

Research-Based Article

Australia's Place in Library and Information Science (LIS) Education: Evolution, Progress and Future Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to determine Australia's position within international Library and Information Science (LIS) education, whilst also examining its evolution, progress, and continuing challenges. The research involved a sample of nine Library and Information Science educators, working in the Republic of Ireland, who provided answers to a series of questions on global LIS education. The aim of the questionnaire was to determine whether Australia's contribution to LIS education would be referenced and in what context. The name of the country under investigation was not disclosed to the sample, as deliberately prompting discourse on Australia would have potentially compromised the authenticity of the data. The study proved Australia is a formidable provider of LIS education, often ranking highly within key academic indicators such as research output, university rankings and educational programmes. The research shows this could not have been possible without the British and American influences on Australian library education since the late nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS

Australia, library and information science education, dissertation summary

EVOLUTION

To understand the provenance of library education in Australia, we must acknowledge the inextricable history and links this vast country has to the United Kingdom in the first instance and the United States later on. These two nations have had a profound impact on most aspects of modern life in Australia, and the British and American influences on Australian libraries and library education remain evident to this day.

According to Wilson et al. (2012, p. 3), efforts to formalise education for entry into the library profession in Australia began in the late 1930s, initially following the British examination-based model. During this same period American popular culture was emerging worldwide and relationships between prominent Australian educators and their US peers were strengthening. The presence of US philanthropic organisations in Australia, like the Carnegie Corporation, ultimately led Australia to adopt more formal, academically oriented professional training aligned with the American model (Carroll, 2007, p. 65).

The establishment of the Australian Institute of Librarians in 1937, now ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) as the accrediting body for librarianship, sought to emulate developments overseas, particularly in the United States and Britain. The American Library Association (ALA) was founded

in 1876, followed by the British Library Association (LA) in 1877, and both played a key role in legitimising library education in their respective countries. In contrast, Australia's lack of a national professional association prior to 1937 had hindered the development of a national education system for librarianship (Wilson et al., 2012, p. 3).

1938 and 1939 witnessed the introduction of the first formal education and training in librarianship through the Public Library of New South Wales and the Public Library of Victoria, marking a shift from on-the-job training to classroom-based education for librarianship.

RATIONALE

There is evidence in the literature to support Australia's contribution to the development and implementation of various LIS education frameworks and theories. The field of Records Management in particular appears to be heavily influenced by Australian theorists. The Records Continuum Model (RCM) developed in 1996 by Frank Upward, an Australian academic at Monash University in Melbourne, was "immediately recognized as a once-in-a-generation breakthrough" and Upward's "pivotal role in developing a unified model of archives and records is undisputed" (Australian Society of Archives, 2015).

Australian records managers and archivists were the first to introduce a records management and archival standard – AS 4390. The International Organisation for Standardisation subsequently based ISO 15489 on its "Australian parent" (Findlay, 2018, p.222) AS 4390 and ISO 15489 became and remains the international standard for records management today.

Australian public servants employed by the State Record Authority of New South Wales also developed the Designing and Implementing Record Keeping Systems (DIRKS, 2003) methodology. DIRKS is essentially an eight-step guide for the application of ISO 15489. This eight-step model was quoted by Koga (2007, p.2) in his paper on the implementation of DIRKS at the United Nations, as an important methodology in terms of its flexibility as a pragmatic solution for recordkeeping activities.

The Australian and New Zealand Information and Literacy (ANZIL) Framework (Bundy, 2004) has been recommended by the Library Association of Ireland's (LAI) Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) as the national information literacy framework Ireland should adopt.

One of the most notable features in LIS education in Australia, which is not broadly offered in other countries, is the availability of the Library Technician Diploma. This one-to-two-year qualification is accredited by ALIA and delivered through Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. The diploma qualifies a person as a technician, offering greater access to the profession and helping to alleviate workforce shortages by providing a cost-effective entry route.

