

False dawn or a new ERA for Australian LIS research?

The ALIA Research Committee began an earnest commitment to participate in the Australian research landscape in 2007 with the Australian government's Research Quality Framework (RQF) initiative. The requirement that the Australian library and information studies/science (LIS) researcher community rank the journals they use came from discussions held at an RQF panel meeting in February 2007 in Canberra; a meeting attended by Kerry Smith, the then Chair of the ALIA Research Committee on behalf of ALIA. While it was recognised by the then Department of Education Science & Technology (DEST) officers present at this meeting that the Web of Science (formerly ISI) journal impact approach of journal acceptance for measures of research quality and impact might not be appropriate for LIS, it was apparent that this model would be the default if no other ranking of journal titles became apparent. Although an increasing number of LIS and related discipline journals were appearing in the Web of Science listed rankings, the number remained limited and it was therefore decided that the Australian LIS researcher community endeavour to rank journals of importance. The then Chair of the ALIA Research Committee undertook to coordinate the project and details of the work undertaken are reported in Smith & Middleton (2009).

Fast forward to the Rudd government's election in 2007 which made a speedy decision that the RQF exercise be reborn under the title Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) – not to be confused with the other ERA (Electronic Resources Australia). In the second half of 2009, ALIA was contacted by the Australian Research Council's (ARC) ERA office to check progress on a revised journal list. Concurrently, the ALIA Research Committee was contacted by the coordinator of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) Field of Research (FoR) code 08 journal listing coordinator: the Computing Research and Education Association (CoRE), code 08: Information and Computing Sciences, which now includes Library and Information Studies under the code 0807. The inclusion of LIS within the computing FoR remains a topic of much debate among Australian LIS academics.

However, as with the RQF exercise, CoRE again decided to allow the Australian LIS profession to work out their journal listings independent of parallel work by CoRE on the same project. CoRE would then absorb

the Australian LIS journal list for 0807 into its final listing for 08. The ALIA Research Committee accepted the opportunity to revise the LIS journal list and this process was recently finalised with the final LIS journal list submitted to the ARC for consideration.

This has been a contentious issue with Australian LIS academics as the final journal listing released by the ARC for our discipline differed significantly from the list we submitted. It appears numerous academics from other disciplines are equally frustrated with the final decisions of this lengthy process as the criteria provided for the exercise, which we felt we met, do not appear to have been adhered to by the ARC.

Where to now?

The Australian LIS researcher community has no choice but to operate under the final listing, which, for example, has neither The Australian Library Journal nor Australian Academic & Research Libraries listed in the top tiers of the ranking process. Both are listed as B journals (the four tiers in the process being A*, A, B, with the last tier being C). Interestingly, Australian journals across all disciplines appear to have ranked lower than expected. Dr Peter Macauley, the current Chair of the ALIA Research Committee, did an evaluation of the final ERA listing and found that only two journals with Australia/Australasian, Australian etc in the journal titles were ranked as Tier A*. While some Australian produced journals (without Australia etc in the title) were ranked as Tier A*, the overall result was quite disappointing. The message in this is to raise the publication rate of Australian LIS researchers—academics, managers, administrators, and practitioners—and this will take time. Australia's LIS academics encourage publication in our two Australian premier journals in the hope that the final outcome will be that their status is raised in the ERA stakes. This will not be an easy journey as, for example, research colleagues in the geosciences, a discipline area with a very strong track record on the Australian research landscape, are bemoaning the ranking of their premier Australian title to Tier B.

Why bother?

The current climate for ranking research takes on a new dimension when so many of Australia's university senior managers rely heavily on the position of their institution in league tables such as the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Academic Ranking of World Universities. Australian LIS is a bit player in this game and runs the risk of not being a player at all, unless it can improve its research activity, publication, and grant successes. Our universities today require their academic

staff to teach, demonstrate leadership, and undertake research. I don't need to spell out the consequences for university education for librarians in Australia if the game is not played successfully. But the issue is much bigger than the preservation of LIS education in Australia at the university level.

The entire profession has a role.

The ALIA Research Committee works hard to promote the benefits of a research culture among practitioners, but the journey is challenging in a library working environment of busy days and a culture of pragmatism. You don't need a PhD to work in a library, but you do need to undertake research into the many initiatives you embark upon, to test their worth. We do need to advance the theoretical thinking for LIS worldwide, to ensure that our profession and the culture that it represents continues to hold its head high in the challenging work environments of today. Collaboration among researchers and practitioners is one way to speed up this process, so I encourage you to seek opportunities for such endeavours.

Reference

Smith, Kerry and Michael Middleton. "Australian library & information studies (LIS) researchers' ranking of LIS journals." *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 40, no. 1 (2009): 1–20.

Associate Professor Kerry Smith
Curtin University
K.Smith@curtin.edu.au