

IS THERE A ROLE FOR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN FOSTERING RESEARCH?

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Abstract

Throughout the world professional associations in librarianship place considerable emphasis on the professional credentialing of their members. This normally means that educational and training courses of study offering a first professional qualification take up much of this activity. Since this first professional qualification does not normally require emphasis on the research process, but rather in obtaining the required skills and knowledge in order to practice librarianship, it is little wonder that the role of research in the profession has not always been openly encouraged by its associations. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some associations are realizing that research and the research process needs 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? The paper will discuss the importance or otherwise of research and its processes in the profession of librarianship and consider the role of the professional association in recognizing, enabling and promoting a research culture amongst qualified professionals. The paper will particularly address the Australian context.

Introduction

In the professions, research is necessary – in fact essential – for one very simple reason: to improve the quality of the services that the profession offers. This point is amply made in the literature about professions, and librarianship is no exception. Recent Australian expressions of this point have been published by Hallam (2005), Harvey (2002), and Middleton (2005). It follows that first professional qualifications in librarianship should place a significant emphasis on research, and that librarianship professional associations should actively and energetically encourage research by their members. But is this the case? Librarianship professional

associations spend considerable time and energy on ensuring that the curriculum of the professional credentials of their members is relevant and of high quality; the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is certainly no exception. Generally, however, first professional qualifications do not give much prominence to the research process, instead placing most emphasis on obtaining the required skills and knowledge in order to practice librarianship. One consequence of this has been that professional associations have not always openly encouraged the role of research in the profession.

Nevertheless, some librarianship professional associations are realising that research and the research process need to be better recognised, particularly as library professionals are increasingly undertaking higher level qualifications which include a research component. This paper addresses the question: have library and information science/studies (LIS) professional associations been active in promoting research? It first notes the importance of research in the profession of librarianship, then examines the role that professional associations play (or do not play) in recognising, enabling and promoting a research culture amongst qualified professionals. Examples are taken largely from the Australian context.

Value of research to LIS

A strong research culture is considered essential to any mature profession, a point made strongly in the literature about professions. For librarianship, Harvey notes that:

Research and professional practice are inextricably linked. Research can and does play a vital role in professional practice in the fields of information management and information systems, in corporate, government, educational and community sectors. The most obvious uses of research in these information environments are for problem solving, for development, evaluation and improvement of services and systems, and to provide information before introducing new systems or services (perhaps through the assessment of user needs) (Harvey, in Williamson, 2002, p.xiii).

Six reasons why research in professional practice is carried out are provided by Williamson:

1. to assist in understanding the problems and issues which arise in the workplace
2. to add to knowledge in the field and/or provide solutions to problems
3. to maintain dynamic and appropriate services
4. to meet requirements of accountability
5. to maintain and improve professional status
6. to provide a body of research findings and theory to inform practitioners (Williamson, 2002, p.12).

The nature of the relationship between research and practice in librarianship has been well articulated in the professional literature of librarianship (for example

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by Maguire, 1998, Macauley, 2004, Seadle, 2004) and its importance is notably emphasised by Haddow and Klobas:

Research should inform practice and contribute to the development of theory. Practice should benefit from research findings (particularly where those findings go towards improving the product or service provided by practitioners) and raise more questions for research. Effective interaction between research and practice will produce a strong theoretical framework within which a practitioner community can develop and thrive (Haddow and Klobas 2004, p.30).

The place of research in first professional qualifications

The 2005 ALIA President Gillian Hallam, herself an LIS educator, notes in a 'Frontline' column in a 2005 issue of ALIA's newsletter *inCite* 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 (p. 4).

Hallam continues:

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 does she suggest that the professional association, ALIA, has a role in ensuring that research is firmly placed in the curriculum of first professional qualifications; rather, the responsibility lies with librarianship educators. So the first question one might ask, is why should professional associations bother to foster a research culture? The history of ALIA until recently has demonstrated that, apart from the acceptance of refereed articles into its two more formal journals, *AARL* and *The Australian Library Journal*, the Association has demonstrated little interest in supporting the research field. Haddow's (2001) work revealed that when it came to an awareness of LIS research that might have gone before them, librarians were very poor performers. This is an embarrassing state of affairs for a profession which prides itself on the veracity of information and sound search strategies when checking the literature for others and when advising users of how to locate the information they seek.

