



Spoiled by Choice: A Recipe for Mediocrity

From the desk of the Library Provocateur

After lengthy procrastination involving sufficient 'management by walking about' for Provocateur's colleagues to suspect the organisation is running another mystery shopper campaign, I have decided there is no easy way to broach the thesis of this month's column. I shall therefore be bold and declare up front: Australia has too many library schools!

There – I've said it.

The apparently large number of library schools and library programs in this country relative to our modest professional population has long intrigued me. It has never made sense, and still doesn't, particularly in the context of high quality professional development opportunities which are comparatively few and far between.

We appear to be spoiled for choice at one end of the education spectrum and scratching for prospects at the other. Somewhere, somehow, the system seems to be out of kilter.

In preparation for this column, I recently counted the number of Australian librarianship courses accredited by ALIA. I did not count the number of library technician programs, which are another issue entirely and of no less concern.

In August of this year, there were by my reckoning, 25 discrete graduate and undergraduate librarianship programs (Bachelor, Graduate Diploma, and Master) offered by no less than 10 universities across all states and territories.

Compare these figures with the profession of dentistry, for which only six universities (Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland, Sydney, WA, and Griffith) offer undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses. The profession of veterinary medicine is similarly served by just seven universities around Australia.

It is difficult to put these numbers in some sort of meaningful context but as a start, let's express the number of Australian universities offering librarianship programs in relation to the claimed membership of ALIA – some 6000 members, according to the Association's Strategic Plan 2010 – 2015.

Thus, a simple calculation suggests that we have one library school per 600 members of ALIA. One library school per 1000 librarians, if we assume ABS figures are correct, and roughly 10 000 Australian library workers identifiable as librarians.

Now let's look at these numbers from the perspectives of our colleagues in North America and the United Kingdom.

The American Library Association currently accredits 62 library programs offered by 57 universities and colleges – several located in Canada. Using the most recent published figures, as at 31 July 2009, the Association's membership is just shy of 62 000 members. If we apply our simple formula, that's approximately one library school per 1088 members.

CILIP in the UK, by comparison, accredits 16 British universities to provide programs in librarianship, and one in Germany – Cologne University of Applied Sciences. CILIP claims a membership of approximately 21 000 members. Thus in the UK, not counting the Cologne program, there is on average one library school per 1300 members – more than double the Australian figure

There is one further dimension and that is the question of enrolments. In this respect, indicative Australian figures published by ALIA for the period 1996 – 2009 show a steady downward trend. In graduate courses, an enrolment peak of 1917 students in 1997 has declined to 1222 students in 2009.

The trend has been more significant in undergraduate programs, with student numbers declining from a peak of 1745 in 1997 to 769 in 2009. For the statistically inclined, that is close to a 60% drop in undergraduate enrolments.

ALIA's accompanying narrative explains the situation:

"In general the lower enrolment numbers of 2009 reflect the loss of a number of undergraduate courses, again especially in teacher-librarianship where courses were gradually phased out during the 1990s at a time when institutions were forced to respond to changes in

funding allocations that impacted heavily on courses identified as specialty courses."

With the rationalisation of Australian higher education in the 1980s and 1990s in mind, my thinking returns to the original question. Compared to other specialist professions, and our colleagues in North America and the UK, why are there still so many librarianship programs on offer in Australia?

Why too has at least one library program been recently resuscitated despite a downwards trend in demand; as evidenced by declining graduate and undergraduate level enrolments?

In lieu of answers, perhaps we should consider the likely impacts on our profession and professional practice.

ALIA's Standing Committee on Education and Professional Development states in its Work Plan 2010 – 2011 that by 2015 it wants accredited LIS courses to "offer programs of excellence to meet the needs of industry and the profession." My first reaction on reading this statement was to hope that our existing 25 programs are already at this point. If they are not, why has ALIA accredited them in the first place, and what does it say about current and future standards of professional practice?

At face value, having one library school per 600 members would seem a good start, particularly in comparison to the UK. But the attractiveness of that figure assumes that all 10 library schools are offering roughly comparable programs. The reality in Australia, as any practitioner will be aware, is quite different.

I would question, for example, how it is possible for a library school or program with just one or two academic staff – however dedicated and talented those staff may be – to offer the breadth and depth of learning opportunities provided by a program with four or more staff. With the degree of specialisation now evident across the library profession, providing a diversity of learning opportunities must surely rely on an ensemble cast; with practitioners playing their part too.

There is also the question of LIS research, which I think most would agree does not receive the degree of support it deserves, and the ongoing quality of our professional practice warrants. It baffles me how any library educator can successfully pursue original research and supervise more than a few token postgraduate students. Somewhere, something has to give.

It has been my belief for a long time that our profession should be advocating to universities and offering to facilitate the creation of three, possibly four LIS Education Centres of Excellence. In effect, teaching and research hubs – one in the west and two or three at most in the east.

Universities would be encouraged to close marginal LIS programs and consolidate teaching staffs to create strong programs offering teaching breadth and depth; and research capabilities of international standing. Well resourced distance education programs using both digital and analogue delivery formats would ensure a level playing field across the country.

The icing on the cake for the profession would be the opportunity for our peak body, ALIA, to work with each new Centre of Excellence to create meaningful PD opportunities as part of a wider integrated program – a genuine 'professional development continuum'. Apropos of this point, it is interesting to note that ALIA's Standing Committee on Education and Professional Development has limited representation outside the higher education sector, despite the comparative abundance of professional development opportunities currently being offered by private providers.

Perhaps it is as composer and management consultant Robert Fritz, author of *The Path of Least Resistance* (1989), once said: "If you limit your choices only to what seems possible or reasonable, you disconnect yourself from what you truly want, and all that is left is compromise."

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