

## **ALIA Education and Workforce Summit 2008**

### **What is a librarian? The future of professional knowledge and qualifications**

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This brief paper should be seen not as a statement or a solution, but rather as a stimulus for discussion. I recognise from the outset that Australia is the third country in which I have practised, and ALIA is the third national professional association with which I have been associated in the arena of professional education for librarians. I write principally as a practising librarian concerned about long-term recruitment into our profession, but recognise that I have association with two university library schools as an adjunct professor. Further, as Australia remains the country in which I have practiced for the shortest time, undoubtedly I will express views which demonstrate a lack of appreciation of the situation here; corrections and clarifications will therefore be welcome. Although membership of ALIA is open to anyone with an interest in the field, this paper seeks to explore the scope of the profession with distinctive reference to those possessing, or studying for, recognised university qualifications and being eligible for the award of Associate of ALIA. Alternative routes to professional qualification remain an important topic which, I trust, will be articulated by other participants in this important summit.

I have been asked to comment on the “need to identify and provide for skills and attributes required to work in the profession”. This requires attention to be paid to a number of themes, and I approach them from the perspective of defining the profession.

Abbott<sup>1</sup> has set out (in the context of librarianship) distinguishing features of a profession: regulation by a professional association, university-based education, a code of conduct and statement of professional ethics and a distinctive body of professional knowledge. We can readily map ALIA’s activities against the first three of these: ALIA is a professional association, it recognises programmes in universities which meet certain criteria and it has a clearly articulated statement of professional conduct. The boundaries of each of these, however, are shaped by the understanding of the body of professional knowledge and it is this body that in many ways has the power to shape the Association’s, and the profession’s, future.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Abbott (1998) Professionalism and the future of librarianship. *Library Trends*, 46, 3, 430-443.

ALIA positions itself as a professional organisation involved in the delivery of library and information services. What do these terms mean – what body of knowledge is required to “deliver” such services, and what skills are required to apply that knowledge in a professional setting? Who might be in professional membership of this organisation? Is it to be a narrowly-defined group of those involved in “traditional” library environments and near friends or a wider body of those whose work involves *inter alia* information or knowledge management, records management, information literacy and so on? If ALIA seeks to embrace a broader sphere of activity there will, inevitably, be implications for course recognition and the articulation of the core knowledge and skills required of Associates. I would contend that clarification and shared understanding of this point is a prerequisite for further discussion.

Issue 1: How do we define the boundaries of the profession which we support?
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Irrespective of the answer to that matter, and to flesh out the next stage of discussion, it is my opinion that an enduring response to matters associated with skills must commence with an assessment of knowledge: what do librarians have to **know** in order to **do**? [From this point on I use the term librarian to represent those eligible for Associate membership of ALIA, recognising that eligibility might be broadened by an ambitious response to my previous point.] I would argue that whilst it evolves over time, it is possible to arrive at a representation of our core professional knowledge which can apply to current and emerging practice and skills. An appreciation of a clear foundational knowledge base will allow librarians to enhance and update their skills in a manner which transcends current fads and fashions. Whilst employers will rightly look to the immediate skills they require to operate their services (and, hopefully, develop their staff in the same manner) the response of the librarian must be to relate these to their professional knowledge.

Therefore, in looking to the skills and attributes required to work in the profession, it is necessary to have an understanding of the conceptual structures of professional knowledge. Through that understanding, it is possible to map the skills which the knowledge underpins. And, of course, it is important to be able to map in reverse: what sorts of activities are being conducted in libraries which require professional skills, and what is the underpinning knowledge? This process of relating knowledge and skills will encourage a sustainable professional structure.

I would rather pause here and ask colleagues to confirm that my thinking is progressing in the right direction. It is my view that such an understanding will allow us to provide a reasoned response to demands for “more cataloguing” or “web authoring or XML skills”. It will also allow us to distinguish clearly between three spheres of interest” the core of “librarianship” knowledge which marks out what we as librarians uniquely know; generic “skills” which can be found in many professional groupings (for example staff management, marketing, financial management) and the governance sphere which marks out the ethical and legislative environments in which our colleagues work.

Issue 2: Is it appropriate to separate core knowledge and generic skills? If so, what should form the content of these streams?

The recognition of a university programme of study is a powerful statement from ALIA – it shows that the profession is content that a course offers thorough and appropriate coverage of the body of professional knowledge and further demonstrates that a person who has completed successfully such a programme of study is fit to practice as a professional librarian. We must discharge a duty of care to employers and clients of libraries alike by having strong confidence in our systems of recognition. Anything short of this does us no favours. I am struck by the diverse nature of ALIA-recognised courses available. Whilst I have not conducted a systematic review, I would suggest that the common core curriculum is very small indeed, both in breadth and depth. Whilst it is highly desirable to offer a range of programmes which can meet different market requirements, it is important that the profession is at ease with the extent to which foundational knowledge is present – or absent – in different settings. We need to have a clear expression of what it is that we expect students to be taught during their initial professional qualification, and to accept that a national system of course recognition must either accept that some things will not be taught in some settings, or impose upon universities a demanding threshold. For example, if we take the view that anyone completing a recognised course must have a level of understanding of text retrieval, then we should be clear about the extent of coverage expected. If we prefer to accept that some courses will make no, or only passing reference, then we need to be clear about the implications of that for employers and for the clients of library services.

Issue 3: Do we have a shared understanding of the wider meaning of course recognition? Can we be clear about our expectations of the recognition process?

Finally, I turn to the issue of ALIA's qualification at Associate level. At present, AALIA status is awarded, amongst others, to those who have completed a recognised programme of study and with no further requirements. Associate status acknowledges that the recipient has completed the academic requirements to become a professional, but offers no endorsement of the holder's fitness to practice as demonstrated through employment at a professional level. I would argue that there is an opportunity for debate about the meaning of AALIA status and the relative recognition of academic qualification and professional competence

Issue 4: Should Associateship of ALIA be awarded only upon completion of a recognised programme of study and a period of post-qualification professional practice.