The changing face of LIS higher education in Australia, part 2

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In the first part of this article (*inCite*, July 2005), I discussed the demand for places in library and information sector (LIS) courses and the impact of higher education reform on curriculum. This second part looks briefly at some additional factors that will influence directions in LIS education in the coming years — and which may impact upon the long-term viability of courses.

Greying of educators

One important issue is the greying of library educators. Library education in Australia expanded rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s, and a number of those who joined the teaching departments in their early period of growth still remain.

There are many issues involved here, not the least of which is the sheer problem in finding replacements. The requirements for entry into academic work have shifted in recent years, with a PhD now being the basic prerequisite. At present there are not too many people with PhDs working in libraries. And given factors such as the typically mature age of entry into the profession and the need for perhaps at least five years work in the profession to gain the necessary experience, those who are available are not likely to be young. It is difficult to envisage anybody being suitably prepared until their mid-30s and probably later. This means that those who become educators later in life are giving ground when it comes to winning promotion to the senior ranks.

It is therefore likely that, for many faced with such a choice, an academic career will look unrewarding. They may well find they have to take a pay reduction in order to find a commencing position, and their long-term advancement and financial prospects may be less than they could expect from a career in libraries.

The danger of greying educators is that in a volatile higher education environment it leaves already-vulnerable departments in a precarious position. Retirements may come rapidly and in close succession, and it can be just such apparently routine occurrences that lead universities to scrutinise courses. This may be particularly the case if positions are advertised and fail to attract suitably qualified applicants.

Research

It is clear that the current federal minister has an agenda for continuing higher education reform that will lead to a bifurcation of teaching and research. This could result in greater distinctions being made between universities, or between discipline areas within universities, or even between individual staff.

There are indications, however, that the most likely outcome will be a three-tier system, with different tiers indicating an institution's role as a primarily research university; a research and teaching university; or a primarily teaching university. Universities currently teaching LIS are likely to fall into all three of those tiers, although perhaps with an emphasis on the second and third tiers. The most optimistic assessment might therefore be little change from the current situation. Realistically it may mean less access to research funding for staff teaching at some universities that now support courses in librarianship.

All universities, including even those in the first tier, are likely to see it as being in their interests to sharpen their research focus and concentrate on existing areas of strength. If LIS departments are to survive — and hopefully thrive — in these circumstances, they are under immediate pressure to be as research-active as possible.

Continuing professional development

There is clearly a case to be made for university teaching departments to be doing more in the area of continuing professional development (CPD). Ideally, universities should be engaged in identifying CPD needs and providing appropriate courses. By and large this does not seem to be happening, and it would seem that work pressures are the primary reason. CPD is not seen as core business for universities.

Universities will no doubt continue to provide some professional development, but it is more likely to be occasional and opportunistic, rather than an ongoing and planned service to the profession. There may be little that can be done to redress this situation. For institutions that do not have a well-geared training arm to hold occasional CPD activities, it is unlikely to be seen as profitable or worth the effort.

What does this mean for ALIA?

It seems that higher education in Australia is to face ongoing 'rationalisation' and it probably matters little which party is in government. The rationalisation will take many forms, one of which is likely to be fewer institutions and attempts to reduce duplication of teaching. Although the situation may take some time to stabilise after recent closures, it is probable that in five to ten years from now we will have fewer institutions teaching LIS.

What is clear is that the course recognition process remains important. Despite the many forms of quality control and measurement required by the government and individual universities, in so far as we have a consistent process in place to assess quality in library education it is that which is provided by the ALIA course recognition process. There is also no doubt that to a university such as Curtin, which prides itself on the strength of its industry links, independent industry accreditation is an important validation of its programs. Not only is the outcome of accreditation important, but so is the process. Although courses are always subject to scrutiny by the profession and employers, course recognition is the one mechanism by which this can be undertaken thoroughly and systematically. The unfortunate truth, however, is that ALIA course recognition provides little, if any, protection against closure of courses.

There is probably little that ALIA can do to influence the causes and likely path of events — outside of what it is currently doing. ALIA needs to continue to: maintain a stringent course recognition process; keep the profession informed and interested in education issues; encourage education in all its forms, including continuing professional development; support active profession/education links by encouraging participation in practicum programs and course advisory committees; encourage and facilitate research both in the workplace and in the academy, whether for formal educational accreditation or for its own value; and be prepared to protest long and loud if threats of closures are apparent.

And remember that, without education, we don't have a profession; and without the profession, there is no need for educators. ∎