Why Think? Just Do: The Dawn of a New Era in Australia and Implications for Australian LIS Research

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ABSTRACT

Work undertaken by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Research Committee for the Australian Research Council's (ARC) Excellence in Research (ERA) initiative revealed a commitment by Australian library and information studies (LIS) academics to undertake serious research for the profession in Australia, a necessity in order to survive in the current Australian research and university policy climate. Yet on a world scale, LIS research being undertaken by research academics and students in the Australian LIS context is not extensive. The paper describes the current context of research activity in Australian universities and outlines the ALIA ERA experience, the final outcome of which was, in the eyes of many, unfavourable to Australian LIS research community. It concludes by addressing the question: Is there room for optimism?

Keywords: LIS research - Australia/ research measurement/ research performance/ research practice

INTRODUCTION

There are growing signs that the LIS profession in Australia needs to do more than just reflect on its practices. These signs have recently manifested themselves in the Australian climate in the form of research performance measurement and rankings for Australian LIS academics and their institutions. Australia's universities are being heavily influenced by the various international ranking exercises being undertaken with the better known of these being: Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities, the Times Higher Education/QS World University Rankings (2004-2009), the Times Higher Education/ Thomson Reuters World University Rankings (2010 on) and the QS World University Rankings (2010 on) (GlobalHigherEd., 2010). It could be said that the library profession, with its passion and allegiance to bibliometrics, has brought this on, particularly with the journal ranking scheme pioneered by Eugene Garfield in the 1970s. The impacts at this level of detail have been much discussed in the literature and are being felt around the world.

The role of library education in Australia began with the first course recognized by the professional association, then know as the Library Association of Australia (LAA) at the University of New South Wales, in 1961, followed by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1965. The LAA's course recognition processes were challenged when Australian tertiary level education threw wide open the issue of graduate qualification with the encouragement and establishment of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE), and were further complicated "in the early 1970s with the emergence of specialist training for both teacher-librarians and library technicians" (Biskup, 1994, p. 401). The latter two training initiatives continue to this day. The CAEs were abolished when

> (i)n 1988 the Federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins, instigated substantial changes to the tertiary education system. A major component was the abolition of the division between universities, institutes and colleges and the establishment of a system comprised only of universities and referred to as the unified national system (Willard, Wilson & Pawley, 2001, p. 286).

The upheaval in tertiary education for LIS since the Dawkins reforms continues although today it is driven by a federal government funding model introduced by Nelson, that includes user pays and continued funding cut backs to universities (Pick, 2006). Schauder (1989) questioned the lack of attention being placed by LIS educators and practitioners on understanding "our theoretical perspectives" (p. 320) and saw this as an indicator of "the problems we face in regard to research in librarianship and information services in the climate of research and innovation in Australian that seems set for the 1990s" (p. 320). In undertaking a review of the LIS research situation in Australia in 1994, Spink reported that "the overall quality and status of library and information science (LIS) research in the United States was mediocre" (p. 9) and suggested that the situation in Australia be studied.

There is a significant international research literature in library and information science/studies (LIS) with few Australian LIS researchers contributing to it. Australian academic colleagues in LIS have pondered this dearth, and the establishment of a concerted interest in LIS research by the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) has placed the issue on the professional agenda.

AUSTRALIA'S RESEARCH FUNDING LANDSCAPE

At the professional education level, i.e university level, the relationship between education and research is now intertwined with new research directions set by the Australian government for its universities. The tiered approach of the Nelson reforms of 2003 onwards (Pick, 2006) brought Australia's universities into an increasingly competitive environment with regard to the need for funding: for teaching, infrastructure and research purposes, and for students. The university research environment in recent years has been heavily influenced by two further initiatives: The Research Quality Framework (RQF) and Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). The RQF exercise was formalized in May 2004 (Dept. Education, Employment…, 2007) when the then Australian federal Liberal government announced the formulation of a quality and accessibility framework for publicly funded research, to replace prior guidelines. A detailed discussion on the RQF can be found in Smith & Middleton (2009).

