



## ALIA National Advisory Congress 2007: Education and Workforce Issues

The ALIA goals for 2008 include these goals relating to “professional education and workforce planning”:

- Develop and promote a vision for education for the profession.
- Support research on the sector’s workforce.
- Convene an education forum for educators, employers and practitioners.
- Further develop and promote the coordinated professional development program.

The theme of the library workforce was the major theme of the National Advisory Congress held as a series of meetings in every state and territory, including a number of regional centres, in September and October. The NAC culminated in a teleconference of representatives from each separate NAC meeting. Altogether, several hundred ALIA members attended the meetings.

By the nature of the event it is not easy to summarise, but this is an attempt. There was a wide variety of viewpoints, so this paper is not the presentation of a consensus. However, some topics were clearly important, because they were raised by many of the meetings. I have provided this summary under these headings

- 1 Generational issues
- 2 Being a profession
- 3 Qualifications and accreditation
- 4 New graduates
- 5 Skill sets – what skills do library employers need?
- 6 Attracting and retaining new recruits
- 7 What do employers want? What can employers give?
- 8 Marketing the profession / Image Issues
- 9 Training and development
- 10 The Role of ALIA in Education and Workforce Issues
- 11 Workforce data
- 12 Workforce summit

### **1 Generational issues**

There was a feeling that senior people should provide more leadership, and on the other hand there was frequent discussion about the characteristics of Gen X (born 1961-1975 or 1980) and Gen Y (born 1976-1990, roughly). The ALIA Outside a Box event on 24 July in Melbourne on the Generation Y workforce added to both our knowledge and our sense of confusion about generational issues; it produced the conclusion that librarians of all people should resist stereotyping of generations or anything else. Some people suggested that the current generation want more tangible benefits, and that ALIA gives too much away for free.

### **2 Being a profession**

What it means for librarians to be a “profession” was raised – but see also <http://www.professions.com.au> There was debate about what we mean by librarianship as profession. People felt that in ranking professions, we are certainly not at the top, but maybe not at the bottom in prestige either. But we do lack the clear identity and respect of some larger professional groups. There seems to have been agreement that the label library or librarian was a good clear one.

### **3 Qualifications and accreditation**

Most meetings seemed to agree that an undergraduate degree was perfectly acceptable, and one reason for this was that most library technicians who become librarians take this route. This was seen as an equity issue, too. There was strong support for good learning pathways for library technicians, and discussion in some locations about associate degrees. There was a lot of discussion about the respective roles and qualifications of librarians and library technicians and the blurred boundaries between them.

There was support at several meetings for new qualifications – Grad. Certificates – for different specialised skills, and the analogy of nursing was given as something from which we might learn. The fragmentation of library types and roles was discussed in the context of new qualifications.

People at several meetings felt that there should be less emphasis on qualifications, and that there were some jobs in libraries which did not require formal qualifications. Others suggested that accreditation and qualifications are taken more seriously by educators than by employers.

There was discussion at several meetings on alternative routes to ALIA accreditation, such as performance-based paths, the use of ALIA PD (professional development), providing formal education after people have worked in libraries for some time

However, there was great value placed on ALIA accreditation and it was a common topic. Education was also seen as becoming too expensive, in relation to the rewards.

### **4 New graduates**

At some meetings people were critical of the level of knowledge and skill of new graduates, and overall there seemed to be conflicting perceptions – libraries can't find staff, and new graduates can't find jobs. The NAC included quite a number of recent graduates, who pointed out that it would be useful to have some knowledge of what skills were expected in a new graduate.

It was also pointed out that in some areas, there were not enough people applying for entry level jobs – e.g. school librarians, children's librarians, new graduates wanting to work in regional areas; this might be because not enough people were being trained, or because not enough people .

### **5 Skill sets – what skills do library employers need?**

There was a strong focus on generic skills

- Change and flexibility
- People friendly, customer skills
- Technology friendly
- Outlook needs to be young
- Good literacy and numeracy
- Communication skills
- Analytical and logical

There was a sense that a lot of the generic skills were about being extraverted, customer-focused people. The “right” attributes – “they need to love people, innovation, technology & learning and they must be creative, curious, enquiring and have a very strong customer service ethic.”

In addition to these some specific library skills were highlighted, and there were some discussions about course content. For example, the teaching of cataloguing was

raised at several groups. It was also suggested that there needs to be a broad focus on information organisation. Course content was discussed in a very piecemeal way – there could be more specialisation, with students choosing subjects from different institutions (like OUA?). The main areas emphasised were

- Courses need to reflect new technology VERY well
- Cataloguing skills, information skills

And some skills which sit somewhere between generic and specific

- Need to be methodological and organized
- Interest in knowledge about everything
- Learn new things
- Library work is about interrogating both people and data, seeing the potential, lateral thinking
- Curiosity and detective skills
- Content management is one term that describes our boundaries, our people and roles – or enterprise content management
- “This is a librarian”: there is a wiki with profiles being developed in Victoria – it is seeking contributions of information which give pictures of what a librarian or library worker does – they need people to be involved.

There was a strong sense that there IS a distinctive library skill set, even if it is hard to pin down, and that this library skill set is transferable outside libraries. The current generation is more mobile, so we are likely to see more transfer of skills to other areas.

## **6 Attracting and retaining new recruits**

There were discussions of pay rates and how significant they are in attracting new recruits. It is suggested that other professions – e.g. IT – take the best and brightest of our potential recruits.

