DREAMING OF A BRIGHTER FUTURE?
AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES, LIBRARIANS AND RESEARCH.

Dr Kerry Smith

Head, Dept. of Information Studies

Curtin University of Technology

GPO Box U 1987

Perth Western Australia 6845

Email: k.smith@curtin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The establishment of a concerted interest in library and information studies[1] (LIS) research by the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) has placed research issues on the professional agenda in Australia. The paper will outline the ALIA Research Committee's involvement in recent Australian government research activity. It will also consider the implications for the LIS profession in light of the research landscape at Australia's universities. This is changing and LIS educators at these universities need to participate in it. Nevertheless, the country's LIS practitioners seem more attuned to practice rather than research although some are being drawn into the evidence-based research net. As well, there is a significant international research literature in library and information science/studies (LIS) with few Australian LIS researchers using or contributing to it. How can we encourage LIS research in the Australian context?

Introduction

It is disappointing but not surprising to sense that strong elements of pragmatism pervade the library landscape in Australia today. It is not surprising because Australian libraries and their librarians operate in the world described by Brewerton (2003): a world which includes management speak and accountability, employer demands and organizational relevance; a world of practice and service delivery; a world that does not encourage or give much time for reflection.

Yet there are signs that the profession needs to do more than just reflect on its practices. Australian library practitioners are joining a growing group of professionals becoming informed on evidence-based librarianship (EBL), often seen by many Australian library practitioners as the research answer. It is a start, but it is not enough (Haddow & Klobas, 2004). There is a significant international research literature in library and information science/studies with few Australian LIS researchers using or contributing to it (Genoni, Haddow & Ritchie, 2004). Australian academic colleagues in LIS have pondered this dearth and the establishment of a concerted interest in LIS research by the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) has placed the issue on the professional agenda.

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[1] While the term " Library and information science" tends to be used internationally, "library and information studies" appears to be the preferred use in Australia.

ALIA and Research

The role of a professional association in fostering a research culture amongst members particularly in the Australian context was contemplated by Smith & Harvey (2006) who reported that there is evidence that some LIS associations are realizing that research and the research process need to be better recognized, particularly as library professionals are increasingly undertaking higher level qualifications which include a research component. Yet if a research qualification is not always necessary for recognition as a professional librarian, the question needs to be asked: why should librarians bother to undertake the rigours of study to achieve it?

Former ALIA President Gillian Hallam herself an LIS educator, noted in
a 'Frontline' column in *inCite* (Dec 2005, p. 4) that:

> it can be strongly argued that research is critical for the creation of professional knowledge and therefore critical to the survival and growth of the library and information profession. Without a commitment to research, we will not be a profession as such, but merely an occupation that focuses on routine processes.

Hallam continued:

> LIS educators have a responsibility to ensure graduates are equipped not only with the conceptual structures and thinking processes of their discipline, but also with an understanding of and experience in the range of research methodologies that can be applied in practice (Hallam, 2005, p. 4).

Perhaps significantly, nowhere in her column did Hallam suggest that the professional association, ALIA, had a role in ensuring that research be firmly placed in the curriculum for first professional qualification; rather, the responsibility lay with librarianship educators. Yet the relationship between education for the Australian library profession and the educators is firmly grounded in the course recognition process that ALIA undertakes.

Why would a professional association like ALIA wish to pursue a research agenda? The Association

> is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. It seeks to empower the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support (ALIA, 2008).

None of ALIA's five "Objects" specifically mentioned research (*Constitution...*, 2006). However "research" is mentioned in a recent promotional publication from the Association (ALIA, 2008, p. 2).

The ALIA Research Committee

It soon became evident from the detail included in some of the ALIA's award activities and the Association's desire to establish a research fund, that the Association needed to take a serious interest in professional research activities. This interest was encouraged during the Library and Information Science Education for the Knowledge Age (LISEKA) project of 2001-2 (ALIA, 2002) aligning this work with Object (c) of the Constitution: "To ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information

provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations" (*Constitution…*, 2006, p. 7).

