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Challenges for Professional Library Education in Australia

Alex Byrne

University of Technology
Sydney, Australia
E-mail: alex.byrne@uts.edu.au

Abstract:

The challenge for both educators and practitioners is to find methods to improve the overall quality of new graduates in order to develop a culture and constituency for innovation in the library profession and to foster leadership. External influences include globalisation, multilingual and multicultural challenges, media developments and eWorld opportunities. However, the traditional emphases on ethics, professionalism and objectivity, and on cooperation and collaboration remain crucial as does our responsibility to think globally, endeavouring to address the implications for those in both developed and developing nations.

BACKGROUND

We live in a time in which the rate of change is unprecedented. The nineteenth century saw tremendous innovations in technology, communications and public health that changed our lives during the twentieth century. We are now seeing a global transformation of social organisation. Contrary to Gordon¹, I believe that the dramatic technological developments both in information and communications technologies and in biotechnologies will continue to transform our lives as profoundly as the nineteenth century clusters of innovation in electricity, the internal combustion engine and transportation, chemicals and materials, entertainment, communication and information, and health and sanitation.

The "Information Revolution" is accelerating the rate of change as it pushes us faster into the 'Knowledge Economy'. That is, into the emerging world economy in which the greatest asset is intellectual capital, the knowledge which gives one organisation or one nation, or a partnership of organisations or nations, an advantage over others. Such an advantage may be found in the relatively new information industries or in the older extractive and transforming industries. E-business encompasses the gamut of processes which involve the use of information and knowledge transfer to

enhance business activity. In general, it seems to offer the prospect of moving economic activity closer to some of the ideals of perfect competition: low transaction costs, low barriers to entry, and improved access to information for the consumer. It may significantly lower prices while improving quality.²

As Castells³ notes, the new paradigm has five characteristics:

1. *information is its raw material*, the technologies act on information not just information acting on technology;
2. the *pervasiveness* of the effects of the new technologies which are shaping all processes of our individual and collective existence;
3. the *networking logic* or topology which is well adapted to increasing complexity of interaction and to unpredictable patterns of development, and can be implemented in all kinds of processes and organisations;
4. *flexibility* in which all processes are reversible and organisations and processes can be reconfigured, in a society characterised by constant change and organisational fluidity; and,
5. the growing *convergence* of specific technologies into a highly integrated system merging separate technological trajectories.

Thus, the information and communications technologies are both a product and signifier of that ‘Knowledge Economy’ and also facilitate acceleration of the rate of change.

In common with other parts of the globe, but heightened by its previous isolation, nineteenth century Australia was radically transformed by the fast communication of news, commerce and personal matters following the completion of the Overland Telegraph and its connection to the British Australian Telegraph undersea cable at Darwin. The immediate global access offered by the Internet and the World Wide Web is similarly, but much more rapidly and extensively, transforming global commerce, international relations and the lives of individuals. The 304 million users of the Internet around the world in March 2000 (78% more than in March 1999⁴) can have immediate (or nearly immediate, bandwidth and “HTTP Error 404 Not Found” allowing) access to an enormous range of information. While we know the access is not without its problems, they are overshadowed by both its benefits and its potential, if only we can realise effective and efficient access in a universal and democratic fashion.

Most marked in OECD member countries, the characteristics of the changes to business, the workforce and professional practice include⁵:

increasing use of symbolic rather than physical goods	decreasing need for physically massed resources
declining importance of traditional boundaries	increase in numbers of knowledge workers
emphasis on R&D	increase in numbers of skilled, white collar workers
high educational levels of workforce	greater investment in and recognition of intangibles

The ability to re-educate is becoming most important as the jobs of all will constantly change. There will be opportunities to gain new skills and an expectation that all will train and retrain⁶. Firms need to concentrate on their key knowledge workers, and to maintain a balance between what they know and what they need to know. Many of the anticipated productivity improvements also pose a threat to employment. Not all labour is homogeneous; for example, increased demand for skilled IT workers is unlikely to be met quickly by large numbers of recently retrenched factory workers.