In Australia, ALIA's statements about first professional qualifications and the curriculum that should be included in them do not pay much attention to research. For example, its statement *ALIA's role in education of library and information professionals* (ALIA 2005a) notes that in order to fulfil the roles outlined in the statement (such as serving Australia's information needs, contributing to Australia's knowledge base, assisting their clients to become information literate) graduates should be equipped, along with other skills and attributes, with "an

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understanding of the importance of research activity within the profession to encourage the expansion and diversification of its knowledge base". But this statement is not about the need for librarianship graduates to be equipped to carry out research; rather, it is about creating an awareness that research is important. There is a large gap between recognizing a need and having the skills to fulfill that need. When we look at the detailed ALIA statements about the content of first professional qualifications, *The library and information sector: core knowledge, skills and attributes* (ALIA 2005b), it could be said that some of the core knowledge and skills areas imply research. An example is the requirement about "Information seeking, demonstrated by the ability to ... identify and investigate information needs and information behaviour of individuals, community groups, organizations and businesses". The most explicit statement about research is for the area *Generation of knowledge* which is

demonstrated by the ability to systematically gather and analyse data and disseminate the findings to advance library and information science theory and its application to the provision of information services; [and] demonstrate a commitment to the improvement of professional practice through a culture of research and evidence-based information practice (ALIA, 2005b, np).

It could be argued that the surge of interest in 'evidence-based librarianship' has taken on the research role and that again, there is no need for ALIA to bother, particularly as many members of the profession have hooked into what is seen as a growth area in the international arena of librarianship. But as Doessel (2005) remarks, "I don't have any great desire to become an academic. I much prefer to search for other people's research than to do it myself. It is this love of finding information that is the primary reason I chose librarianship as a career" (p. 12). Consequently the ability to use research methods to easily and quickly resolve workplace research questions, based on evidence from practice, comes in handy for such a professional. Research in LIS is more than this and whilst many LIS professionals do not wish to become academics, the future of the profession and its theoretical base needs more than evidence-based practice to see it continue as a university-based entity. It also needs much more than journals and journal articles of the standard that we currently see in the Australian LIS professional offerings.

Are librarians getting research-credentialed and doing research?

Middleton notes, from the point of view of an academic researcher, that:

Researchers and library administrators alike are continually striving to bridge the gap between research and practice. At times there is frustration with lack of involvement by practitioners in academic investigations or with irrelevant lines of research by academics. However, there is increasing engagement by practitioners through university research programs (Middleton 2005).

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Who is getting research-credentialed and doing research in librarianship in Australia? One way to answer this question is to use the measure of the number of enrolments in research higher degrees in LIS. We use two sets of data: the first published by Maguire in 1998, and partial data relating to doctorates in LIS in Australia collected by Harvey and Wallis at the end of 2005.

Maguire (1998) surveyed Australian universities about research degree programs in librarianship. Although the data was incomplete, she ascertained that in 1998 more than 230 graduates from Australian LIS research degree programs since the first, a research masters from the University of New South Wales (UNSW), was awarded in 1967 and the first PhDs from Monash and UNSW in 1985. Of this total, more than 40 were doctorates and at least 194 were research masters. Ten university-based LIS schools offered these programs. In 1998 there were more than 130 research students currently enrolled. Maguire suggests that these totals are “a serious under-estimate” of Australian librarianship students’ research activity and notes that in addition to these we need to consider the “many project reports produced for Masters by coursework degrees” (Maguire 1998, p.43), as well as some honours theses, and also relevant research pursued in departments other than librarianship. (Maguire also notes – although this is not the primary interest of our paper – that the four “most populous” areas of research up to 1998 were “1. Information needs/user and use studies/information seeking behaviour; 2. Cataloguing, classification, bibliographic formats, thesauri, authority control, subject access, metadata; 3. History of libraries and archives and bibliographical studies; and 4. academic and research library management” (Maguire 1998, p.45).) Perhaps most pertinently for this paper, Maguire reported a “disturbing feature” noted by the respondents to her survey (the heads of Australian schools of librarianship): that “they perceived ... a lack of support for research students from employers or from the profession” (Maguire 1998, p.49).