Among the outcomes of this work which included the exploration of educational and professional development needs of information practitioners, was the ALIA Research Exchange and Partnership (REAP) program: "REAP is a network of peers working together to exchange ideas and information" (*ALIA Research...,*2006, p.1). Another outcome from this project was the establishment of the ALIA Research Committee by the ALIA Board of Directors. The Committee's role is

> to promote the value of research, to provide advice on the development of REAP and ALIA's role in research in general, to have oversight of the research fund and to recommend recipients of research awards and research activities to be supported by the research fund (*ALIA Research...*2006, p.1).

The early activity of this Committee was based around the research award process, seeking taxation exemption for potential donations to a research fund, and early steps towards encouraging a research culture amongst Australia's library professionals. The activities have been more focused in recent times and were driven by the Committee's belief that if LIS research was to be encouraged then LIS research needed to be a part of the Australian government's research agenda.

Australia's research funding landscape

At the professional education level, i.e university level, the relationship between education and research is now intertwined with new research directions set by the Australian government for its universities. In 2006 Smith & Harvey wrote:

> The research funding environment in Australian universities is under review, such that a tiered approach to funding universities is envisaged in the present 'Nelson'[2] reforms. It has not been clearly stated, though many believe, that the Australian federal government is finding it very difficult to sustain equity in funding for its 39 publicly funded universities plus the funding assistance it has chosen to give to the few private universities in the country.
>
> …you need a funded university in order for good teaching and research to be undertaken. The academics amongst us argue that good teaching is informed by research and a number of us have guided our research to better supplement and inform our teaching. Undertaking research also means that we are better able to teach research methods because we have used many of them ourselves. Yet the research environment in Australia is extremely competitive and the stakes are high. A number of Australian LIS academics have taken advantage of internally funded research grants offered by each university from the larger research funding streams that come through the federal government. However, this is small when compared with the ultimate level of research funding through the Australian Research Council and other allied grant systems. One is considered a solid researcher once such a grant has been secured. There are currently few such LIS researchers in Australia (Smith & Harvey, 2006, p. 615).

The RQF

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[2] Named after the Minister initiating them: The Hon Brendan Nelson.

Until the advent of a new Labor government in November 2007, the Research Quality Framework (RQF) was the proposed new funding model for Australia's university research. The then Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) maintained a comprehensive website[3] on developments. The initiative was taken very seriously by most of Australia's universities.

The RQF exercise was formalized in May 2004 when the then Australian federal Liberal government announced the formulation of a quality and accessibility framework for publicly funded research, to replace prior guidelines. This arose out of a significant number of recommendations stemming from an earlier federal government enquiry *Backing Australia's Ability – Building Our Future through Science and Innovation* and was because of the government's belief that:

> there is no robust and consistent way to measure the quality of research conducted in universities and publicly funded research agencies and its benefits to research and the wider community [and] (n)or is there a mechanism through which a researcher or member of the community can be sure that he or she is aware of all the research that has been done in a particular field and how to access it. (*Quality...*, 2004, p.1).

Added to this was the belief that the RQF would drive change in the patterns of published outputs (whether in print or electronic form) of research teams. The process to get to near implementation stage involved:

- The establishment of an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) in early 2005, lead by Professor Gareth Roberts, Chair, Research Committee Higher Education Funding Council for England and a membership of 12 drawn from the elite of Australian university, science and research circles.

- Release of *Research Quality Framework: assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia: issues paper*, March 2005. The feedback from consultations after this release was taken into account with the release of the

- *Advanced approaches paper* which set "out a range of issues to be considered in developing an effective Framework, and will be used to facilitate discussion at the RQF National Stakeholder Forum" (Nelson, 2004, p. 1) held in Canberra in June 2005.

- Release of the *Final Advice on the Preferred RQF Model* in December 2005, also endorsed by the Expert Advisory Group for the RQF.

