselves and we owe it to our profession.

REFERENCES