In late 2005 Harvey and Wallis collected data from various sources (university web sites, library catalogues, through direct communication with School research higher degree officers, doctoral students) about research degrees in Australian schools of librarianship. This data, very incomplete, indicates that the number of librarianship doctorates candidates either completed or with students currently totalled 60 doctorates. Information seeking behaviour was the most heavily represented topic. (Harvey and Wallis, 2006). Another measure that has been made of the extent of the formal research credentials of Australian librarians is the number of professional members of ALIA who use the title ‘Dr’. Macauley notes that for the financial year 2002/2003, 64 members were in this category, or 1.3 per cent of the total personal membership (Macauley 2004, p.2).

It is salutary to compare these Australian figures with a single library school in the United Kingdom, the admittedly research-intensive Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, where in the period 1968 to 1996, 137 research degrees were completed: 89 at doctoral level, and 48 at masters level (Santos, Willett and Wood, 1998).

The place of the LIS profession within the Australian research environment

The research funding environment in Australian universities is under review, such that a tiered approach to funding universities is envisaged in the present 'Nelson'¹ 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.

None of the universities offering education in LIS in Australia qualify for membership in what is perceived as the first tier, i.e. the 'sandstone' or Group of Eight² universities. Under the Nelson model these would be very well funded for their research endeavours and may even have minimal teaching engagement. These universities have as long a history in education and research as Australia's short European activity allows, in university education and research in Australia. Universities like Monash (which has an LIS school) could be included if the number of qualifiers for tier 1 funding is enlarged. Curtin (which has an LIS school) and Murdoch universities in Perth, Western Australia recently endeavoured to merge, again, in an effort to boost the strengths of both entities. However the merger talks failed.

The second tier under discussion comprises those universities where teaching and research would be undertaken, with research funding significantly less than that offered for tier 1. It could be expected that Monash would certainly qualify here if it does not gain tier 1 entry, and that Curtin and Queensland Universities of Technology and possibly Charles Sturt University, all of which have an LIS school, would come under tier 2. Tier 3 is teaching only universities where sparse to no research funding would be delivered.

Why is this important in the context of LIS research in Australia? It is important because a funded university is needed in order for good teaching and research to be undertaken. Academics argue that good teaching is informed by research and a number of Australian LIS academics have guided their research to better supplement and inform their teaching. Undertaking research also means that LIS academics are better able to teach research methods because they have used many of them. 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, these are small amounts when compared with the higher 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.

¹ Named after the Minister initiating them: The Hon Brendan Nelson.

² Membership comprises: Universities of Queensland, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Tasmania, Western Australia, The Australian National University and the University of New South Wales.

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The profession might argue that existence in the teaching only environment is good enough because the educational delivery of the first professional qualification is essentially a teaching only requirement. We suggest that if this is the case, then why bother to educate for the profession at university level at all? Why not leave it to the technical and further education fields?

Notwithstanding this, Australian librarianship and librarians and their practice are held in high regard in the international arena. A number of Australian professionals play important roles in associations like the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA). Others, although the numbers are low, make contributions to international journals held in high esteem by the profession. Much of the theoretical activity in LIS is being undertaken in Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom with very little activity emanating from Australia. There is probably even less coming from the Asian countries.