At this stage the involvement of the Australian library community had been minimal. The release of the next RQF report covering measures of research impact in September 2006 prompted invitations from DEST for representations from interested parties at a series of Discipline workshops to be held early in 2007. The EAG had by that time been replaced by the Research Quality Framework Development Advisory Group (RQFDAG, or more commonly known as DAG) and a more prescriptive approach to formulating the RQF direction was now evident.

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[3] All website information for the RQF was removed by the newly elected Australian government in December 2007

ALIA and the RQF

This was when ALIA received a letter seeking nominations, and ALIA specified in December 2006 that it would be interested in two of the prescribed assessment panel workshops: Panel 4: Mathematical and Information Sciences Technology; and Panel 11: law, Education and Professional Practices. The Association sent in the names of 2 nominees for each and only those for Panel 11 were selected by DEST. The first Panel 11 workshop was held in February 2007. A report of this meeting can be found in Johansen & Smith, 2007.

Members of the Panel 11 discussions were assured that the intricacy and variety of indicators of research performance that arose in this and other workshops would be fully considered by the RQF's Development Advisory Group. These issues included:

- 'quality' was not easily measured;
- should not just focus on competitive grants; and
- any list of disciplinary journal titles, ranked according to international measures, or high levels of citation of individual author-researchers, has limited recognition in practice.

Subsequent discussions amongst Australian LIS educators revealed a difficulty in separating measures of quality and impact; something that was clearly desired in the RQF discussions. It was also during these discussions that the LIS group used their best endeavours to ensure the consideration of the:

- non inclusion of citations and citation ranking in LIS research measures except when they are included as strong evidence in the "context statement";
- non ranking of LIS journals in measures of quality because this did not work;
- inclusion of informatic products as outputs of research projects;
- inclusion of researchers in our field who are professional librarians working in libraries; and
- inclusion of non competitive grants.

In September 2007 the RQF assessment panels were announced and a member of the Australian university library community was named on Panel 11. This was the first instance in the whole of the RQF process that an element of internal networking became evident. Although this was not the case in LIS, many members of the research community could not believe that researchers who themselves would be judged by these panels, were members of them. The final RQF specifications were also produced in September 2007.

In tandem with and subsequent to the above activities, the ALIA Research Committee and some members of the Australian LIS research community participated in an exercise to prepare a ranked list of LIS journals, and in discussions regarding the updating and revision of the Australian Standard Research Classification (ASRC) revision of Research Fields, Courses and Disciplines (RFCD) codes. This latter exercise, lead by Dr Stuart Ferguson from Charles Sturt University, took into account negotiations at a national level, though not from ALIA's point of view, with colleagues in New Zealand, with the resultant product being the Australian and New Zealand

Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC). The final results was released in March 2008 with Library and information studies moved from a variety of headings in the 1998 version of the codes to a new location:

Division 08 – INFORMATION AND COMPUTING SCIENCES

…

Group 0807 Library and Information Studies.

Other related codings in this scheme include:

    2102   Curatorial and related studies;

    8903   Information Services.

The dawn of a new ERA

As noted earlier, much of the reference to the RQF and its outputs and outcomes have disappeared from the newly constituted federal department, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) website where, interestingly, all reference to "research", except that quoted next, is currently linked to the former DEST website.

> The Education, Science and Training portfolio has a major role in ensuring that the research system operates to maximum effectiveness and delivers real value for the money invested in it. The Department of Education, Science and Training delivers a range of policies and programmes to:
>
> - strengthen Australia's ability to generate ideas and undertake research
>
> - strengthen greater collaboration and linkages between business, universities and publicly funded research agencies
> - support investment in, and access to, world class research infrastructure, including information and communications technology, in Australia and overseas
> - accelerate the commercialisation and utilisation of public sector research
> - develop and retain Australian skills for operating in the fast-paced global economy (DEEWR, 2008, np).