Many of trends evident in business and the workforce are also, of course, discernable in areas of professional practice. However, the distinctive character of professional practice introduces other

dimensions including greater emphasis on such issues as ethics, professional responsibility, competition and regulation.

Ethical concerns have extended to discussions on the acceptable limits to professional practice; for example, the acceptability of professionals to perform acts which are not illegal but might be regarded by the general community as aggressive commercial practices. Professional responsibility has come to include both social and environmental responsibility with, for instance, the growing emphasis on sustainability in engineering. In most professions and in the media and public forums, there has been considerable discussion on the question of self regulation versus legislated regulation. The desire for client centred practice and emphasis on client choice has itself raised a number of questions. They include the fundamental issue of how to foster informed choice in the face of complex professional, technological and moral issues. The capacity of the general public to choose competent professional advice and to negotiate competitive fees is limited, leading to mechanisms for internal or external supervision.

Following the experience of the United States, increased litigiousness, and especially the introduction of class actions, has become markedly evident in Australia. The defence of such legal actions and the significant damages incurred when they are lost has led to significantly increased cost of professional indemnity, medical and other forms of insurance. Another implication of the trends towards both quality and increased litigiousness is the demand for more meticulous documentation of professional practice. This ensures that the history and reasons for making decisions are tracked more clearly but also increases the cost of professional services.

New technologies have had a major impact on all fields. Their effects have included both productivity gains and improvements in standards of professional practice through the ability to determine key issues more finely, earlier and/or more comprehensively. However, in some areas, there has also been a discernable 'technological push' encouraging the adoption of new technologies because they exist, not necessarily because of their benefits. One benefit of the new information and communication technologies which is particularly notable in the context of the Information Society is the improved access to information to facilitate both improved professional practice and more discerning clients, to promote 'consumer power'. Many of these changes have led to increased costs. In many areas of professional practice, there is a question of 'Who pays?' If it is predominantly the individual then questions are raised of affordability and equity in access to professional services. If the community pays, then there are questions of the extent to which the community is willing to pay and whether government should impose limitations on professional practice to limit costs.

These trends indicate that we are now in a distinctively different phase of professional practice from that experienced before 1990 which was characterised by the emergence and recognition of the 'new professions' such as nursing. They hold significant implications for both library and information professional practice and the education of practitioners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

At a broader level, the developments have profound implications for education generally and for the world's information services. When information fuels the knowledge economy, libraries and information services are the carburetors and fuel injectors which make the information available when and where it may be required. In education we have moved from imparting a relatively fixed corpus of knowledge to an emphasis on skills, understanding and collaboration. In history, for example, the narratives of kings and queens, wars and conquests, inventions and discoveries have been replaced by the application of the techniques of investigation, analysis and synthesis. At all levels of education students are required to work in teams to investigate questions and develop understandings while absorbing the worth and skills of collaboration.

In higher education, rapid change is being driven by the catchcries of 'lifelong', 'open' and 'flexible' learning and the opportunities offered by 'eLearning'. Many universities are also considering the threats or opportunities posed by educational programs offered by or through powerful global entertainment corporations such as News Limited and Disney.

The rapidity of the change has been demonstrated by recent developments. A 1998 report noted, in discussing what it called the 'Death Star' scenario, "the involvement of global media networks in providing higher education has been overstated, ... [but some] companies are seeking to establish a presence as a carrier, rather than a provider, of educational content"⁷. This year, however, the Universitas 21 international consortium of 18 universities, including three Australian universities, entered into an agreement with Mr Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation to form a joint venture company to secure a substantial share of the global higher education market. Mr Murdoch welcomed the move, saying: "News Corporation has taken a strategic decision to enter the distance learning market using our global distribution platforms, our advanced technologies and our marketing reach. A mutually profitable partnership between leading providers in higher education and one of the world's leading media companies is a very strong proposition."⁸

More broadly, the following implications can be discerned⁹ ¹⁰:

1. *Career long learning* - "empowering workers with cutting-edge high-tech skills, providing downsized workers with transition assistance, or helping young people get a foothold on the career ladder".
2. *Educate in diversity* - "As our population becomes more diverse and global competition expands employers can't afford to underutilize any segment of the ... talent pool".
3. *Enable equal opportunity* - "workers with disabilities are more likely to have two jobs, work part-time because they cannot find full-time employment, be self-employed, earn less from their own incorporated businesses, earn less per hour, per month, and per year".
4. *Citizenship* - creating a pluralistic community with shared core values and a commitment to caring for those in need.
5. *Internationalise and globalise* - "to contribute effectively to Australia's economic development and international stature ... [be] alert to international developments and trends, and ... internationally competitive ... facilitating active international links with higher education institutions, business, industry and the professions, with particular emphasis given to the Asia-Pacific region."

EDUCATION FOR LIBRARIANSHIP IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association recognises first-award librarianship and library technician qualifications. Courses to be recognised are assessed against the criteria set out in the Association's education policy statements and the course recognition procedures. Courses are assessed at intervals of not more than seven years. The currently recognised courses are listed in the Appendix.

The Association's Board of Education is responsible for the development, implementation and modification of educational policy for the Association¹¹. The Board's mission is to empower members of the Association to attain excellence in their professional practice through provision of education and training policies, standards and activities. In 2000, the Board of Education's priorities are:

1. Application of education and training standards to library and information service activities
2. Monitoring of, and involvement in outside issues within the terms of reference of the Board of Education
3. Enhancing opportunities for continuing professional development
4. Promotion of the Board of Education's activities
5. Participation in the development of the Association's role with respect to research in the library and information services sector.
6. Redefinition of the provision of education and training policies, standards and activities within the new Association.

To achieve these priorities, the Board's focus is on the application of education and training standards to library and information service activities, course recognition, monitoring of innovation in library and information studies courses, implementation of outcomes from consultations, evaluation of standards for recognition of qualifications, continuing professional development, evaluation of the implications of government education and training policies for the sector, promotion of research and review of the Association's role in education and training.

The Board defines librarians and library technicians in the following way:

“Librarians are professionals who manage and provide library and information services by analysing, evaluating, organising and synthesising information to meet client needs. The role of the librarian focuses on management, direction, policy formulation and application required to meet the information needs of clients. Library technicians work with librarians in the provision of library and information services. The role of the library technician focuses on the operational and technical aspects of the information or library service.”¹²

This is quite a traditional and rather narrow definition which indicates the tight focus of the Board of Education on librarianship as a profession which is essential practiced within information service organisations and libraries in particular. It is at variance with the practice of many of the 'library schools' which are engaging with the socioeconomic changes outlined above as well as reduced employment in traditional library environments leading to soft demand for traditional courses.

The UTS Department of Information Studies

The Department of Information Studies at my university, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), describes itself as “an innovative centre for theory and research in information studies, including: information science, information technology, knowledge management, information user behaviour, information retrieval, information enterprises, and information policy”¹³.

Its degree offers the opportunity to prepare for

“an exciting, professional and future-oriented career in the information industry ... Employment opportunities in the information industry are growing as the world becomes increasingly information oriented. This is shown in the enormous growth in the quantity of information, the transition from paper to electronic media, the rapid expansion of electronic information networks, and the global flow of information. The BA in Communication (Information) is a broad-based degree which allows you to develop a portfolio of skills and knowledge for the information industry. In first year, you gain a background to understanding society and culture and the role of communication and information in it, and progress in later years to questioning the information society. Key questions you will investigate in your studies are: What is information? Who should own it? Who should control it? Who should get it? Who should provide it? How can it be best accessed? How important is information in a democracy? Does information equal power? What happens when you don't have information? How do you get information? How is information technology shaping our future?”¹⁴

The degree offers two study strands:

1. A disciplinary strand in information and communication which provides the theoretical foundations of information work
2. a professional strand which provides opportunities to apply knowledge to practice and to further develop technical skills.

Subjects in the course include: information in society, information needs and uses, information resources, knowledge organisation and access, organising and retrieving information, information services management, information and the organisation, internet and electronic information networking, creating user documentation, research methods and data analysis, information society and

policy. Electives include public relations, design/production/publishing, journalism, writing and new media, information design, creating user documentation, and information technology.