Some international LIS research observations

Internationally, Davies (2005) reports that LIS research has been “of variably quality (though) [i]n its defence, however, it can be argued that the discipline is still relatively new” (p. 29). He reports that the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in the United Kingdom recently adopted a research policy and strategy by undertaking many activities including to:

- act as an authoritative voice on R&D
- influence the broad R&D agenda
- identify and promote appropriate R&D
- maintain dialogue with relevant stakeholders...
- disseminate information about R&D activity
- promote the take-up of relevant R&D outcomes
- ensure an adequate skills base for undertaking and applying R&D, and
- nurture a professional culture that embraces R&D and encourage reflective practice generally (2005, p. 29).

With respect to the role of research in first professional qualifications, IFLA’s *Guidelines for Professional Library/Information Educational Programs* (IFLA 2000) include ten core elements, the sixth of which is “Research, Analysis and Interpretation of Information”. This is not amplified, leaving us to conjecture about the intention: does it mean simply locating and analysing information, or is it intended to apply more widely to research into and about the profession? Since IFLA is an organization committed to many and various areas of professional interest, it is heartening to note that one of these is a Section on Library Theory and Research (LTR). Nevertheless LTR is Section 24 of 47 IFLA sections, another of which specializes in Education and Training. Since the performance, policy influence and future of such interests in IFLA depends on the energy and commitment of the section office bearers, the work of sections like LTR can wax and wane.

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LIANZA is the professional LIS association in New Zealand. Its website states that:

LIANZA directly contributes to and participates in the development of the Library and Information profession. It is involved with:

education of new librarians

recognition of excellence and innovation

scholarships and grants

promotion of job opportunities within the profession (LIANZA, 2005a, np).

The criteria for professional (associate) membership of LIANZA, detailed in Document 1 of Part 3 of the LIANZA *Code of Practice: criteria for the award of an associateship of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa* make no direct reference to research knowledge or ability, although as with the ALIA criteria, research ability in the “understanding of the information needs of clients” might be inferred (LIANZA, 2005b, np). The Association has recently established a Task Force on Professional Registration “(t)o investigate the registration of New Zealand librarians and other information professionals and the associated accreditation of their training and professional practice; and make recommendations suitable for the New Zealand environment” (LIANZA, 2005c, np). There is no reference to a professional research requirement in the Terms of reference for this Taskforce nor is there such a reference in the body of its Discussion document. The Discussion document refers to IFLA’s *Guidelines for a Body of Knowledge* and also notes the existence of the ALIA Research Committee but proffers no discussion on such a committee for LIANZA (LIANZA, 2005d).

The American Library Association (ALA) is very committed to the education of the profession and has extensive accreditation procedures. Its *Accreditation processes, policies and procedures* (ALA, 2003) pay attention to the research activity of faculty (p. 31), and on the availability of research funds (p. 42). These follow the ALA’s Accreditation standards of 1992 which state:

This document sets forth Standards for these programs. The phrase "library and information studies" is understood to be concerned with recordable information and knowledge and the services and technologies to facilitate their management and use. Library and information studies encompasses information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management.

This definition incorporates a field of professional practice and associated areas of study and research... (ALA, 1992, p. 1)

The standards continue to acknowledge “the importance of research to the advancement of the field’s knowledge base” (ALA, 1992, p. 3) throughout the document. The first professional qualification in librarianship in the US is at the Masters level, so perhaps this is why such emphasis on research is present. Canadian

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library schools are also accredited by ALA and follow a similar educational pattern to that in the US.

Another US LIS association with a strong research emphasis is the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T). Formed in 1937, ASIS& T

has been the society for information professionals leading the search for new and better theories, techniques, and technologies to improve access to information.

ASIS&T brings together diverse streams of knowledge, focusing what might be disparate approaches into novel solutions to common problems.

ASIS&T bridges the gaps not only between disciplines but also between the research that drives and the practices that sustain new developments (ASIS&T, 2006, p. 1) .

Whether ASIS&T can be considered a ‘professional’ association is a moot point, however it produces two highly regarded publications in academic and scholarly circles: *The Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* (ARIST) and the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* (JASIST). Its many chapters and special interest groups reflect a commitment to LIS research in its broadest form.