In November 2007, the Australian Liberal government lost the national election and a new Labor government was sworn in. "[This new] Australian Government announced on 21 December 2007 that it would not be proceeding with the former Government's Research Quality Framework (RQF) project. In light of this decision, material regarding the RQF has been removed from the website" (Dept. Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2007).

In 2008, the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. Senator Kim Carr, announced an Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative:

> The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative, to be developed by the Australian Research Council (ARC) in conjunction with the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, will assess research quality using a combination of metrics and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts.
>
> Australia is about to embark on a transparent, workable system to assess the quality of home-grown research. Australia is well known internationally for its research strengths.
>
> "For the first time we will be able to measure our achievements against our peers around the world, and plan the future of research investment," Senator Carr said. …
>
> The ERA will replace the now defunct Research Quality Framework with a streamlined, internationally recognised and transparent research quality assurance system (Carr, 2008, p1).

Information on ERA is available from: http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm

AUSTRALIAN LIS PARTICIPATION IN THE NATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA

Through representation by ALIA, the Australian LIS research community participated in some of the meetings for the RQF exercise, and the two journal ranking exercises: the first under the RQF banner (Smith & Middleton, 2009) and the second under the ERA banner (Smith – in prep.). It did this for a number of reasons including:

- there are 10 ALIA accredited university library schools (ALIA 2010) so the visibility of Australia's LIS academics and researchers (the two categories are not necessarily the same) is relatively low in this context. They could be missed in a wider university research information gathering exercise.
- The advent of a serious attempt by the Australia government to quantify Australian research in both quality and measurement aspects, meant that if Australia's LIS academics did not participate in the exercise they could easily become marginalized.
- The continued realization by ALIA of the need to foster a research culture amongst members and the commitment of the ALIA Research Committee towards this goal; and
- to gain a place at the table and participate in national research discussions.

During the RQF forums, the small representation of Australian LIS academics and libraries who attended used their best endeavours to act on advice earlier sought from LIS academics and researchers to ensure the consideration of the:

- non inclusion of citations and citation ranking in LIS research measures except when they are included as strong evidence;
- non ranking of LIS journals in measures of quality because this did not work;
- inclusion of informatic products as outputs of research projects;
- inclusion of researchers in our field who are professional librarians working in libraries; and
- inclusion of non competitive grants (Smith, 2007).

It did seem that at the RQF stage many of these suggestions were listened to. However the advent of ERA and the new Labor government's desire to do things differently meant that the final outcome was not as positively wide ranging. Journal ranking remains and has replaced citations, although citations do appear as a measurement criterion for research output for some discipline areas. The difficulty in claiming informatic products as well as the inclusion of professional librarians who are undertaking research and working in libraries, is because of the perceived practicality of the products, and the necessity that any professionals who are part of a research project would need to also be part of a national competitive grant scheme (e.g. ARC research grants).

An interesting dimension to the ERA phase of the journal re-ranking process was an overriding element of confidentiality regarding the draft, working and final journal lists such that the coordinator of each discipline group was required to sign a confidentiality agreement not to divulge the list to collaborators. This lack of transparency on the part of the ARC was to return at the end of the exercise. Nevertheless, the Australian LIS community re-engaged with the discussions with renewed energy, although a number of issues became apparent as the exercise unfolded. These included:

- ***The diminution of the place of LIS as the discussions proceeded.***
  In the final days of the RQF, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) decided to "update the 1998 Standard Research Classification and replace it with an Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC)" (ARC, 2008, n.p.) and reorganize the discipline clusters. The new coding system is based on a hierarchy of parent code (2 digits); sub codes of 4 digits with each 4 digit sub code having 6 digit sub field/s of what are deemed related research disciplines.

  After lengthy consultation, the LIS Field of Research (FoR) in the eyes of the Australian government and of course ERA is now under Code 08: Information and Computing Sciences, which has 8 4 digit sub codes of which Library and Information Studies appears under the code 0807. This code has 10 sub fields:

080701 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Management
080702 Health Informatics
080703 Human Information Behaviour
080704 Information Retrieval and Web Search
080705 Informetrics
080706 Librarianship
080707 Organisation of Information and Knowledge Resources
080708 Records and Information Management (excl. Business Records and Information Management)
080709 Social and Community Informatics
080799 Library and Information Studies not elsewhere classified
(ABS, 2008, n.p.).

