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Professional Pathways: Strategies to increase workforce diversity in the Australian library and information sector

Abstract: In this article it is argued that the notion of a ‘diverse workforce’ extends beyond our understandings about the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the gender identity or the sexual orientation of individual staff members; it also considers the increasingly diverse skills required by library and information professionals. The work undertaken in the Australian *Professional Pathways* project is discussed.

Keywords: workforce diversity, LIS education, continuing professional development



Introduction

In August 2020, the Board of Directors of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) released the *ALIA strategic plan 2020-2024* (ALIA, 2020a). Contextualised by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, ALIA identified four strategic priorities for the association: Supporting a resilient, diverse workforce; Developing alliances and collaborative ventures; Succeeding through advocacy; and Enhancing member value. Given the theme of ‘diversity’ in this issue of *Bibliothek Forschung und Praxis*, the first of ALIA’s strategic priorities is of immediate relevance. Underpinning the goal ‘to support a resilient, diverse workforce’ is the understanding that the library and information profession needs to attract and develop “talented, committed individuals from different cultural backgrounds, who will have the strength and agility to navigate a rapidly changing

workplace” (ALIA, 2020a, p.1). As Australia is a multi-cultural country with 30% of the population, or 7.6 million people, born overseas, and with over 300 languages spoken in Australian homes (ABS, 2021), there is clearly scope for a truly multi-cultural workforce.

Nevertheless, it is important to ask whether the idea of ‘individuals from different cultural backgrounds’ represents a satisfactory understanding of the concept of ‘diversity’. In the context of employment, the term ‘a diverse workforce’ inevitably extends beyond people drawn from different cultural backgrounds, to encompass those drawn from many other categories of ‘diversity’. The current President of ALIA (2021-2023), Vicki Edmunds, has selected ‘diversity’ as the focus for her presidential theme and she has described her vision for the library and information workforce where there is “a strong representation of women and gender diverse peoples, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, neurodiverse and all other diverse categories” (Edmunds, 2021, p.3).

In 2020, ALIA conducted a *Workforce Diversity Survey* to develop a clearer understanding of diversity in the workplace (ALIA, 2021a). The survey attracted 114 responses from human resources staff employed in all types of library service. Respondents were asked to describe the degree of diversity at their workplace, to identify the specific categories of diversity considered in their organisation, whether any key performance indicators (KPIs) were used to measure workforce diversity, and to indicate the importance of workforce diversity goals in recruitment decisions. The key findings revealed that three quarters (75%) of all respondents believed that it was very important to create a more diverse workforce, but that admittedly, to date, relatively little had been done to measure progress through KPIs. Greater emphasis tended to be placed on the recruitment of First Nations and gender-diverse staff members, but there was less evidence about people from other minority cultural, ethnic or racial backgrounds or those living with a disability. The study concluded that much more work needed to be done “to change good intentions into measurable (and measured) progress” (ALIA, 2021a, p.7). Edmunds’ commitment to building a diverse and inclusive library and information workforce and to working towards significant and ongoing changes in policy and practice underpins her work as ALIA President.

It has long been argued that the library and information workforce should reflect the diversity inherent in the communities they serve. Beyond the staffing profile itself, however, it is critical that libraries develop and deliver the relevant collections, programs and services to directly respond to the wide range of community interests and to support the spectrum of community needs. The ambit of library programs and services has undoubtedly expanded in recent years – and is likely to continue to expand into further new areas of practice – with the result that many non-LIS qualified

personnel are attracted to the emerging fields of professional practice in the library and information sector. People from many different disciplines, including IT, data science, education, early childhood literacy, social work, community development and the creative arts, are already working in the new roles that have been established. If we accept that library programs and services are becoming increasingly diverse, then we must also consider the knowledge and skills that are required for contemporary library practice. In this article, the topic of workforce diversity is explored through the lens of library and information science (LIS) education and qualifications.

Issues in LIS education in Australia

For the past 50 years or so, the traditional pathway to becoming a library and information professional in Australia has been the completion of a formal program of education or training, accredited by ALIA. In this country, courses in librarianship have been offered by universities, primarily at the postgraduate level (Graduate Diploma and Master degrees), but also a small number at the undergraduate level (Bachelor degree). Colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in the vocational education and training (VET) sector have offered programs leading to the qualification of library technician (Diploma). Graduates from the higher education programs are eligible to become Associate members of ALIA, while those completing a VET qualification may become Library Technician members.

These days, however, the Australian education sector is in a state of flux. Even before the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and TAFE institutions were facing significant financial, structural and technological challenges that forced them to review their strategic and operational activities. International education markets had become increasingly attractive sources of revenue, while the fees for domestic students had progressively risen. Academic institutions became more reliant on a number of high-demand disciplines, such as business, engineering and medicine, while niche fields of study with relatively small numbers of students – including library and information science – became more vulnerable. Over the decade 2009-2019, the number of LIS courses offered by universities and TAFE colleges declined from 50 to 36 (ALIA, 2019a).

