

Who do you think you are?

ABSTRACT

The workforce will, to some extent, consist of very able women who, having the good sense to realize that their working life is likely to be limited, wish to start working life after matriculation, not after spending four years in higher education. This I would argue is for the common good. Their profitable working life is extended for 4 years. (Flowers, 1963 p.5)

This quote from before the establishment of the first library technicians' course in Australia describes a general point of view at the time about the role of education for women in occupations such as those working in libraries. It reflects a view of library technicians thought to be long gone. Times have changed, yet what do we really know about the ambitions, success and composition of those who work as library technicians today? This paper will investigate the history and development of this occupation and take a look at who really inhabits the world of the library technician, investigating the truth beyond the stereotype. Over a number of years data has been gathered about the education, composition, attitudes and ambitions of library technicians, technician students and those who have chosen to continue their education further and become librarians. Unique characteristics have been investigated and details determined about how library technicians, particularly those in the early years of study, match up to the broader education community. The results to date show a widely varied group matching some of the stereotypes and defying others. The picture painted is a complex and interesting one providing a useful insight into the composition of those working as library technicians and raising questions about education and definitions in the library industry today.

Who do you think you are?

Edward Flowers, a prominent librarian wrote in 1963 as part of a broader discussion on the structure of Australian library education of a need for a new industry group in Australian libraries who would 'to some extent, consist of very able women' (p.5). To a large degree this vision for education for women within Australian libraries came to fruition and was in fact to be one of the driving forces behind the establishment of library technicians' courses in Australia. Wesley Young, responsible for the delivery of the first library technicians' course believed that

a crucial factor was the desire of so many women to get back into the workforce, or those already there, for some form of upward mobility (pers. comm. 23rd July 2001)

Yet this first course was also established for other often complex reasons.

The questions of 'Why?', 'How' and 'Who?' are important in our understanding of the development of library technicians as an identifiable group within the library industry. In the search to find answers to these questions we sometimes have to look behind us and examine where we have come from. While a great many words have been written over the last forty or fifty years about the divisions between professionals and paraprofessionals in this industry, changes in society, the nature of work and in education over the last ten years in particular have led to a need to re-examine some of the premises upon which we base employment in and education for libraries. This re-examination needs to take place within a social and historical context so we can truly understand what has shaped the employment structures in libraries today. When examining such contexts we also need to remember the vast array of workplaces in which librarians and library technicians find themselves in. Too frequently discussions about the LIS workplace revolve around the 'high end' research and corporate libraries and neglect the thousands of smaller work environments such as schools, private organisations, government agencies, rural libraries, public libraries and other associated institutions. This focus on large institutions does not really give us a comprehensive picture of the nature of employment and the skills and education needed for library work in the twenty-first century. To do complete

justice to such an examination is beyond the range of an article such as this but some key themes may be able to be touched upon. Education in particular needs to be considered, as within the context of the LIS industry, it can be argued that education has been used as a vehicle to shape and define employment strata and status in the sector.

Historical Context

It is fitting that such a re-examination take place in Melbourne as it was in this city that some defining events occurred in the field of education for the library industry. In Melbourne at least three innovations occurred which were to have a long-term impact on education and industry divisions for work in libraries in Australia, These innovations were:

- The establishment under Warwick Eunson's direction of the very first course of librarianship in a post-secondary institution at the Melbourne's Teachers' College in 1955. This was a one-year programme following the Trained Primary Teachers Certificate.
- The establishment of the first post-matriculation course in a post-secondary institution at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 1965. This was the two year Associateship Diploma of Librarianship under the direction of Jean Hagger. It was followed by the introduction of the three-year Associate Diploma in 1970 which eventually became a Bachelors degree.
- The introduction of the first course for library technicians at Box Hill Girls Secondary College (Box Hill Institute) in 1970 taught by Wesley Young