A specialisation in government information has the same core as librarianship plus subjects from the information technology strand and subjects from the social inquiry and change strand such as politics and the policy process, inequality and power.

These interrelated programs offer many exciting opportunities for careers in a variety of fields, opportunities which are enthusiastically taken by students. Graduate employment is very high and starting salaries above average but few find employment in traditional libraries.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The socioeconomic developments and trends described above place libraries in the spotlight as many of the issues centre around our business: information and knowledge. Not only do they concern the matters usually discussed in the context of the knowledge economy, mentioned above, but also the key questions of who, where, when and how? In the context of university and research libraries:

- Who are (will be) the students?
- Where will they learn?
- When and how?
- Will they have the skills to learn effectively in a networked environment?
- To what extent are those skills, the generic ‘information skills’ crucial to our students’ futures, not only skills necessary to learn in an online world?

Of course, it is a truism to note that university libraries have evolved considerably from the wonderful Aladdin’s caves of bibliographic treasures, typified by the Bodleian and many others to the information access services of today. Many have speculated about the creation of ‘virtual’ university libraries and some have reported on their initiatives such as Schmidt’s description of the ‘Cybrary’ at the University of Queensland¹⁵. But we do not need a new name: the university library is still the place to go to get information to support study, teaching and research. Many of the processes and some of the functions have changed, but the purpose of university libraries remains. The ‘place’ that our clients visit is no longer only, or even primarily, the edifice comprising a box of books, study areas and services. Yale’s telling inscription “This is not the Library, the Library is within” has acquired new resonance: “This is not the Library, the Library is with you”. The information and knowledge that our clients use is no longer primarily found on paper. Our clients, however, still come to us to find information and knowledge: we continue to facilitate and mediate their access.

The traditional role of university libraries as the *holders* of scholarly information has diminished. In many fields, but not all, it is no longer necessary for students and researchers to travel physically to specific libraries which hold the resources necessary for their investigations. They can point and click to access remotely but this does not mean that the library has lost its importance. Far from it, the library is needed to bring together the services and make them available, with assistance, to clients while ensuring that support and advice are provided, and more mundanely that licences are respected and invoices paid. It is needed to ensure relevance and appropriateness of information resources to facilitate the achievement of each university’s particular goals.

THE CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY LIBRARIES

University libraries today face many challenges for which we would expect our staff to be prepared. These challenges are no unique to university libraries but are shared with many other organisations, both commercial and civil. In this period of flux, there is much uncertainty. Both university libraries

and our partners in publishing, database development, distribution and communication have many issues to including:

- **Electronic information** - The challenges are far from trivial. The questions of access, licensing, costs, and preservation have exercised our minds within our own institutions, through consortia and internationally. Not least among these is the creation of appropriate information architectures. In this we move from our longstanding expertise in creating buildings for information related purposes to architecture in the sense of creating information structures which will store and make appropriately accessible digital information. Behind these immediate issues are our traditional concerns with preservation and archiving.
- **Information literacy** - The efficient and effective provision of comprehensive and up to date information skills training is this vital for effective use of the modern academic library and as an essential element of the attributes expected of the graduates of our universities.
- **Pedagogical change** - University libraries are now being recognised as ever more integral to learning and research within higher education. Through that recognition, we can play an essential role in the refocusing of universities towards flexible, open and career long learning. Pedagogical development demands continuing dialogue between teachers and librarians with emphases on client autonomy, information skills and the attributes of graduates through continual innovation. Through such conversations, librarians are engaging with the core of higher education and the necessary emphasis on quality.
- **Research** - Libraries have extended into the laboratory and out to the field providing access to scholarly information and relevant data in situ. In this respect many of the challenges can be summarised in Ranganathan's dictum "save the user's time". But, as mentioned above, we must also assist researchers and particularly research students, the researchers in training, to develop their skills in acquiring and using information.
- **Intellectual property** - We need to be concerned about the intellectual property issues related to the so called "Crisis in Scholarly Communication", the ownership and use of copyright material in our universities, and the implications of the trend towards licensing. Wider societal issues include the consideration of the moral rights of creators and the particular positions of indigenous peoples.
- **Technological convergence** - Mentioned above, it is exacerbating many of these issues. The consequence has been nervousness and the resultant paralysis of many publishers and media distributors as they fear losing control of their content in a digital environment.
- **Intellectual freedom** - Similar fears of loss of control underlie the recent preoccupation with the control of 'offensive' content on the Internet, a preoccupation that has significantly plagued some countries. It has raised the serpent of censorship, which had been somewhat dormant in civilized nations.
- **Infrastructure** - University librarians must also guide the implementation of increasingly integrated information resource access systems and the consequent adoption of knowledge management. There are a host of issues to be addressed in regard to the provision of adequate and accessible bandwidth to enable our students to learn. In developing nations there is a need for basic infrastructure: buildings and well stocked collections managed and supported by well trained staff.
- **Collaboration** - Many of the solutions to these challenges lie in collaboration. The development of consortia, often from pre-existing cooperative groups, has improved our bargaining position and brought some consistency to the market place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICE EDUCATION