It should be noted that the presidential theme of the immediate Past-President of ALIA, Viv Barton, was 'education'. In late 2019, ALIA published an Issues Paper, *The Future of LIS Education* (ALIA, 2019b) to investigate the widespread concerns across the library and information sector. LIS educators, students, employers and the wider membership of the association were invited to discuss the factors affecting professional education and training for the library and information workforce. Three key areas were examined: the issues relating to the current pathways to becoming an LIS

professional; the issues relating to the sustainability of LIS education; and the issues relating to employer engagement in the education and development of future LIS professionals. The Issues Paper concluded with a listing of “ten desirable characteristics for an LIS sector with a strong professional focus” (ALIA, 2019b, p.6). These characteristics highlighted the importance of a whole-of-sector commitment to LIS education and professional learning and were subsequently used as the basis for a survey designed to measure the views of the wider membership about the future of LIS education. Additionally, a series of focus group discussions was held across the country, along with several interviews with ‘critical friends’, to explore some of the more challenging issues in greater depth.

The findings from the nation-wide data gathering activities were reported and considered in *The future of library and information science education in Australia: Discussion paper* (ALIA, 2020b). Most respondents believed that ALIA’s recognition of formal LIS qualifications remained essential, but they also felt that there was scope for new pathways into the profession which could potentially increase the diversity of the LIS workforce and ensure that staff had a wider range of contemporary skills and expertise. One significant area of feedback revealed that, while the core business of library management generally sat with library and information professionals, many other professional skillsets were already being used in the design, delivery and administration of programs and services (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The landscape of skillsets underpinning the library and information sector (ALIA, 2020b, p.11)

Comments provided by respondents in the survey highlighted the reality of the situation for employers (ALIA, 2020c, p.16):

We employ highly educated people from different disciplines, who bring important knowledge and skills to the sector. How can we help them achieve professional status?

Individuals also provided their views:

I have a degree and masters in IT. I've been working in libraries for five years. I don't see myself as a librarian, but I do want to be recognised as a library professional.

Some 'more traditional' library professionals found the changing skills landscape threatening, while others were keen to look to the future and identify the opportunities (ALIA, 2020c, p.5):

Librarians are not always open to skills obtained in different backgrounds, valuing 'irrelevant' library experience over 'relevant' non-library experience. Libraries should be more open to people from different industries and, likewise, librarians should be more open to gaining experience in other sectors.

ALIA's research into the issues associated with education and qualifications amplified the desirable attributes of a strong LIS profession: education should be closely linked to employment outcomes; courses should be developed with and for employers; a flexible qualifications framework should cover the required knowledge, skills and competencies ranging from vocational levels through to higher education levels; there should be different pathways to professional status; and ongoing professional learning should be integrated into all pathways to professional status (ALIA, 2019b; ALIA, 2020b). ALIA's goals for a strong LIS profession therefore focus on building on workforce diversity to strengthen the roles, capabilities and responsibilities of LIS-qualified professionals and to offer alternative pathways for people with non-LIS academic qualifications to join the profession by articulating their knowledge, skills and experience, "according to new industry-developed professional frameworks" (ALIA, 2020c, p.5). The next stages of ALIA's work towards 'a resilient, diverse workforce' is referred to as the *Professional Pathways* project.

The Professional Pathways project

In late November 2020, ALIA released a consultation draft of the *Professional Pathways* plan (ALIA, 2020c). The plan included four key strategies relating to the desirable features of a strong LIS profession:

- To recognise the skills and experience of LIS professionals and to incentivise continuous learning through a professional certification process

- To create pathways for people with non-LIS academic qualifications to seek LIS professional status through knowledge, skills and experience, according to new industry-developed professional frameworks
- To create an ALIA-accredited Library Certificate for people working at the entry-level in libraries with no formal qualifications
- To work with the university and TAFE sectors to strengthen the position of existing LIS courses through industry investment in student places and research.

The draft plan was discussed by ALIA members and other interested parties in a series of online Town Hall meetings held during the months of December 2020 and January 2021. The consultation process culminated in February 2021 with a *Professional Pathways Summit* where library leaders, LIS educators, subject matter experts and new graduates worked together to map the way forward.

Following ALIA's formal ratification of the *Professional Pathways* project in June 2021, the Professional Pathways Board was established to provide project governance and oversight. This sector-wide Board is chaired by ALIA President, Vicki Edmunds, and includes appointed members of the peak industry bodies: National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA), the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), the Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA), along with representatives from schools and TAFE libraries, health and government libraries, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, new and emerging professionals, and LIS educators (higher education and vocational education and training).