You will have noticed the names of some of those associated with these courses have been mentioned. This is because in the LIS arena we often fail to acknowledge our 'dead Germans' (Pierce 1992 p.641) as one library academic called them and concentrate on the buildings and the books. This is particularly true when it comes to courses for library technicians. Library technician education has had a relatively stable workforce over the years and many of those who were instrumental in the establishment, maintenance, and growth of these courses remained involved for many years and in some cases continue to be so. Their involvement has often shaped the education

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and working lives for many library technicians yet these people are often outside the mainstream LIS environment because traditionally they have been operating in large educational institutions as classroom teachers. To name only a few who may be familiar to you and who were involved in the early development of library technician education we have of course Wesley Young, Jay Lamont, Bill Irving, Pam Naylor, Cathy Privic, Rosemary Allan, Helen Smeaton, Ian Rogers, Pam Naylor, Kay Barrett, Robert Williams, Richard Williams Cynthia Ziggle, Margaret Star, Judy Claydon and Roberta Blackwood-Beatie (Talbot). These people amongst a host of others have delivered library technician education throughout Australia since the 1970s and have guided developments in curriculum through many changes both in the industry and in the very structure of education in this country. Perhaps we should at this point examine the environment and context in which these teachers worked and library technicians' course developed.

The early years

The establishment of the first course for library technicians in Australia came about through an approach made by the Victorian branch of the Library Association of Australia (LAA) to the Department of Technical Education in that state in June 1969. It was approved in October of that year and by December Wesley Young had written the syllabi for subjects in a two level course for library clerks and library technicians based on models and information he had of such programmes in the United States and Canada and sent them out for comment on the 23rd of December 1969 (Naylor 1991 p.2). The course was advertised in the local press and in the *Australian Women's Weekly* and according to Young 'the response from women who were thirsting for such an opportunity was overwhelming' resulting in hundreds of applications (pers. comm. 23rd July 2001). A pilot course was up and running by early 1970 with twenty full-time and thirty-seven part-time students enrolled including two men (Pivec 1975, p.48). A condition placed on the LAA by the Department was that the second level be sufficiently advanced to allow good students to articulate into the librarianship degree at RMIT, a practice that has remained in place to the present day.

This is the 'How?' but what of the 'Why?' The winds of change had begun to blow politically, industrially and socially in Australia at this time. The Vietnam War was drawing to a close; the Liberal Party's twenty-three year reign in Federal government was also reaching its end. In the same year as the technicians course was established Germaine Greer's seminal *Female Eunuch* was first published and at this time women also began to enter the paid workforce in unprecedented numbers. Two years later the new Whitlam government introduced equal pay for equal work for women. This was also a time of rapid change in the educational environment with a number of key reports changing the face of education for the next twenty years. These reports included the Martin report (1965), Wark Report (1967), Wiltshire report (1969) and most importantly for technicians, the Kangan report (1974). These reports introduced into the educational scene the idea of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE's) alongside universities and saw the transformation of many previously non-degree conferring institutions such as the RMIT and Melbourne Teacher's College into an alternate or binary degree-conferring stream alongside universities. These reports also opened the gates of post-secondary education to the a growing number of men and women aspiring to further education but who fell outside the coterie of privilege which provided access to university. Out of all of this arose a stream of education which provided "vocational starting points for individuals who frequently did not have a trade background" in "areas which tended to fall outside the province or sphere of the tradesman or professional" (Barker and Holbrook 1997, p.219). All of these changes were to vitally affect the library industry which was still attempting to find its way in this new world while pursuing an old quest to establish librarianship schools in the universities. The implication of the LAA's quest for university education for library technicians is that it also involved the removal from the workplace of the many 'trainee' or apprentice librarians who performed what were seen as routine or non-professional tasks. It was felt by many in the field that this left a gap for a group of 'sub-professionals' between clerks and professionals. It was also felt that the librarians' quest for professional status would be enhanced if there

was a group available to perform the routine tasks of library work which released librarians from the mundane to perform purely professional duties. Margery Ramsey prominent library educator had said the introduction of such training would

free our professionals of a lot of unnecessary responsibility and inappropriate work if we paid attention to the development of a strong body of non-professionals who could carry responsible jobs under professional supervisions (Ramsey 1963, p.19)

