

EDUCATION FOR INFORMATION FORUM

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION FOR THE INFORMATION DISCIPLINES

I-Forum 1 — 11 February 2008

Sponsored by the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management at the University of New South Wales, Kensington

Rationale for the Education for Information Forum (I-Forum)

The rationale for starting a collaborative and open “conversation” is to focus attention on matters of mutual interest among stakeholders in the information disciplines and professions such as: initiatives in teaching and delivery of courses; curriculum content and design; research requirements; industry needs; career opportunities; issues in technology and communications.

We need a new type of infrastructure for delivery of education in the information disciplines. Among the reasons for this are:

- Productivity and innovation in the Information Sector is hampered by less than optimal educational offerings in many locations.
- Divided efforts in many institutions with insufficient critical mass of researchers and educators means that Australia is not getting the best innovative minds to converge on problems that could affect Australia’s economic capability;
- Volatility in student enrolments and student retention patterns;
- Current administrative arrangements that inhibit cross-disciplinary fertilization of ideas across all information fields;
- Rapidly changing industry requirements.

We need a strategy for looking at the situation from outside the confines of the usual faculty forums of individual teaching institutions. Among stakeholders in developing a new strategy are:

- Disciplines and fields which are concerned with education for information
- Faculties and Schools that currently service and provide education for information
- Universities and institutions hosting the above.

Collaborative Potential

One possible mechanism is to establish an educational entity or consortium for effective sharing and delivery of curriculum content among partner institutions. Improved collaboration and connectivity would enhance intellectual and social capital among Australian information educational programs. This shared collaborative might be conceived of as a virtual or physical institute that operates at the national level. The synergy thus generated could achieve:

- Greater visibility and recognition both internally within the home institution, and externally in the world of work and industry;
- Closer ties to provide avenues for convergence and differentiation among fields with the information domain;
- Mutual respect for the contributions of each field to the world of knowledge and information work.

The following table illustrates some of the shared benefits and strengths of such a consortium:

Shared Attributes	Shared Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded teaching and research opportunities • Power to investigate and test new (e.g. online) modes of teaching • Collaborative and shared curriculum initiatives • Stable platform for research, development and innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course modules as electives or core subjects • Staff exchanges • Doctoral forum to promote better mentoring and supervision of students • Support systems for staff and faculty members • Contact with industry bodies and employer institutions

Collaboratively universities and academic departments could build greater strength of offerings thereby broadening and improving student learning outcomes. Participating institutions would share in the benefits and gains of such collaborative activities. Exchange mechanisms would need to be designed to allow sharing of course materials and subject content within an agreed-upon system of payments among providers of course units.

What are the Models for Collaboration?

In the United States, the ISchool movement consists of “schools interested in the relationship between information, technology, and people ... characterized by a commitment to learning and understanding of the role of information in human endeavors. The *i*Schools take it as given that expertise in all forms of information is required for progress in science, business, education, and culture. This expertise must include understanding of the uses and users of information, as well as information technologies and their applications.” The US I-Schools have developed a set of guidelines to pursue common objectives with a collective commitment of resources (see <http://www.ischools.org/oc/charter.html>).

Although the *i*Schools model is a relevant and important starting point for our discussions, Australian conditions will require something different given a university system that serves a widely dispersed population across a huge land mass.

With Australia's small population size, the solution achieved in the United States with its *iSchools* Project is probably not possible. However, it is conceivable that in an Australian context the *iSchool* model could become 'virtual'.

Government and Other Initiatives

Prior to election in late 2008, the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, announced that Labor would create a digital education revolution by turning schools in Australia into digital schools by providing every student in Year 9 to 12 with individual access to a computer. Representatives of the country's IT industry are calling on the new government to establish a trade advisory group to assist in implementing its "education revolution". Sheryle Moon, CEO of industry body the Australian Information Industry Association (AIIA), described the government's digital education plans as an "enormous technical and logistical task" which will require an attached industry consultancy to be fully realised.

Other initiatives in for example the E-Research arena and experiences in mounting new courses in *services science, management and engineering (SSME)* at the University of Sydney, illustrate that the information discipline is moving towards a new approach to education. The SSME course is teaching students about the wide socio-economic and business foundations of an information-enabled service sector that uses information systems, information management and information technology to achieve innovation in postgraduate education.

It is also clear that universities need to prepare for new cohorts of students entering their university educational years with enhanced knowledge about information technologies and with expectations of being able to enter innovative and challenging programs in information related fields.

Thus, the I-Forum is established at an opportune time, at the beginning of new directions by the Labor Government with its promise of innovation and renewal in education at the secondary and tertiary levels, and with a new focus on research. There will be calls for better educated teachers with appropriate information degrees in the information disciplines to meet the needs of secondary schools; for new programs that address the need for skilled thinkers with information-enabling skills for servicing E-Research projects in different arenas; and for universities to offer innovative and challenging career-oriented programs for the information professions.

