

# The changing face of LIS higher education in Australia

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The factors currently influencing higher education, and library and information sector (LIS) education in particular, will have a significant impact upon ALIA as it plans for its evolving role in professional education. The recent closure of several library courses came as a surprise to many. The closures are, however, an indication of the vulnerability of courses, and a warning that, by their nature, decisions of this type are made with little warning and are virtually impossible to reverse.

## Higher education 'reform'

The first point that needs to be made is the extent of the process of transformation that has created the general operating environment for higher education over the last two decades. Anyone with an interest in public policy will be aware of this process, but unless you are intimately involved, it is difficult to understand how fundamental and ongoing the transformation has been.

There isn't space to address the various aspects of this reform, but simply to note the impact that it has had on LIS education. The general outcome has been an emphasis on efficiency in various guises, resulting in a 'big is best' approach, which has led to an erosion of autonomy for library schools. Nearly all LIS schools have been forced into alliances with other disciplines, and it is unlikely that any school now teaches courses over which they have full control. Curriculum is therefore invariably a compromise reached in order to secure the short/medium-term future of courses. We have seen different courses gravitate towards different disciplinary alliance

— business, computing, media — with resulting changes in curriculum.

This may not be all bad news. There are advantages in interdisciplinary exposure. It has resulted, however, in confusion amongst practitioners and the profession as they have watched the evolution of courses from the outside, not always understanding the pressure to survive and how it has brought about course and curriculum changes. It also makes life difficult for ALIA as it works to recognise courses which are increasingly un-alike, with less consistency amongst graduate skills and knowledge.

## Demand for courses

Demand for places is difficult to assess, as the ALIA figures come with the warning that they are 'approximate only, as statistics supplied are not always complete'. Hopefully, however, they are reliable enough to indicate trends. The most recently available figures cover 1996–2003. It is noticeable that they fluctuate considerably between years. This is likely to be a response to general higher education policy than it is a reflection of underlying demand. However, in so far as trends are discernible, we can note that:

- Graduate places (that is, in Graduate Diploma and Masters level courses) have trended upwards.
- Undergraduate (Bachelor level) places have trended downwards. In 1996, 51 per cent of students were studying undergraduate courses; by 2003, this figure was 38 per cent.
- The total number of students has fluctuated, but 2003 was higher than any year since 1997.

From this we can make two tentative conclusions:

1. Total underlying demand for courses continues to be strong by previous measures.
2. We might be experiencing the early stages of a transition to postgraduate-only entry to the profession. If the decline in demand and/or places available at undergraduate level continues, then these courses may eventually become unviable.

## Graduate-only education?

This leads to a consideration of the future of graduate education. Recently

we have seen a number of universities moving to introduce 18-month Masters degrees by course work. These have now largely replaced the former two-year Masters qualifications. We have also had one university introduce an 18-month Masters degree with no exit point at a Graduate Diploma — previously the standard entry-level qualification.

It may be that this is the start of a trend towards both students and employers expecting a Masters degree as the standard entry level. There are sound pedagogic reasons for this being the case. There have long been questions as to how well a 12-month course prepares graduates for the workplace. This issue is becoming more critical as the expansion of required skills and knowledge demands constant additions to the curriculum. The downside is that it will require a greater financial commitment from students, which will be a disincentive to some.

There are also changes to the undergraduate side of the equation that are likely to have an impact. These include the recent trend to lower entry requirements for school leavers seeking places in many courses. This is being driven by a mix of changing demographics and changes in school leavers' preference for other forms of workplace preparation. It is likely this trend will continue. The 'skills crisis' in many industries may lead to a rejuvenation of interest in some skilled and semi-skilled occupations and the government will look for ways to attract school leavers to these jobs.

It is difficult to say what the impact might be on a career such as librarianship. On the one hand, some potential entrants may be attracted to other careers; on the other hand, if university entrance scores continue to decline, then some students who might otherwise have been excluded may find there are positions available.

In the next issue of *inCite*, I will consider other significant issues affecting LIS education, including the ageing education workforce, and the place of educators in research and continuing professional development. ■

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