This relocation of librarianship from the earlier Research Fields, Courses & Disciplines (RFCD) code under 400000 Journalism, Librarianship and Curatorial Studies did not please all Australian LIS researchers.

- *Definitional frameworks*.

Regarding the RQF component of the study it was noted that:

Given more time it would have been useful to debate definitional matters more comprehensively. However the RQF was well underway and guidance by them in this regard was scant. It was decided that if Australian LIS researchers were to be part of the RQF debate then they needed to commence the journal ranking process quickly (Smith & Middleton, 2009, p. 8)

The later ERA review of the journal rankings provided closer definitional frameworks and all participants had a clearer picture of the new requirements. It was now a requirement that ALL journals that appeared on the ERA journal list, regardless of their ranked Tier, must undergo some sort of peer review of contributions. This meant that some of the titles that appeared on the earlier submitted RQF list would need to be removed. On this issue the ARC advised that they were reasonably relaxed about the level of peer review (i.e. not every title needed to have a double blind peer review requirement), but that there must be visible evidence that the title goes through some sort of peer review process. Other disciplines were in discussion with the ARC over the inclusion of non peer reviewed journals and got nowhere with respect to their inclusion. It appeared that as the review got underway, that these conditions made the job of review clearer for all participants.

Even with the guidance of the ERA definitions, the decision making process of each respondent, of what title should be ranked in which tier, will be known only to the respondents of the exercise. The guidance provided by the ARC was:

Tier A* - Typically an A* journal would be one of the best in its field or subfield in which to publish and would typically cover the entire field/subfield. Virtually all papers they publish will be of a very high quality. These are journals where most of the work is important (it will really shape the field) and where researchers boast about getting accepted. Acceptance rates would typically be low and the editorial board would be dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions.

Tier A - The majority of papers in a Tier A journal will be of very high quality. Publishing in an A journal would enhance the author's standing, showing they have real engagement with the global research community and that they have something to say about problems of some significance. Typical signs of an A journal are lowish acceptance rates and an editorial board which includes a reasonable fraction of well known researchers from top institutions.

Tier B - Tier B covers journals with a solid, though not outstanding, reputation. Generally, in a Tier B journal, one would expect only a few papers of very high quality. They are often important outlets for the work of PhD students and early career researchers. Typical examples would be regional journals with high acceptance rates, and editorial boards that have few leading researchers from top international institutions.

Tier C - Tier C includes quality, peer reviewed, journals that do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers. (ARC,2009b).

The move away from journal impact factor and citation analysis in the journal ranking exercise has been appreciated by many, but it does bring with it other variables. Is it any wonder that Australian LIS colleagues might be influenced by other factors including: "the value of a journal beyond the impact factor" as discussed by Coleman (2007, p. 1148); the journal titles preferred by individual Australian LIS researchers for the work that they undertake, much of which supports the Australian LIS condition; their own position within the academic hierarchy, a matter discussed in the US context Adkins & Budd (2006) and Shaw & Vaughan (2008); and perhaps even Nisonger & Davis's (2005) "perception" of LIS journals by LIS education deans? In the case of the Australian LIS journal ranking exercise Coleman's (2007) comment: "the two primary methods of journal evaluation, the so-called objective citation-based rankings, and subjective also called perceptual rankings by experts" (p. 1148) are instructive, particularly as the final decision after the ranked journal titles were submitted to the ARC upon completion, was made, as was discovered much later, by a college of experts.

IS THERE ROOM FOR OPTIMISM?

It transpires that the final ERA journal ranking list that the Australian LIS research community submitted through ALIA was not accepted in total by the ERA governing body on this matter, the Australian Research Council (ARC). This was despite evidence and assurances that the parent body supervising the completion and submission to the ARC of the ERA ranked journal lists: FoR08: Information and Computing Science, would submit the ALIA rankings unaltered.