Purpose of the I-Forum

As an outcome of the Rudd Government's new education initiatives to equip every secondary school student with personal computers and to improve education in information systems and technology, the purpose of I-Forum is to:

- Discuss strategies for improving the delivery of education in the information disciplines in a timely and efficient manner to cater for a predicted influx of students over the next decade;

- Address issues associated with the loss of efficiency and coordination occasioned by the scatter across many faculties and universities of information-related disciplinary programs in Australia;
- Examine alternative administrative structures for bringing the information disciplines into closer cooperation and collaboration.

I-Forum Objectives and Actions

Key objectives are to outline a continuing series of meetings that will work towards:

- Agreement on cooperation among the information disciplines towards useful collaborative structures;
- Developing a set of guidelines for the reform of education in the information disciplines;
- Continuation of discussion over time drawing in stakeholders from industry, government, research and academic sectors to contribute to future meetings
- Creating a clearer identity for the information fields/professions as an integrated domain.
- Nominate dates and topics for future I-Forums (I-Forum2 planning in train for mid-July);
- Enlist other participants specifically those in Information Sector industry groups, in the for-profit business and non-profit sectors, and government;
- Speak about the I-Forum's objectives to government departments and agencies whose remit is education and research;
- Enlist the support of Vice-Chancellors, Academic Boards and Heads of Schools and Departments of information related programs.

What has been discussed so far

The inaugural meeting of the I-Forum earlier this year saw great energy and appetite among participants to address the questions of reform and change. Dr Marianne Broadbent (Edward W. Kelley & Partners) opened the I-Forum by outlining earlier efforts to create an integrated curriculum over 24 years ago.

Dr Broadbent gave us some perspectives on the information continuum starting with the notion that information and IT are part of an organisation's asset base and that deployment and use of information impacts on business performance. In order to challenge the I-Forum participants, she outlined the challenge of understanding and caring about market demand for trained information specialists.

Underlining the difficulties of the I-Forum's remit is the difficulty of harmonising an adolescent field with multiple competing sub-fields where acceptance as an integrated discipline of information is yet to be recognised. Another difficulty she pointed to is the nature of academic institutions which during the past decade in Australia favoured a competitive stance towards academic enterprises at the expense of more fruitful integration and collaborative models of education. An important point she made was that *size does matter* and she alluded to the small size of most information departments or schools as not providing the critical mass needed for innovation and integration.

Dr Broadbent touched on the history of the information disciplines in Australia's education system. First, she highlighted the adverse outcomes for the domain from having been established piece-meal over time, resulting in programs situated in different faculties and schools. She affirmed the view that to maintain any form of creative edge and contribution to industry and society in general, Australia needs to sustain its information programs with structures that support researchers and teachers in university information programs.

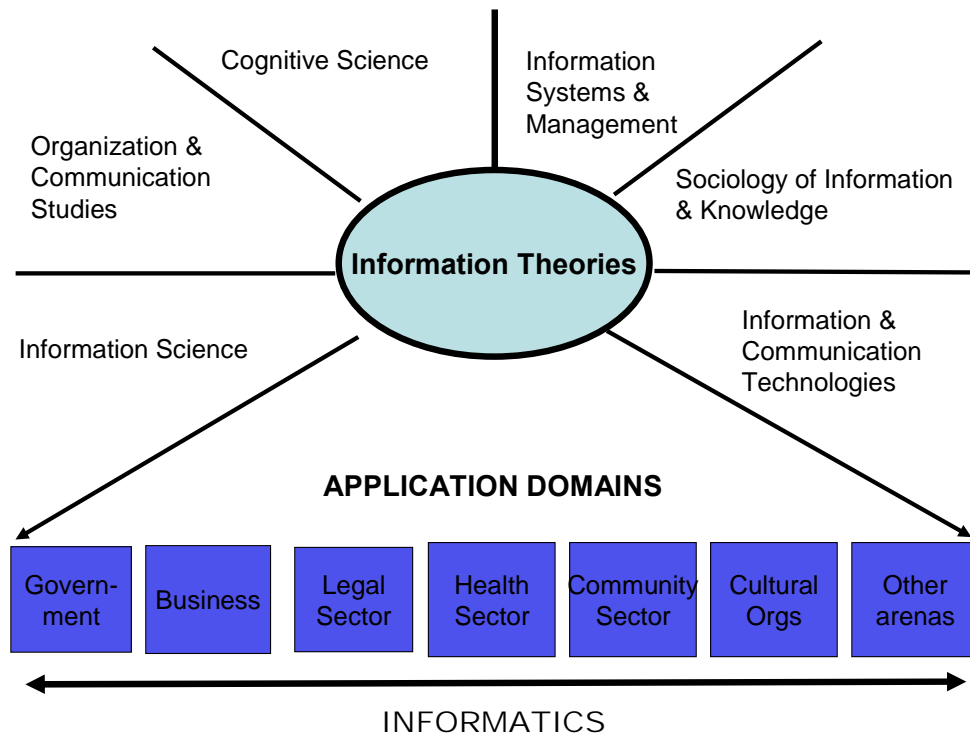
Emphasizing that the information sector cannot expect additional funds simply by requesting it from government, she suggested that additional resources might be available if genuine ideas for reform based on realistic assessments of strengths and potential outcomes were put forward. As information professions and academics, she advised the I-Forum to start from where we are now and to implement changes that will lead to better collaboration, cooperation and continuity of scholarship and research across fields in the information domain. These kinds of changes can be begun immediately she said and this I-Forum with its open discussion of issues is a step in the right direction.