W.L. Brown president of the LAA in a report in the *Australian Library Journal* said the establishment of the first course at Box Hill Girls Technical College was

a major step forward in the field of library education in Australia and one which is hoped will improve division of labour and thus levels of service in all types of libraries (1970, p.109)

Terminology

The terminology associated with this industry group is important as it gives a clearer picture of what the LAA had in mind when it began to initially advocate for such a training course. Before the course's establishment Ramsey was to spend some time pondering the name of such a group, putting forward suggestions such as 'chartered librarian', 'student librarian', 'and library aide 'and' library clerk' (1963 p.20). A cursory investigation suggests that it was not until quite late, perhaps the mid to late 1960s that the term *technician* began to be applied in other fields such as engineering. The prominent and influential United States educator Lester Asheim who spoke at the LAA's fifteenth biennial conference in Adelaide in 1969 uses the term *library technician* or *library technical assistant* and this appears to be a defining moment in the naming of this group as well as in the development of key concepts about the education of such a group. Wesley Young was greatly influenced by Ashiem's visit and drew many of his ideas from the views expressed. It would appear that up until this point the term most commonly applied in the literature for this group Australia was *sub-professional*, *non-professional* or *library assistant*. The re-naming of this group was part of a larger movement at the time towards a growth in technician level *semi-professions* in many industries to suit growing manpower needs and also reflecting contemporary theorists' belief in a stratified workforce based upon

what has been called a Taylorist or Fordist model. This is a view of work in which tasks are broken down into their smallest component parts, as in a factory, where ideas and systems creation are the realm of the professional and the execution of these ideas and maintenance of these systems the role of the technician. It is very clearly an hierarchical system in which employment and education levels were also defined by perceptions of intellectual ability. Brown was to say of the new library technician course that

most of the students for the Technicians Course would be of a practical rather than academic turn of mind and would have no interest in further study (Brown 1970 p.112).

This theme of roles in the workplace reflecting a different intellectual capacity was a strong one in the contemporary literature and is one that still has purchase in the minds of many when speaking of the differences between TAFE and university today, particularly in the discussions surrounding articulation between the two post-compulsory education sectors.

In the 1970s a new language began to emerge in the lexicon of industry and education. It was a language emanating, at least in Australia, out of the Kangan Report of 1974, *TAFE in Australia*. This report was to fundamentally change the face of training for industry replacing the previous educational paradigm and its attendant rhetoric with a new one which was to re-vitalise training programmes and to change the associated language. What emerges post-Kangan is the concept that training should be about more than vocational outcomes; it should also be about preparing people for active citizenship. Specifically

an educational philosophy which recognizes that the ultimate economic stability of the nation will not be realized from a narrow attachment to training for a trade whose usefulness has a limited term but is more likely to derive from young people educated to possess moral, social and aesthetic values, historical perspectives and the capacity to relate effectively to others. (Young 1979 p.445)

The framework for this new educational model were

- A belief in educating the individual not just for the manpower needs of industry
- TAFE education would be available for all
- Emphasis on life-long learning
- Flexibility

(Watkins 1976, p. 5)

What began to appear in the contemporary LIS literature was a shift away from the use of terms such as *sub-professional* towards the use of the term *paraprofessional*. The use of the term paraprofessional is an important conceptual shift as, rather than the concept of an hierarchical work and training structure, you move towards a concept of a collaborative one which involves such concepts as *parity of esteem* and *equal but different*, catch phrases in the period immediately following the Kangan report and beyond. The term paraprofessional applied to what were called *middle level workers* emerged in the 1960s and seems to have become attached to the LIS field in the early to mid 1970s when Emma R. Christine from the Department of Librarianship at the Queensland Institute of Technology wrote an article for the *Australian and Academic Research Libraries* journal entitled *Paraprofessionals: plague or promise?* (1974, pp.201-205). Amongst many this may be a question that has yet to be answered!

