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Student voices: Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the twenty-first century

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Abstract This paper reports on the preliminary research findings of the sub-study group of a larger undertaking, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) priority project *Re-conceptualising and Re-positioning Australian Library and Information Science Education for the Twenty-first Century*. It examines student experiences of library and information science (LIS) education across both the tertiary and vocational education sectors in Australia. The student sub-study group's task was to provide the student/recent graduate perspective on LIS education in Australia. The research considered four major themes to find out how students and recent graduates felt about LIS education in Australia. The themes were: learning opportunities; learner attributes; learning experiences; and learner outcomes. In the second half of 2010, self-administered anonymous web questionnaires and focus groups were used to explore issues such as student demographics, socio-economic backgrounds, past experiences, expectations and rationale behind course choices. In addition the destinations of graduates were explored. Key findings suggest there are various pathways that students take to achieve a LIS qualification in Australia; students are generally optimistic about the future of the LIS profession, and consider that technology will continue to play a key role in future career options; they stress the importance of practical workplace experiences as part of course structure; their satisfaction levels with current courses are high and students feel confident they have been provided with the skills required to begin their professional life. Crown Copyright © 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

As participants in the learning process, students are key stakeholders in Library and Information Science (LIS) education. Multimedia e-learning environments and the interactive nature afforded by Web 2.0 technologies mean that LIS educational programs can be delivered globally and collaboratively to an International audience. Hence, the quality of students' educational experiences and outcomes will have a direct impact on the future growth, knowledge and expertise of the LIS professions. Attracting students who will take LIS and the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving information landscape into the twenty-first century is an integral part of building strong and sustainable educational programs. Part of a larger project, *Re-conceptualising and Re-positioning Australian Library and Information Science Education for the Twenty-first Century*, this paper reports on the preliminary research findings of the sub-study group examining student experiences of LIS education across both the tertiary and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors in Australia. The research explores current learning opportunities, learner attributes, demographics, expectations and motivations, learning experiences and learning outcomes as experienced by current students and new graduates. The findings from this sub-study will be used to support the development of a framework for the education of the information professions in Australia by contributing evidence about student experiences of LIS education.

Background

The Library and Information Science (LIS) and/or Library and Information Management (LIM) profession struggles for legitimacy due to a lack of demarcated bodies of knowledge and strong public awareness (Whitmell, 2004) about the role of information managers in today's contemporary organisation. This is perhaps not surprising as the nature of the profession requires a degree of responsiveness to developments occurring in other fields as well as emerging social trends within the discipline. Declining numbers of LIS students over recent years (ALIA, 2010; Poynton, 2004) suggests that attracting students to a career in librarianship is problematic. One reason may be a lack of understanding concerning the diverse nature and role of information managers in today's modern world. Furthermore, the 'fuzzy' nature of the profession creates some misconceptions amongst current and potential LIS students about what a LIS course should entail. This is especially significant when considering the variety and levels of courses available across the vocational and higher education (HE) sectors. Despite the activities of several key research groups in LIS in Australia, the discipline lacks an holistic view of the student body, with little research relating to the influences on student decision-making, students' expectations, perceptions and experiences or the degree of satisfaction with LIS courses as graduates enter the workforce.

In recent years, there have been many complaints that LIS education in Australia continues to be framed and undertaken in disciplinary and educational traditions that lack the necessary strategic alignment with Australia's

current and future information needs (Harvey, 2001), thus limiting the future growth of the profession. According to this view the current approach to LIS education in Australia appears to lack cohesion and sustainability (Myburgh, 2003), with the result that it ultimately fails to provide effectively a diverse supply of graduates with the attributes required for professional practice in the rapidly changing twenty-first century. Michael Gorman (2004), President of the American Library Association in 2005–2006, declared that there is a 'crisis in LIS education'. In Australia, Harvey (2001) asserts that 'something's amiss with university-based education for librarianship' and Myburgh (2003) argues that a 'fresh approach needs to be taken' by the Australian LIS industry with regard to its education and continuing professional development. Another challenge for LIS HE providers is the growing trend for traditional LIS graduates to find career paths outside the roles and settings of libraries (Colvin, 2009). There has also been little research focussing on the vocational education and training sector (VET) of the LIS discipline, although there is evidence of an increasing interest in this sector with the current round of changes within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Carroll & Murray, 2010, p. 189).

In both the VET and HE sectors, LIS educators of all levels seek to balance appropriate curriculum development, students' expectations, research requirements and institutional demands, all within the constraints of the current economic climate. While similar issues are faced by other disciplines in the tertiary sector (Poynton, 2004) there is an impending crisis in Information Science. Gorman (2004, p. 376) supports this in his discussion concerning the 'crisis in library education', demonstrating the link between the crises in library services and education. This trend gives rise to implications for the profession, as well as influencing students and LIS educators alike. Students and graduates are key stakeholders in LIS education as current and recent participants in the learning process. The quality and content of their educational experiences and outcomes will have a direct impact on the future growth, knowledge and expertise of the LIS professions. Hence, it is incumbent on LIS educators to review the current offerings of LIS courses in the light of the changing nature of the profession, and to ensure that graduates are 'industry-ready' for careers in contemporary organisations. If the LIS sector is to attract and retain students who will lead the profession in the future, LIS courses should reflect the dynamic and varied nature of the discipline, and provide a solid awareness of information management in the digital age.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to develop a profile of current LIS students and recent graduates, and their graduate destinations across Australia. It includes students and graduates from both the university and the VET sector. The research aims to analyse student and recent graduate experiences, perceptions and expectations of LIS courses in Australia. The student sub-study group examined four themes: learning opportunities; learner attributes; learning experiences; and learner outcomes.

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