METHODOLOGY

The study incorporates primary research via a standardised, self-completion questionnaire. The questions were open ended, allowing respondents to provide as much or as little information as they wished. It was important to avoid direct references to Australia in any of the questions, so as not to influence respondents' answers and to ensure the reliability of the data. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether participants would mention Australia unprompted, so that its position amongst influential countries in LIS education could be ascertained.

Participants / Sample

The sample comprised nine current and former, third level LIS educators from Dublin Business School's Master of Science in Information and Library Management programme and University College Dublin's Master of Library and Information Studies, and Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies programmes. These three programmes are the only LAI accredited LIS programmes in the Republic of Ireland.

Literature

Secondary research from the literature included, but was not limited to, papers from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, conference papers, discussion papers and information from LIS accreditation body websites. All of these sources provided history, context and understanding of the topic. Insights gained from the literature and questionnaire responses directed the study and led to the development of several themes and concepts.

Data Analysis

(Based on Braun and Clarke (2006), Phases of Thematic Analysis)

Similar themes began to emerge from the data especially in terms of the countries deemed to be the strongest LIS providers. As expected, the responses heavily reflected the influences of the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) on global LIS education. Both nations have played a significant role in shaping all aspects of modern life in Australia and education is no exception. It was important to compare Australian LIS education output to these countries, often as a way of gauging Australia's position globally.

RESULTS

Australia did not feature as prevalently as the US or UK in the questionnaire but was commended by four out of nine respondents for its ALIA frameworks, community-focused delivery of LIS education and its strong LIS programmes. Three participants also identified Australia as one of the countries whose LIS programmes inform the structure of their own modules.

The United States was mentioned by the highest number of participants as the leading country in many aspects of LIS education. It was the country most frequently cited by participants as a source of inspiration for developing and updating LIS modules. The majority of theorists listed as helping to inform participants' teaching practice were American and it was named more than any other country as being exceptional at providing LIS education. The US offers more LIS bachelor's and master's degree programmes than the UK, Australia, Ireland and Canada combined, but it also has a significantly higher population to serve. US universities host seven of the top ten Library and Information Management courses in the world according to QS (2025) and it consistently ranks as the leading producer of published LIS articles. The study revealed the US is certainly the one to beat or emulate in terms of delivery of, and innovation in, LIS education. The UK is a formidable contender in that it was generally runner up to the US or maintained a strong presence in the statistics within the literature and in terms of mentions in the questionnaire.

As an aside, and despite the questionnaire not explicitly requesting this information, participants identified Ireland as excelling in academic librarianship, information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, scholarly communications, open science, research data management, digital information management and social justice/equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Future Challenges For Australian LIS Education

In 2009, the Australian Teaching and Learning Council funded a paper called 'Re-conceptualising and Re-positioning Australian Library and Information Science Education for the 21st Century', to examine how LIS education in Australia could produce graduates with the appropriate attributes to support LIS professional practice into the 21st Century. Some years later, in 2020 ALIA published 'The Future of Library and Information Science Education in Australia, Discussion Paper'. Both works highlighted many of the same future challenges for Australian LIS education.

Decline in Programmes

The instability of LIS programmes in Australian universities and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges has been a common theme throughout the literature, as programmes seem to develop and conclude regularly. Willard and Wilson (2016, p.251) illustrate the availability of 32 graduate and postgraduate programmes on offer across 12 third level institutions in 2003. An analysis of graduate and postgraduate LIS programmes on the ALIA website in 2025 reveals a considerable decline to approximately nine courses across four institutions available nationwide today.

Relevant Skills

ALIA's Discussion Paper highlights an apparent lack of alignment between academic courses/providers and the needs of employers. Participants did not feel curricula mirrored societal changes, especially in the fields of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital preservation and should better reflect the realities of the profession and real-world scenarios (ALIA, 2020, p.14).

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Ongoing professional development offered to library professionals in Australia, once employed, falls short of what many employees expect. Suggestions for CPD in the ALIA 2020 Discussion Paper (2020, p.15) include staff exchanges, mentoring, rotations, secondments, and internships. These initiatives should be accompanied by credentials to validate and recognise this training. Ongoing education in areas like AI, metadata, copyright and indigenous knowledge practices, was identified as being particularly important in the Australian LIS sector right now.