It is noted that this research direction is significantly based on the earlier mentioned document *Backing Australia's ability*. The matter is complicated in that the Minister responsible for "research" is Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research and that any activity related to him appears on another website, that of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. Carr has announced an Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative:

> The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative, to be developed by the Australian Research Council (ARC) in conjunction with the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, will assess research quality using a combination of metrics and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts.
>
> "Australia is about to embark on a transparent, workable system to assess the quality of home-grown research. Australia is well known internationally for its research strengths.
>
> "For the first time we will be able to measure our achievements against our peers around the world, and plan the future of research investment," Senator Carr said. …

> The ERA will replace the now defunct Research Quality Framework with a streamlined, internationally recognised and transparent research quality assurance system (Carr, 2008, p1).

All information relating to ERA, which is still in its infancy, now appears on the Australian Research Council (ARC) website (ARC, 2008). It is hoped that the library sector will continue to be consulted as the new ERA dawns. It is important that library/information-related projects and teams are amongst those that are put forward by their universities to participate in future research rounds and that they are properly recognised for the contribution that they make.

The first of the ERA projects was announced in June 2008 with comment sought on a *Consultation paper*. The ALIA's research community's comments were fed into the system by the June 30th deadline, and can be found on the ALIA Advocacy website.

A second ERA project was announced in June 2008, although ALIA had received advanced warning of it through email correspondence in May 2008 via the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). This new project was directed at developing outlet journal rankings. A comprehensive list of journal rankings for all disciplines was posted to the ARC website and those relevant to Australian LIS were downloaded. The deadline for final comment on these new ERA journal rankings was set at 24th July 2008 and fortunately extended to 14th August 2008. In the case of Australian LIS, it was found that while a number of the titles followed the earlier RQF A*, A, B and C tiered rankings submitted to the then DEST by the ALIA Research Committee in November 2007, there were a number of titles omitted. ALIA's response, undertaken in consultation with Australian LIS educators and researchers, was emailed to ERA in time for their August 2008 deadline. Further complicating matters encountered here included:

- ERA generally classify LIS under Humanities. However the journal listings follow the ANZSRC codes that place it firmly under Information and Computing Science - 0807;

- email support from the Australian Computer Society and their journal listings stated that they "had not touched" LIS – 0807; and

- a very late submission received from the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) seeking inclusion of their journal tiers with the ALIA submission, in 0807, Library and information studies. Discussions on this matter continue.

Australian LIS research

Haddow and Klobas (2004) report "(c)oncern about flaws in communication between research and practice [as] a recurring theme in the LIS literature" (p. 30). Earlier work by Haddow (2001) revealed that in the Australian context "there is little communication of research to practice through periodical publications" (Haddow & Klobas, 2004, p. 37).

This might be seen as an embarrassing state of affairs but it also begs the question: how much research is the Australian LIS profession undertaking? These thoughts are further developed in another paper by Haddow, this time with Genoni and Ritchie (2004): "Why don't librarians use research?" in which they support "the majority view that [LIS] research findings are underutilized" (p. 57) and that this could be more from a

culture than a communication gap between the library practitioner and the library researcher. Suggested ways forward include collaborative projects between researchers and practitioners, that researchers "find venues and a language to communicate effectively with practitioners" and that "practitioners increase their contribution to the research literature" (p. 57).

Evidence-based LIS research

The Haddow and Klobas (2004) paper concludes with the comment that the evidence-based practice seen by many Australian library practitioners as the 'research answer' is a start, but it is not enough. This leaves us to wonder what might be enough and suggestions are not forthcoming from their paper.

The health libraries literature is replete with papers on evidence-based research practice but arriving at a working definition can be problematic. Eldredge appears to be the mainstay for this research initiative and in one of his first writings in 1997 he reported that "Librarians [need] to develop their own version of "evidence-based practice" (Eldredge, 1997, p. 4). A survey of some of the key literature since then indicates that little progress on defining EBL has been made. It seems that Eldredge (1997) developed the term EBL as a mechanism to encourage the medical library profession to take a serious interest in researching its issues.