This change in language is important as with this change comes a change in the way in which this work and also education for it was perceived and promoted. What emerges from the late 1970s and into the 1980s is an increasing adherence to the concept of the technician as a discrete professional group with a set of its own skills and specialisations. Noel Watkins Assistant Director of the Education Department of Victoria's Technical Division wrote

I believe the middle level paraprofessional courses prepare students for vocations which have an integrity in their own right. I believe that they are not mere extensions of the technical psychomotor skills of the tradesman or tradeswomen. Neither are they watered down, diluted aspects of the full vocational preparations one expects of a professionally educated person. (1976 p.5)

These views were to dominate educational rhetoric for the next twenty-five years and were to guide much of the employment structures and educational curriculum during that time. Courses for library technicians were described (perhaps a little unfortunately) as *terminal* rather than *pre-professional* (Smeaton 1983 p.34) a viewpoint stressed strongly by both

educators and by the industry. Yet while the rhetoric espoused this view the reality was somewhat different. Within this paradigm is a belief that the skill sets and thus the education of the paraprofessional and professional were unique and the people inhabiting each group had different abilities and were somehow 'different'. This view was not unique to the LIS sector but underpinned most of the education structures at this time. It also has implications for the concepts of articulation, credit and integration of paraprofessional and professional education and relies heavily upon making philosophical distinctions between 'training' and 'education' and practical distinctions between the work that each group performs. Education academic Neil Hooley believes such a view is "remarkable" and

one that suggests that some people have different brains that have been wired in a certain way and not another. It promotes the view that practice and theory are not a unity, and for some practice and theory are separated by a 'Berlin Wall' and can never meet. (2002 p.4)

The library industry in Australia has expended much time clarifying workplace differences using concepts such as *work-level guideline* to corral certain skill sets within an industry group and education has been used as a tool to support such definitions. The reality has been however that there are some areas which have continued to be contested territory and some skills which having once been considered professional moved into the paraprofessional arena suggesting a fluidity or flexibility in the boundaries and a degree of expediency in interpretation. Some educational theorists such as Leesa Wheelahan believe the TAFE curriculum is made up, not of harder, less academic, or less professional skills but is *residual* and made up of those areas which don't fit a professional groups current view of their own education needs and role perception. Therefore technical courses teach those things that professional courses decide they don't wish to teach rather than defining the curriculum according to higher or lower levels of academic or theoretical difficulty (n.d. p.2). This may be a reflection of how difficult it is to separate theory from practice particularly in a vocationally based field such as library and information services. Current debate on such issues questions the possibility of making such distinctions and stems from a long history of

concern about the validity of drawing these distinctions between education and training. Eminent technical education commentator and historian Stephen Murray-Smith viewed such delineations as arbitrary and misleading, he believed that

there is no hierarchy of esteem, There may be educational institutions working in different places, working for different clients, even working at different standards, but that all knowledge is applied, all knowledge is useful, all knowledge is reciprocal. (1976, p. 16)

While Australian educator and librarian John Levett was to say quite early on that

there is a zone of activities in which both the professional and the paraprofessional operate: it is the width of this zone which will be of continuing interest. (1981, p.48)

Not only has it been of continuing interest but it also has been on going and problematic.

Education

The type of education librarians and technicians have received has defined differences in the workplace between the two groups. This difference has a number of aspects but the two most important ones are the presumption of a difference in the actual content of the two courses and the other a difference in the intellectual depth, complexity and teaching approach of the subject matter. The first can be labeled an *epistemological* difference, the second a *pedagogical* difference. The argument for an epistemological difference reflects a reliance on the concept of two equal but different professions as a defining point. The pedagogical argument is based on the concept of sub-professional as opposed to paraprofessional and related to incremental rather than discrete knowledge base relying on differences in ability, achievement and quality. Related to these is the presumption of *higher* rather than *different* academic skills required for professional level courses and issues of access associated with the primary mission of TAFE to provide education for all as opposed to the merit based selection in the university sector. Each of these sectoral delineators needs to be scrutinized carefully as evidence suggests that within the broader educational context they have not held up to interrogation. Victoria particularly presents a situation where traditional boundaries between sectors are being interrogated to establish what is truly

different about TAFE and University education. This has occurred because Victoria is the home of all but one of the dual sector institutions in the country and such institutions have been faced with a need to contemplate the nature of difference both in their educational systems and client groups. This leads to many questions about the validity of the assumptions upon which educational and professional differences have been based. As a result of such research the LIS sector needs to ask a number of questions including: are LIS TAFE students different to university students and if they are, how? : does the curriculum teach different content or the same content in a different way: are the barriers between TAFE training and university education valid ; and is there anything about LIS TAFE students and therefore library technicians which makes them unique?

