Demystifying course recognition

ALIA is the body that establishes and maintains standards for entry into the library and information profession in Australia. As such the Association has a keen interest in the quality of the education programs offered at both the librarian and library technician levels, and works with education providers and consults with stakeholders to ensure courses equip graduates with up-to-date and relevant skills. Course recognition is undertaken at the invitation of an institution delivering a course and is carried out in a spirit of cooperation between ALIA and the institution through the evaluation of courses against the ALIA education policies and the established core knowledge, skills, and attributes.

In 1999, the Museum, Library/Information Services Training Package was introduced, encompassing the education and training of library technicians (Diploma) and library assistants (Certificates II, III, and IV). As there was considerable input into the development from the professional association and industry representatives, it was felt that the training package was appropriately aligned with the workforce needs of the LIS sector. As a result, there has been no formal evaluation of library technician courses for more than a decade.

2009 Course Recognition site visits

The overall purpose of the ALIA course recognition process was to build a national best practice guide for library technician education. The 17 institutions currently offering the Diploma of Library and Information Services program participated in the ALIA course recognition process. As part of the process each institution was visited by a course recognition panel. For several years, members of ALIA's Education and Professional Development Standing Committee have worked with library technician educators offering courses through colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to plan and prepare for a national program of course recognition. In 2009, following the submission of the required documentation, an ALIA course recognition panel conducted site visits to all 17 institutions. Each institution received a report documenting the panel's findings, highlighting areas of good practice and providing a series of recommendations for enhancements to the course.

Course recognition evaluation

The ALIA course recognition process has been a valuable learning process for all involved. The local panel members were selected through their role and experience as an established library technician with a strong understanding of the local market for paraprofessional staff. One third of the respondents had worked in the LIS sector for between six and ten years, while five people had over 20 years experience in the sector.

The framework for course recognition encompasses the assessment of courses against the key criteria of course design, curriculum content, assessment, staffing, resourcing, quality assurance mechanisms, and infrastructure. Each of these criteria was discussed from the perspectives of ALIA policy and the key dimensions of each criterion outlined according to variations in current practice and, wherever possible, examples of best practice. Despite the philosophy and principles of the national training package, there is considerable diversity of practice across the 17 different library technician courses in this country. The ALIA panel undertook its own quality assurance review as part of the 2009 program. The findings from the review will inform future course recognition activities, including:

- Ongoing review of the course recognition questionnaire for the course recognition process;
- Timelines for the preparation and submission of the documentation;
- Strategies for the progressive collection of documents and evidence;
- Succession planning for teaching staff involved in the course recognition process at each institution; and
- Recruitment of and succession planning for panel members.

In summary, the course recognition program undertaken by ALIA was multifaceted, multilayered, and extremely demanding. The commitment to planning, data collection, participation in the site visits, and the preparation of reports has taken over a year, with more than 350 people involved in the whole process.

Where to from here?

The outcomes will be used to contribute to a wider understanding of the importance of professional standards in the LIS sector and that aggregated findings from the program will help guide future practice.

The ALIA Education and Professional Development Standing Committee will consider the strengths of the model for course recognition undertaken in 2009 and work towards finding ways to maximise the benefits to all stakeholders. The value of the process to the maintenance of professional standards in the LIS sector must be clearly communicated. Additionally, options should be investigated to reduce the administration load for the institutions and for the Association.

Gillian Hallam
Chair, Education and PD
Standing Committee
gillian.hallam@alia.org.au

As of 1 July 2010, ALIA will be changing its terminology from course recognition to course accreditation. This change brings ALIA in line with industry standards.