

Charles Sturt University School of Information Studies

Submission to the ALIA Education and Workforce Summit, March 2008

The School of Information Studies at CSU is placed within the Faculty of Education. We see this as a key strategic placement that will enable the School to develop in line with emerging government priorities for education – the lifelong learning concept – and the growth of the knowledge economy. Traditionally, LIS schools have suffered as very junior partners in a number of schools and faculties (previously at CSU for instance, we were placed in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture) where engagement with the strategic direction of the parent body has been limited or non-existent. This resulted in the schools having very little power or influence, leading to low profiles, small budgets, limited interaction or collaboration with other faculty members and marginalisation of courses. This can clearly be seen in the closures of a number of LIS schools over the last decade or so. Thus as a first priority, Schools of Information Studies must clearly articulate their strategic direction and, ideally, link this with a major player in the organisation (in our case Education) who will appreciate the benefits that can be achieved through close cooperation between the disciplines.

Thus the first point we think should be emphasised is the need to link closely with other, relevant disciplines within the University in order to exploit the potential for synergies in research, teaching and consultancy work. Of course, the other vital link is with employers of our graduates. More formal links need to be established (maybe a regular annual meeting) where the LIS Schools can get input from employers as well as employers gaining a better understanding of why the Schools do what they do.

The definition of what a LIS School is all about needs to be broadened. The model of the iSchool developed at the University of Washington and elsewhere, with increasing emphasis upon industry engagement, the role of technology and enabling people in their uses of information is seen by CSU as providing the basis upon which to redevelop LIS education in Australia. In addition, locally, with the advent of the digital age and the government's agenda focusing on the digital economy, what constitutes traditional education for LIS needs to be reconsidered. We live in a society where basic skills such as project management, dealing with organisational change, managing technology-driven change, effective communication, team work – both 'real' and virtual, moving information to knowledge and so on are key skills that all graduates need, regardless of the area in which they expect to work. The traditional expectation of a graduate librarian being someone with a liberal arts degree over which they have done the equivalent of one-year full-time study in specific LIS subjects is unlikely to properly prepare a student for a workplace that will require those key skills noted above as well as profession specific knowledge. Similarly for undergraduate courses where a significant component consists of a freely chosen major in almost any area, there is limited time available for gaining proficiency in these key skill areas.

In addition to this basic knowledge requirement, there is a core knowledge base associated with the broad definition of LIS work that also needs to be clearly defined. These would be broad-brush areas that would form the foundation on which more specific, focused learning could be built. Areas that may comprise this core may take a more wide-ranging, theoretical coverage of topics including areas such as information and society; information organisation; information communication and overload; information management (IT focus); technology; the digital economy; information literacy and the workplace; turning information into knowledge; the preservation of information resources. With this core set of subjects (common to all LIS courses in the country) students could then elect to specialise in a particular stream that may focus say on general librarianship (with opportunities to specialise in public, academic, health, law, business and children's); records management; archives; preservation; information analysis (to be defined but focusing on creating info experts for the business world); knowledge management and so on. Obviously not all of these options could be made available by all LIS Schools and this review provides a major opportunity for existing Schools to work cooperatively to develop a nationwide program that complements each other, providing a cooperative rather than competing environment among the Schools.

Taking the above approach would require the specialisation options to be offered in an online, distance education mode to enable students everywhere to undertake their specialisation of choice. The core studies should be offered in a flexible manner with some subjects requiring a level of face-to-face study in order to generate the student interaction, discussion, brain storming and so on that are the key benefits of a traditional tutorial approach. This could be offered in a number of ways such as weekend schools or one-week intensive residentials as part of the subject or in the more traditional manner on campus every week during term. In addition, compulsory online interactive classrooms would benefit most subjects.

If this were done in a cooperative environment, with all LIS Schools adopting the same approach, then the current situation where LIS Schools compete for students, offering the easiest, most attractive option for them (non-attendance at anything and limited or no interaction with other students), regardless of its educational benefit (or lack thereof), then students would be forced into this mode of study with resulting benefits to their broader education. This approach also helps differentiate a university education with its emphasis on thinking more broadly from that of a TAFE qualification with its focus on job specific skills. It would also, of course, make it easier for academics from all of the Schools to work together on cooperative research projects and gain significant benefits from specialisation – something quite difficult given the numbers of small schools with low staff numbers. In a country the size of Australia, in this fairly small field, cooperation would seem to provide considerable benefits.

Given the above, it would seem that it could only work at the undergraduate level or, for post-graduates, at the Masters level. To fit it all in as a one year Graduate Diploma would not seem possible.

Having the specialisation strands would also provide opportunities for professional development activities focused in these specific areas which is an area CSU is keen to build and develop given the focus on lifelong learning and ALIA's commitment to professional development.

Research students (Masters and PhDs) need to be encouraged among younger professionals in order to develop that level of expertise to benefit the workplace directly and also, of course, to build a pool of potential LIS academics. This needs to be encouraged through liaison with key employers, more publicity and promotion for PhD completions and regular recruiting drives by Schools from their brightest graduate students. We (Australia) also need to ensure that sufficient opportunities are maintained—via conferences and scholarly journals, to enable showcasing of this work and we (at CSU) suggest this is an area in which ALIA could be more closely involved.

The Education Summit is timely for the LIS School at CSU as we are at the moment going through a process of examining our strategic direction and future opportunities. It is hoped that the outcomes of the Summit will, together with feedback from our own focus groups and think tank sessions, provide vital input to the review of the School at CSU.

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