Lewis & Cotter (2007) report little take up of research issues in medical librarianship between 2001 and their study in 2006. This could be a warning for Australia's practicing LIS professionals that they need not just a summary of the research that has gone on before so that they can learn from it (i.e. the 'evidence'), but that they need to locate for themselves the research that must be undertaken now and in the future to move their service provision and context into the future.

Australian LIS educators and research

Because of the pivotal role of the Australian LIS educator in the promotion and continuation of research in the current Australian LIS context, a small study was undertaken on the professional development of the LIS educator (Smith, 2006). The study sought to establish the types of professional development activities being undertaken by LIS educators in Australia by using an email survey to the discussion list for the Australian Information Studies Educators' Forum (ISEF). There were sixty two Australian subscribers to the ISEF e-list. The list accommodates membership from the technical and further education (TAFE) sector and from other interested parties. It also includes academics whose expertise is in teacher librarianship. Nevertheless, twenty three responses were received, i.e. a 36% response rate from the discussion list.

Of the 11 respondents who held a masters qualification, 6 were studying for a PhD. Seven of the 12 respondents who held a PhD had done so for more than 10 years. If they had followed a university research trajectory they should, at this stage of their career, be considered mature researchers. The remaining 5 PhD respondents gained this qualification more recently. However, only 4 of all respondents mentioned that they undertook research and/or were engaged in writing research grant applications as part of their professional development. It is useful to consider this research activity, or lack of it, in light of prevailing conditions in universities within Australia.

There is significant research activity within the university library sector. An example is the work on institutional digital repositories that continues to be recognized by the government:

> However, as institutions are aware progress reports still need to be submitted for funding obtained under the Australian Scheme for Higher Education Repositories (ASHER) program and the Implementation Assistance Program (IAP) (*ASHER and IAP*, 2008)

Is there a future for LIS research in the Australian context?

How can we encourage LIS research in the Australian context? There has to be a future for LIS research in Australia; but there is a long way to go. It is hoped that library/information-related projects and teams will be amongst those that are put forward by their universities to participate in future Australian government research rounds and projects and that they are properly recognised for the contribution that they make.

Where might Australian LIS education and research sit within the new ERA framework? It is evident that if LIS educators wish to be considered in the research environment for Australian universities then, given the indications from the Smith (2006) study, serious application to research projects and programs must be undertaken.

There is an enormous challenge ahead for LIS educators and their research contributions in Australia. It is not one that can be taken lightly. Gillian Hallam noted in her April 2006 Frontline:

> There are few incentives now to become an educator. Twenty years ago, talented and motivated library professionals were able to move comfortable between academia and industry, which serviced to invigorate practice and to enrich the learning environment…Without succession planning, LIS departments will be increasingly vulnerable (p. 4).

It will take more than succession planning to see the continuation of library education at the university level in Australia. If there are few incentives to join LIS education, how can educators successively plan? Current and new library educators must be those who are committed to furthering the theoretical enquiry of the discipline and who are prepared to do this in the environment that is university education in Australia today.

If ALIA, as the "professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector" (ALIA, 2008) considers research to be a significant component of its future direction, then it has a professional responsibility to encourage practitioners to contribute more seriously to the LIS research literature. It also has no choice but to make sure that the voice that was heard during the very busy times of the RQF initiative continues to resonate in government research circles today and in the future.

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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

KERRY SMITH, B. AppSc (ILS), MA, PhD, FALIA

Kerry Smith coordinates the Information Studies discipline at Curtin University of Technology. Her research interests are mainly in science and technology information policy, specialising in the geosciences. She has been editor-in-chief of the electronic journal LIBRES (Library and Information Science Research) since 1996, was the national president of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in 1997, is a Fellow of ALIA and currently chairs its Research Committee. She has established the Curtin-based virtual research network: *Researching the Information Commons (RIC)* and continues her significant involvement with the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA). She was a local government councillor for the Town of Cambridge, Western Australia from 1995-2003.