The European Association for Library and Information Research (EUCLID) has as its mission:

The Association is an independent European (sic) non-governmental and non-profit organisation whose purpose are: to promote European (sic) cooperation within library and information education and research and to provide a body through which it can be represented in matters of European interest (EUCLID, 2006, p. 1)

The execution of this cooperative intention can be seen in the conferences and meetings the group organizes. The research cooperation is not easy to confirm from the information on the Association’s website. A scan of the proceedings from three recent conferences in which EUCLID has been involved appears to concentrate on library education issues and makes little if any mention of the role of research in this process. Further research is needed to confirm anecdotal evidence from attendance and networking at conferences like IFLA and from reading the literature, that there is a sound theoretical base in many European library schools.

The role of the professional association in fostering research

If there are few explicit statements about the place of research in first professional qualifications in librarianship, does the same apply to statements about the role of the librarianship professional associations in fostering research? Only the ALA has a strong history in fostering research under its accreditation processes but does this translate into a professional interest in the research process from its members? Of ALA’s many specialized chapters, committees and discussion groups, there is one:

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the ALA Committee on Research and Statistics which directly relates to LIS research (ALA, 2006a, p.1). The Committee's statement on the Dissemination of Research (ALA, 2006b) is impressive and indicates a strong commitment by this committee to research in LIS.

The new role that CILIP proposes for research in the LIS domain in the United Kingdom is also impressive. CILIP has a long standing professional committee; its Library and Information research Group. "The Group was formed in 1977 to bring together those interested in library and information research. In April 2003 it became a Special Interest Group of CILIP" (CILIP, 2006, np.). Amongst its aims is to increase the profile and influence the direction of library research. The Group publishes the journal *Library and Information Research*.

These two professional association activities, together with the academic and scholarly activities of ASIS&T demonstrate that there is international scholarly and research interest in LIS and it could be argued that these three groups are the prime movers in the LIS research agenda. The Australian (and other country's) library professional could therefore argue that if they were interested in research as individuals, then they could join one of these associations. There would be no need for an association like ALIA to bother with the matter; that it should stick to its 'core business' which appears to revolve around the first professional qualification and the promotion and mentoring of new to middle level librarians.

We have argued earlier that maturity in a profession means that it must move beyond the bounds of practice. We have also demonstrated that in the current climate, LIS education in Australian universities could be seen to be under threat given the new research emphasis of the major funding body: the Australian federal government. Even if we accept that such political climates change over time i.e. that these sorts of political issues are cyclic, we have shown that a profession is not mature until it demonstrates a substantial body of research contemplation and literature. The profession grows through academic and scholarly thought and attention to its issues of the day.

This is why ALIA has embarked upon such initiatives as the ALIA Research and Exchange Partnership (REAP): "REAP is a network of peers working together to exchange ideas and information. It has been developed along recommendations of the report: *Promoting research and information sharing: report of the ALIA research initiative project*, commissioned by the ALIA Board of Directors in 2002" (ALIA, 2006a, p. 1). REAP is a good example of the old adage 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. The repository it houses has few contributions, but those of us on the ALIA Research Committee (ALIA 2006b), another initiative, are working to improve this.

Conclusion

Maguire noted in 1998 that "concerns about the numbers and quality of research students should not be confined to the LIS teachers and researchers in the universities. It should be shared by all who wish to see the LIS profession survive" (1998, p.49). If the library profession is to grow and thrive as a true profession,

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demonstrating not only exemplary practice, but also considered and scholarly approaches to the issues of its day, then its engagement in sound research practice is essential. The evidence-based practice seen by many Australian library practitioners as the 'research answer' is a start, but it is not enough. A new graduate who undertakes the occasional workplace research project should not be considered as an early career researcher in the research environment of Australia today. Rather the researcher should be an LIS professional who is committed to research and actually undertaking it on an almost full-time basis, but in the early stages of their research career path.

The ALIA Research Committee has many activities to undertake and its mission statement is under review. However its driving mantra is to encourage the profession in Australia to take a more serious look at itself. The profession's commitment to sound research enquiry and practice is an essential component of its future as a highly regarded profession.

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