The logic proposition that guides the project seeks to achieve the vision for a strong profession: "The *Professional Pathways* initiative recognises that an LIS workforce that reflects the diversity of the community, equipped with the right skills, knowledge and ethics, and valued and supported by employers and the community will be best placed to deliver library and information services that anticipate and meet the needs of the community, now and into the future" (ALIA, 2021c). The concept of 'diversity' is therefore critical: the LIS profession must acknowledge and respond to the *diversity* of society, and a *diversity* of skills and expertise is required across the workforce to provide the rich *diversity* of library and information services enjoyed by the Australian population. Inevitably this means that, rather than having a single, common career path into libraries, there should be multiple pathways into and across the profession. This requires employers, as well as employees, to value all aspects of the LIS profession and to collectively become active supporters of career development.

The principal objective of the *Professional Pathways* project is to develop the appropriate frameworks which will form the foundation of the alternative pathways into the library and

information profession. The already familiar pathway for prospective library and information professionals to follow an ALIA-accredited LIS program of study and to graduate from a university as a librarian or from a TAFE college as a library technician will continue to exist. ALIA will also maintain the services it provides to LIS professionals migrating to Australia to recognise their international qualifications, including the reciprocal recognition of qualifications held by members of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the American Library Association (ALA). Beyond this, there will be pathways which are designed to address the sector-specific skills requirements for LIS professionals working in health, law, government and school libraries. The *Professional Pathways* project will also see the development of new pathways for people who enter the LIS profession with tertiary qualifications that they have gained in other disciplines, and who then undertake specific LIS-focused studies (for example, short courses and/or micro-credentials) and who can demonstrate the relevant knowledge and skills they have gained through accredited training and employment experiences. Regardless of their pathway into the profession, everyone will be encouraged to commit to ongoing learning in order to work towards, and maintain, their certified professional status.

The *Professional Pathways* project is a work in progress. The first major body of work involves an extensive literature review and environmental scan to inform the development of the frameworks that will underpin these varied professional pathways. It is essential to have a sound and reliable evidence base to ensure that ALIA's ideas for the future workforce align with current and emerging developments in the international LIS field, that they resonate with similar initiatives in other professions, and that they take into account the evolving trends in professional qualifications and micro-credentialling in the Australian higher education and vocational education and training arenas. The findings from these research activities will be presented in a multi-stranded technical report: an analysis of general and specialised skills frameworks will support the mapping of professional skills, while an examination of the professional values and ethics of the library and information profession will shape the values-driven framework to distinguish the LIS profession from other fields. There is discussion in the academic literature about the concept of 'acculturation into a profession' and this topic is regarded as an intrinsic element in supporting new players as they achieve professional status in the library and information sector.

The commitment to career-long professional development and skills training represents a highly significant aspect of the *Professional Pathways* project. ALIA has long been recognised for its work with the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) scheme for members, with the associated

Certified Practitioner arrangements (ALIA, 2021d). The revised, stronger CPD scheme will include a new program of accredited education and training options. Following the release of the technical report, the consultation process to review the draft frameworks and alternative pathways will actively involve the Professional Pathways Board, as well as ALIA's Special Interest Groups and Advisory Committees. Feedback will also be invited from ALIA's regional groups and from other appropriate bodies across the wider Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM), education and professional sectors.

Summary

ALIA has set a four-year timeline (2021-2024) for the *Professional Pathways* project, moving from the current stage of conducting the research, developing the draft frameworks and consulting with stakeholders, through to launching the agreed frameworks and implementing the new pathways. Communications strategies will accompany the roll out of the new pathways and promote their value, and finally the pathways will be embedded in practice.

There will be a number of important outputs from the project: clear skills frameworks for LIS professionals across the sector; new pathways to support entry to the profession at different levels; an updated CPD scheme with industry-accredited education and training options; employer support for their staff members' career journeys; and a committed LIS workforce with a deep understanding of their value to society. Ultimately, the goal of the *Professional Pathways* project is to "attract clever people from a wide range of backgrounds to the industry, who share the ethos and values of the profession, in order to be inclusive and relevant" (ALIA, 2020c, p.23).

The LIS profession in Australia has a sound foundation of qualifications which ALIA seeks to retain and further strengthen, particularly through establishing closer productive linkages between education and industry. However, to achieve a truly diverse workforce, effective strategies are needed to remove the barriers for entry for people from non-LIS fields, to create entry points at multiple career stages, and to create incentives for people to seek LIS professional status through qualifications, training and experience. ALIA wishes to develop a sector-wide understanding of the values, ethics and policies that are fundamental to the LIS profession, and to promote this as the core element of professional identity. Sector-wide engagement is critical for a strong future-focused LIS sector: employers, educators, trainers, researchers and LIS professionals at all stages of their career should demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that the diverse, skilled, valued and supported LIS workforce proudly and successfully delivers quality library and information services to communities across Australia. The *Professional Pathways* project is embedded in the first of ALIA's

strategic priorities, that is to support a resilient, diverse workforce. It is also aligned with the other three strategic priorities, as successful outcomes will depend on strong alliances and collaborative ventures, on powerful advocacy about the value of LIS professionals in society, and on communicating the enhanced member value that accompany the alternative pathways and ongoing learning.

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