It was suggested that we must avoid traditional PDs when we advertise, and be more eye-catching.

A common approach was the need to promote to students much earlier – in schools, and expos and career counsellors are relevant, as well as the celebration of starts, people who achieve excellence.

There seems to be a strong perception of the forthcoming membership survey and the need to relate it to non-members.

The diversity of roles in the profession needs emphasising.

## **7 What do employers want? What can employers give?**

There was quite a range of ideas about what employers could do for the profession, and this was one of the most useful outcomes of the workforce ideas consultation.

Some of the comments and ideas included these:

- Employers could recognise and require qualifications – there was a feeling that they were less solid on this issue now.
- Cadetships are a good idea, the favourite example being Wollongong – they got a good wrap up from a number of groups; in the meantime, a number of university libraries are currently discussing a common model for cadetships.
- Mentoring or a mentoring exchange, and perceptorship (an obscure term which seems to be used in nursing).
- Many people wanted employers to take LOTS of work experience students
- And longer placements (more than just a couple of weeks).
- Expose students to a work environment earlier – help prospective recruits experience what it is like – “get out there”
- Provide people in the profession as examples to admire.

- There was a perception that employers not as generous or as committed to the wider interest as they were once.
- Given the gender balance in library employment, we need to lead in flexibility – e.g. access to senior roles for part-time people.
- There could be more industry/employer events and marketing of library work to prospective students and recruits – there has been some of this lately.
- There was a view that employers should take more responsibility for study and development – time, money, flexibility.
- At UniSA a direct link has been forged between educators and employers, and people saw this as interesting and important.

## **8 Marketing the profession / Image Issues**

There was enthusiasm for marketing of libraries as a career. Some people saw the need for more professional advertising, cool and modern, and this should be aimed at schools.

The idea was put in several places that ALIA could produce promotion material like or in the form of a DVD.

A major source of our image problems is that people have only a very hazy idea of what is done in libraries, and it is the process work that people see, not the thinking (that they don't see).

Several people suggested that we need examples of the kinds of things libraries do that are exciting, but hidden, although it was harder to suggest examples.

People generally agreed that we are still a trusted brand, and our image is probably better than it has ever been. There are exceptions, perhaps including teacher librarians. People mentioned the accountants and their successes a number of times.

## **9 Training and development**

There was a significant focus in the meetings on training and development, with a number of angles – the fairly new CPD program, training gaps, and online training. People were happy with a variety of models, such as partnerships (e.g. ALIA./CAVAL), or subcontracting of training. It was suggested that library/LT schools had synergies with training and development, and could offer more courses.

PD was mentioned by lots of people, supportively. PD for life. Short courses were seen as an important part of PD, and online courses like FOLIOZ – they need to be part of an ongoing program over time. Short courses to upgrade skills in selected areas. There were some comments that ALIA membership and PD activities should be more closely aligned. Others felt that we could now review the PD scheme, and yet others suggested that the CPD program is very good, but needs to be promoted and marketed, and there needs to be a higher level of recognition. How do other industries do this? people asked. How does the CILIP chartership program work?

Training gaps were mainly seen as geographical, and there was a plea for more training in regional areas – there was a recognition that costs are high. Gaps were also mentioned in some subject areas.

Online training and education was also emphasised, partly as a substitute. Some suggested online education at the cert 2 and 3 level. Learning materials should be available more widely on the web, including from both formal education, and conferences and seminars.

## **10 The Role of ALIA in Education and Workforce Issues**

- ALIA represents us and has a strong advocacy role, but nowadays is competing with many other organisations to represent librarians – CAUL, ASLA, PLA. But people saw ALIA as having a role in current issues.

- ALIA has a responsibility for enhancing our image and promoting our profession a clear persona for the profession.
- Some people saw ALIA as having a significant industrial role, e.g. promoting extension of the NSW test case. This includes making library employers more family friendly.
- Some argued for a strong regional focus – events in regions – ALIA groups in regions getting together.
- Careers fairs
- A role in recruitment was often mentioned – e.g. producing a kit to sell the profession as a career – DVD included. This was one of the most common roles seen for ALIA – the need to market the profession to new recruits and the wider world, and accompany this with promotional materials.
- The role of a Victorian group in producing a promotional website was mentioned – the site is (Jan) online at <http://destinationlibrary.pbwiki.com/> and under ongoing development.
- The CPD program was definitely seen as an ALIA role. Mandatory certification like CPAs was also discussed.
- Some suggested that ALIA could set up e-learning portfolios to assist people with creating them and making them portable.
- ALIA should meet with students and get an idea of how they see things.
- The importance of a research culture was mentioned at some groups.

### **11 Workforce data**

The Perth meeting pointed out that information about the workforce is poor – e.g. statistical & demographic information. ALIA needs to maintain a database of information about graduates. The Nexus project was mentioned in this context.

### **12 Workforce summit**

The Perth meeting commented that there needs to be an Education and Workforce Summit blog, papers need to be distributed well before the summit, and feedback solicited. Issues papers should be released soon, they said.

### **Conclusion**

Please feel free to get in touch with me with any comments and thoughts you may have about these issues – email [Derek.whitehead@alia.org.au](mailto:Derek.whitehead@alia.org.au) or make a contribution to the Summit website – see <http://www.alia.org.au/education/summit08/>

The NAC was a very valuable means of bringing together a wide range (if fairly small number) of ALIA members around Australia, and its input to the Summit is very valuable.

Derek Whitehead  
23 January, 2008