The people

We know quite a bit about the profile of library technician students because of the work of the National Council for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) who are responsible for the compilation of a vast array of statistics about Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia. Statistics about the university sector are a little harder to gather but useful statistics have been gathered by ALIA giving us an indication of the profile of the LIS student body and workforce. Over the last ten years there have been between two and three thousand students training annually in each of the professional and technical education sectors (ALIA 2006). The numbers have been roughly equal in each sector which is interesting light of the fact that when LIS education in this country was first envisaged by prominent librarians it was to be a system in which one third would be professional and two-thirds paraprofessional. That is

It has been estimated by Australian librarians that two third support staff to one third professional staff represents an economically and professionally sound ratio (Hagger 1971, p.14)

And raises the question of whether we have educated too many professionals. In the workplace the breakdown is a similar 50/50 split between librarians and other library workers. There are a total of 29,000 people employed in the industry in Australia about forty-six percent of these being

librarians and the remainder library assistants and library technicians (ALIA 2007). NSW employs more library workers but Victoria educates more technicians than anywhere else. Statistics for 2002 indicated that there were 962 trainee technicians in Victoria compared to NSW, the next largest at 499 (NCVER pers. com. 11th March 2004). These figures vary only marginally from year to year.

The LIS industry is predominately a female one both in terms of the workplace and education. Statistic gathered showed that in 2002 eight-six percent of all library technician students were female, while in 2005 eighty-four percent of all librarians and ninety-four percent of all technicians in the workforce were female (Teece 2005). No statistics were available for library assistants. The greatest difference in terms of the two groups occurs when we look at the way in which groups are employed with over half of all technicians (55.4%) being employed part-time compared to only one third of librarians working part-time and 71.45% of librarians working full-time (Teece 2003, slide 12). However gender is important in employment status with the figures for female librarians working part-time closer to that of technicians at 45% (Teece, 2005). The library workforce is older than the Australian average but technicians are slightly younger than their professional counterparts. In terms of training library technician students are much older than the average training package students with only seventeen percent falling in the under twenty-five age group compared to forty-seven percent of all training package participants. Eighty-three percent of all trainee library technicians were over twenty-five with nearly half being over forty. In terms of education the library technician student presents an interesting picture with thirty-three percent coming into training with a prior qualification; at least twelve percent have a Bachelor's Degree or higher, slightly higher than the overall training package cohort. Limited statistics are available for undergraduate librarianship students but what is available indicates that roughly forty to fifty percent of this group has a library technician's qualification (Sanders 2006, Richardson 1999). Further research needs to be conducted in this area but if this is correct then very recent research into the area of TAFE–university articulation suggests this is higher than other

comparative industry groups such as Business and Information Technology with rates of about 13.5 % Australia wide for students admitted into university based on their TAFE award (Keating, 2006 p.73). This is however a very variable statistic, dependent of location of the university, field of study and whether or no the university is one of the so-called Group of Eight universities. Undergraduate librarianship courses appear to be atypical in a number of ways with regards to articulation with excellent outcomes in terms of equity which appear at this early stage to be pioneering in terms of the Australian education environment and perhaps worldwide. A great deal of further research needs to be conducted in this area to really confirm the implications of these articulation patterns in areas such as equity for low-socio economic groups, women and early school leavers. In terms of the success of those students who do articulate into the university sector there are a number of factors associated with library technicians which are predictors of success. These include their relatively mature age entrance into education and high rates of completion of the final year of secondary school (Milne, Glaisher and Keating 2006). Research evidence suggests that rather than doing less well than their non-TAFE counterparts TAFE graduates in fact perform on par after an initially unsettled first period. Cohen et al found that

despite being likely that these TAFE graduates had lower TERs (Tertiary Entrance Scores), their subsequent performance at university strengthened the case for admission of TAFE graduates (1997 p.)