Workforce Diversity

Data from Jobs and Skills Australia (no date) notes that women comprise 66% of the librarian workforce and Mitchell and Weldon (2016, p.6) report that over 80% of those in teaching-related library roles are female.

LIS students tend to be older and come to the profession as a secondary career (Combes et al., 2021, p.5). LIS professionals in general do not speak a language other than English, leading to shortfalls in the provision of services to multicultural communities. The lack of LIS professionals who speak a language other than English and the homogeneity of the LIS demographic may mean that ethnic and migrant groups may not feel comfortable in environments where their language is a barrier (Combes et al., 2021, p.5).

Educator Shortages

There is a significant concern about the 'greying' of LIS educators who qualified in great numbers during the 1970s and 1980s and who are all expected to retire around the same time (Hallam, 2007, cited in Partridge et al., 2011, p.14). While this will result in many vacant positions which more diverse hires could fill, it is

unlikely, given the data, that there are many diverse candidates available. Ansari and Munshi (2024, p.9) also note the decreasing number of LIS academics, which is worrying in terms of the currency and relevance of LIS curricula. Partridge and Yates (2012, pp.88-89) note that recruitment of LIS educators has emerged as a pressing issue and the challenge for LIS education now is to find ways to entice new educators into the field.

Salaries

Postgraduate qualification within the LIS field is not usually linked to higher salaries, which provides little incentive for prospective students to pay the extra cost incurred in pursuing a master's degree (Harvey and Higgins, 2003, cited in Ansari & Munshi, 2024, p.9). The majority of respondents to ALIA's discussion paper survey indicated that their motivation for becoming LIS professionals was "based on their commitment to the values of the sector rather than to any expectation of high earnings" (ALIA, 2020, p.12).

Librarian and Library Technician Task Debate

A recurring theme in the literature is the ambiguity between tasks appropriate for library professionals and those more suited to library technicians. The constant uncertainty and overlap of duties can be attributed to both undergraduate and technician education emerging at virtually the same time and overseen by the same group of people (Carroll, 2007, p.52). Partridge et al. (2011, p.12) also refer to boundaries between paraprofessional and professional roles blurring over time.

CONCLUSION

While an exact ranking of Australia's contribution to global LIS education is difficult to pinpoint given the various facets of LIS, Australia does appear to hold a respectable position in several aspects of LIS education provision. Four individuals who took part in the study commended Australia for its various contributions to LIS education, ranging from educational programmes to ALIA frameworks, to community-focussed delivery of LIS education. Furthermore, Australia offers an ALIA accredited Library Technician Diploma, which is a unique strength, as a similar qualification to this does not appear to be widely available in other countries. Several Australian universities feature on the QS university rankings for their LIS programmes and Australia is fourth in the world in terms of LIS published articles according to Aslam et al. (2022, p.85) and sixth in the world in LIS citations according to Nisha et al. (2022, p.379), giving it a strong research performance relative to its population.

As previously mentioned, LIS educational programmes in Australia appear to be in decline, with 32 professional third-level programmes available in 2003 compared to nine programmes available today. There also seems to be a considerable dip in bachelor's degree programmes between Gibbons and White's study in 2019 and this study in 2025. Furthermore, Chawner (2015, p.20) reports that in 2014 there were fewer than 30,000 Australians employed in library and information services positions, and that number has dropped significantly since 2010.

There could be a number of reasons for the ongoing downturn in programmes, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic (especially as foreign students were prohibited from travelling to Australia), programmes moving online, or just the prevailing uncertainty surrounding the future of LIS education amid the rise in Artificial Intelligence.

The literature also suggests this decrease in programmes could be intentional due to a previous

overabundance of LIS courses for Australia's sparse population. With more LIS courses offered per capita than the UK and US, Australian universities have been competing for the small number of students nationally who wish to pursue a career in LIS (Partridge & Yates, 2012, p. 83). Perhaps this is not a decline at all, but a deliberate re-structuring, to ensure the stability and viability of LIS education in Australia into the future.

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