The first I-Forum in February 2008 highlighted the need for a clear identity for the information fields/professions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students are unable to grasp a clear picture of what studying information might offer in terms of subsequent careers, unlike law or medicine where the career options are well known, and recognized as highly remunerated. Participants noted that students arrive at university with significant understanding of various IT tools and programs, but they lack understanding of the social, political and economic returns from studying information as a discipline.

It was agreed that initiatives for change are needed and should be generated within the information professions. What would benefit the debate would be factual descriptions of the professions informed by:

- the challenges faced by information workers,
- the role of innovation and adaptations in the workplace,
- the opportunities for innovation, adaptation or deployment of open source software, or other IT applications in new contexts
- the social implications of deploying communication networks in various milieux.

The I-Forum also addressed the notion of an integrated domain through a hypothetical case of creating a new Faculty of Informatics. Participants commented on the holistic nature of information work with inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary components and emphasized the importance of social issues related to information use and information systems creation. The tentative model below was drawn up to identify a structure of fields for this hypothetical faculty structure.



Next Steps

Future I-Forum meetings are being planned around:

- The emerging importance of information-enabled services for e-research projects and for innovation in business environments.
- The relevance for Australia of the *iSchool* model which has been successfully implemented in many universities in the United States. For this meeting, we have invited key *iSchool* Deans and administrators to address the I-Forum.

Planning of meetings and consideration of themes for discussion is ongoing. People interested to participate might like to contact the I-Forum convenors.

Contact

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I-Forum Convenors

Mari Davis has taught in the field of Information Organisation and Information Management both at the University of Melbourne and at the University of New South Wales. Currently she is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management at the University of New South Wales where she is co-director of BIRG (Bibliometric and Informetric Research Group), a centre of expertise for research on aspects of scholarly communication, research and publication activities.

Her research has mainly focused on the nature, composition and growth of disciplines and interdisciplinary domains. With her colleagues in the Information Management Research Group at UNSW, she has been working on modelling complex data for bibliometrics and informetrics using object relational database management systems. Over recent years she has turned her attention to exploring issues and change in education in the information disciplines through a series of interviews with academics and professionals in the information domain.

Dagmar Schmidmaier is a former State Librarian & Chief Executive, State Library of New South Wales, one of Australia's leading research and information libraries, which includes the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries. Prior to her appointment as State Librarian & Chief Executive in 1995, Dagmar Schmidmaier held senior academic and management positions in the field of technology and information systems, management and librarianship. She has worked in the university, government and private sector.

Dagmar has worked as a consultant to national and international organisations and was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 1988/89. She has published widely and has been guest speaker at conferences both in Australia and overseas. In 1999 Mrs Schmidmaier was awarded a Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, from the University of New South Wales and appointed Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. In May 2000 she was awarded the distinction of Fellow of the Australian Library and Information Association and in 2003 received a Centenary of Federation Medal for service to the community through library services. Dagmar was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in the 2004 Australia Day Honours List for services to librarianship, particularly through the application of new technology and information systems and in the areas of administration and education.

Dagmar is Chair of the board of the Aurora Foundation Ltd. which is dedicated to leadership development in the library and information profession, and Chair of the Council of Australian State Libraries (CASL). She has been on Advisory Councils of university programs in information at the University of New South Wales and at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is a member of the Editorial Boards of the journal, *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*; and Boards of the Library Council of New South Wales and the State Library of New South Wales Foundation.

Education for Information Project — Publications & Conferences

Yu, H.; Davis, M. (2007). The Case for Curriculum Reform in Australian IM & LIS Education: Part 1, Technology and Digitization as Drivers. *Information Research*, v.12(4), October [Available at <http://InformationR.net/ir/>]

Yu, H. and Davis, M. (2007) The Case for Curriculum Reform in Australia information programs. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science, Borås, Sweden, 13-16 August.

Davis, M. (2006). Towards a Re-Conceptualisation of Education for Information Management: A Reprise on John Metcalfe's Work on Education for the Information Management Profession. Paper presented at RAILS3 - Research Applications in Information and Library Studies Perth. Western Australia, 22-23 September, 2006, Curtin University of Technology.

Acknowledgements

The I-Forum is funded by the **John Metcalfe Memorial Fund** as part of the SISTM Education for Information Project. We have been particularly fortunate to have the following people encourage and support this initiative.

- We thank **Dr Marianne Broadbent** of Edward W. Kelley & Partners for giving her time to address this first Forum meeting.
- We thank **Professor Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic** for her support in hosting this Forum.
- We are grateful also for the advice and encouragement given us by **Dr Dagmar Schmidmaier**.
- And, we thank members of the **Information Management Research Group at SISTM** who have given freely of their time to make this Forum a success.

