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Labour force statistics and ongoing skills shortages

In late October the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released labour force data from the 2006 national census. This month's Workwatch reviews the data as it relates to the library and information sector, referring as well to the regular ABS quarterly reviews.

As at August 2006, the total number of library workers in Australia was 24,849. Of these, 10,085 were librarians, 6,510 library technicians and 8,254 library assistants. There has been a fall of around 3,000 in the sector in recent years, with the greatest decline being in the category of librarian, while numbers of library technicians and assistants have fallen only slightly. (These statistics do not include teacher-librarians, who are counted among primary and secondary school teachers.) For archivists, the total number employed was 896.

Two features of the library workforce remain constant: gender imbalance and an older profile of worker than in other occupations. The library workforce remains highly 'feminised' with women comprising just over 83% of Australian library workers, with male participation rising by only 0.5% in recent years. This is in marked contrast to the workforce as a whole, where female participation stands at 45%. The gender profile of the library sector is unlikely to change greatly in the foreseeable future, given the pattern of current enrolments in library and information studies programs. An ALIA survey completed in early 2007 showed that enrolment of males in undergraduate library courses has never topped the figure of 10.9% in 2000, although there is a higher male participation rate of 16–20% at postgraduate level.

With regard to age profiles, the median age for library workers is 45, compared with 39 for the general workforce. Given the older age groupings within the sector, the fall in numbers of librarians may have stemmed from retirements of senior and long-serving librarians whose positions in some instances have not been filled, especially following library restructures. A further factor could be the recent practice in some libraries of appointing senior staff from general management, administrative and research streams rather than from among librarians.

Employment outlook

Employment prospects for librarians remain good. ABS and Jobsearch¹ data indicates that unemployment among librarians stands at 3% in 2007, as opposed to 5% for the specific occupational groups surveyed. For library technicians the figure is less favourable at 8% and for library assistants unemployment is at 6%. The differing levels of job prospects are also indicated by the figures for full and part-time work in the sector: 69% of librarians work on a full-time basis, compared with 51% for library technicians and 29% for library assistants. For the workforce as a whole, full-time participation is 71.74%. The statistics relating to hours worked in the library sector would, however, be

affected by factors other than prevailing economic conditions, given that many library technicians and assistants are enrolled in part-time study relating to their work — and in other areas — and not seeking full-time work. The high number of women employed in the library sector would also include many employees who favour part-time work. The jobsearch data indicates that employment opportunities in the sector are likely to improve for library technicians while remaining stable for librarians and library assistants.

Skills shortages

As noted in press reports, employers in many areas continue to experience difficulties in finding workers with relevant skills. The Jobsearch figures indicate that, generally, the most serious shortages are in trades and in particular professions, such as accountancy and nursing. The overall state and territory unemployment figures are lower than for thirty years, with a national figure of 4.3% in October 2007, ranging from 4.6% in NSW to 2.5% in the ACT, where competition for skilled workers is acute, especially given higher average salaries and greater participation rate. While exact information regarding regional employment patterns within the library sector is not readily available, the best sources for further advice would be local government associations and library and information recruitment agencies. Relevant pages on the ALIA website are regularly updated: www.alia.org.au/employment/links.html

1. Employment statistics by occupational group (as opposed to general labour force statistics) are at <http://jobsearch.gov.au/joboutlook>.



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