The particular challenges faced by university libraries must be seen in the context of the many external influences, including globalisation, multilingual and multicultural challenges, media

developments and eWorld opportunities. However, the traditional emphases on ethics, professionalism and objectivity, and on cooperation and collaboration remain crucial as does our responsibility to think globally, endeavouring to address the implications for those in both developed and developing nations.

These considerations suggest that our professional education and training, both initial and continuing, should address such issues as:

- Socioeconomic context
- Knowledge economy
- Modes of publication, including diversification of media, scholarly information etc
- Networked electronic information
- Intellectual property
- Pedagogy – both understanding how people learn and developing teaching skills
- Information literacy
- Technological proficiency
- Ethics and intellectual freedom
- Collaboration

Such issues have been canvassed by others¹⁶ and, as indicated above, introduced into some programs. Rather different from the traditional expectations, emphasising these aspects will prepare our colleagues and successors to work in the twenty-first century. They illustrate a significant move away from the reductive focus on competencies to an aspiration to develop the noble profession of librarianship as an open and flexible profession which will be able to respond wholeheartedly and effectively to the challenges of open and changing societies.

Australian Library and Information Association

Recognised courses in library and information studies 2000

A. Librarianship courses

1. University of Canberra, Division of Communication and Education
2. Charles Sturt University, School of Information Studies
3. The University of New South Wales, School of Information Systems, Technology and Management, Faculty of Commerce and Economics
4. University of Technology, Sydney, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
5. Northern Territory University, Faculty of Business
6. Queensland University of Technology (Gardens Point), School of Information Systems
7. Queensland University of Technology (Kelvin Grove), School of Language and Literacy Education
8. University of South Australia, School of Communication and Information Studies
9. Monash University, School of Information Management and Systems
10. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, School of Business Information Technology
11. Curtin University of Technology, Department of Information Studies
12. Edith Cowan University, School of Computer and Information Science

B. Library technician courses

The Diploma course in Library and Information Studies is a new level of course introduced in 1996/97 and is based on the National Curriculum for Library and Information Studies:

1. Canberra Institute of Technology, Department of Computing and Information Management
2. TAFE New South Wales
3. Northern Territory University, Faculty of Business
4. TAFE Queensland, Southbank Institute of TAFE
5. Adelaide Institute of TAFE, Department of Employment, Education and Training, South Australia, Library Studies Unit
6. Technical and Further Education, Tasmania
7. Box Hill Institute of TAFE, Information and Library Studies, Centre for Information Technologies
8. Swinburne University of Technology (Prahran Campus), Library Studies Program, Department of Administration and Office Technology
9. University of Ballarat - TAFE Division
10. Victoria University of Technology - TAFE Division, Department of Library Studies
11. Central Metropolitan College of TAFE (Perth Campus), Western Australian School of Management and Business, Centre for Information Studies
12. Edith Cowan University, School of Computer and Information Science
(<http://www.alia.org.au/publications/courses/technician.html>)

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