Recent research by Milne (2007) and some preliminary evidence by Sanders (2001) also reflect these findings. It may also be that the historic relationship between the two industry groups contributes to successful outcomes as “articulation pathways work best when the two sectors have close and mutually beneficial relationships” (Milne, Glaisher and Keating 2006, p.ii).

Why a technician?

The nature of the LIS student body gives rise to the question of why people choose to enter a VET qualification rather than go directly into university.

Some answers to this may be found in the broader research into articulation and VET. Victoria University, a dual sector university in Melbourne’s West has carried out some research into what motivates students to begin their initial

study at TAFE. This research examined articulation behaviour amongst a group of one hundred and fourteen TAFE students in eight disciplines and provided some insight into attitudes and outcomes at this institution. From interviews the researchers found

The majority of the students hoping to articulate had entered their course with the goal of articulation into a particular degree course in mind. (Milne, Glaisher and Keating 2006, p.3)

We do not know if this applies to those specifically in the LIS field. Such information does reflect what Teese et al call, a “backdoor” to a university education “ Standing outside the graded academic education” (Teese et al 1998, p.8) which many entering the VET sector use. This has an impact most directly on groups mentioned previously in terms of equity such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, early school leavers, women returning to the workforce and those for whom English is a second language. VET can provide initial access for these groups to training which can then provide a launching pad to further studies. Responses to a questionnaire sent out as part of my PhD research reflect some of these themes. One respondent was to say

I commenced study at TAFE because I believed it was a cheaper way to ‘test the waters’ of librarianship to see if I wanted to change careers.

I always intended to get my librarian qualification so I could apply for higher paying positions, but in the end found the TAFE course so interesting and useful I completed the full 2 year diploma. I think I am a better librarian for having studied and worked at technician level also. (Respondent 13)

Replies to an email sent by me to some of the original respondents to the questionnaire asking why they entered TAFE first were also enlightening.

These included

Respondent A

I always wanted to work in a library but it was many years since I was at school so the thought of studying again was quite scary, so I decided that two years was enough for me to accomplish my goal and for me it was realistic according to circumstances, family and finances also (pers.comm. 14 Nov. 2003)

Respondent B

I had a number of reasons for choosing to do the Library Technicians course

1. Cost

2. Perceptions of a librarians duties, I wanted to do the hands on stuff...
3. Workload...
(pers.comm. 13th Nov. 2003)

Respondent C

...I had no formal training and the Library Technicians' course was seen as a useful course to do as it was practical and related to the current job I was doing.

My supervisor encouraged it...

Ease of access to the institution...

Flexibility of the provision of subjects...

Moral support from other staff members...

Each of these responses reflects what have been found to be some of the key themes associated with those who undertake VET study and they provide an interesting insight into traditional perceptions of the motivations of those who undertake such study.

Conclusion

Education for the LIS industry has a complex history and demonstrates many of the important themes associated with post-secondary education in Australia. Education for the library industry in Australia can provide those interested in themes central to post-secondary education in Australia with a unique opportunity to examine in a microcosm, the complexities and issues which have both driven and divided education in Australia. Library education has reflected the ebb and flow of government priorities, the quest for recognition of a new profession, the tensions and debates surrounding appropriate entry level to a profession and the tensions which arise between the professional and paraprofessional. Library technicians and their education has formed part of the development of the industry in Australia and the shape and form of the paraprofessional group and the content of their education has been a defining counterpoint to education for professionals in the field. Both the workplace and education have been shaped by the role the professional and the paraprofessional perceive each other as playing in relation to each other and the 'How', 'Why?' And 'Who?' of library technicians is inextricably linked to the development, past, present and future of the LIS industry.

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