The ARC's process for release of the final list was not transparent. Small comfort might be gained from the fact that a number of other discipline areas have been similarly affected (or more precisely disaffected). It is evident that in the final decisions that the ARC give little credence to the importance to national titles. Macauley's (2010) brief analysis of the final run of ALL journal titles in the ARC's final list includes:

I did a keyword search for Austral* on the complete ERA Journal Title List. Listed below are the A* ranked journals located:

Australasian Journal of Philosophy
Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand)

While an Australian produced journal doesn't necessarily need to have Australia/Australian/Australasia etc in the title, it is a sad reflection on the lack of respect that has been given to Australian journals in the ERA process (P. Macauley, personal communication, May 3, 2010).

The ARC have advised that the lists will be revised again in the near future (ARC, 2010), and at the time of writing this process is underway. The mystery as to why the intense commitment of those researchers in the LIS discipline, and others, was essentially ignored in the final analysis and released product, remains. The lack of transparency shown by the ARC has disappointed and angered many members of the Australian academic community (e.g. Cockbain, 2010; Rowbotham, 2010b). So much for academic and research accountability.

Time will tell if the location of Australian LIS under the FoR 08: Information and Computing Sciences, which includes Library and Information Studies under the code 0807 will be detrimental to the representation of LIS in Australia's research outputs and outcome measures. The FoR codes were established as a "means of classifying research for government policy and they were not originally intended to be used for classifying publications" (Edwards as quoted by Rowbotham, 2010b. p. 39). If this remains the case, then the categorization of the archives journal titles in FoR 0807, at the request of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) and through the ALIA process. when the Australian Bureau of Statistic's document specifically states that "e) Archival, repository and related studies is included in Group 2102 Curatorial and Related Studies" (ABS, 2008, n.p.), makes little sense. It remains to be seen how the dual categorisation of archives and related studies will work in practice.

Efforts by the LIS researcher community to gain some stature in the university research scheme of things will depend on the vibrancy and activity of LIS schools in the research agenda for Australia. How this might happen given their small size within often quite large institutions, will be a significant challenge.

There is an enormous challenge ahead for LIS educators and their research contributions in Australia. It is not one that can be taken lightly. Hallam noted in her April 2006 Frontline:

> There are few incentives now to become an educator. Twenty years ago, talented and motivated library professionals were able to move comfortably between academia and industry, which serviced to invigorate practice and to enrich the learning environment…Without succession planning, LIS departments will be increasingly vulnerable (p. 4).

The disappointment in the final title ranking for Australia's two premier LIS journals is mirrored in other disciplines e.g. geology (Cockbain, 2010).   So too is the lack of transparency demonstrated by the ARC when the final list of journal titles was released (Rowbotham, 2010a, b; Woodward, 2010).   The push for Australian academics to publish in Tier A* and A journals has already started and the LIS sector is not alone (e.g. Editorial, 2008).   An initial effort to encourage Australia's LIS academics to publish in an A* title has lead to the publication of a theme issue of the journal *Library and Information Science Research*, December 2010 (Smith and Haddow, 2010). But this is only a start.

It is hoped that library/information-related projects and teams will be amongst those that are put forward by their universities to participate in future research rounds and projects and that they are properly recognised for the contribution that they make.   There is also significant research activity within the Australian university library sector. The work on institutional digital repositories continues to be recognized by the government (ASHER, 2009), although this work often comes under the earlier mentioned informatics product domain.

 Wilson, Kennan, Willard & Boell (2010) offer cautious optimism for the future of LIS education and research in Australia because of their evidence of "steady academization" (p. 256) of the LIS educator.   It will take more than succession planning to see the continuation of library education at the university level in Australia. It will take current and new library educators who are committed to furthering the theoretical enquiry of the discipline and who are prepared to do this in the environment that is university education in Australia today and in the future. The ALIA has no choice but to make sure that the voice that was heard during the very busy times of the RQF initiative continues to resonate in Australian research circles. The ALIA cannot do this alone: it must have the research activity of its LIS members and researchers, published and recognized, for the profession to be a vital contributor to the Australian university research landscape.

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