Aligning policy with practice: An evaluation of vocational education and training in the library and information services sector

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Abstract

Vocational education and training for the library and information services (LIS) sector in Australia offers students the career pathway to become library technicians. Library technicians play a valuable role in drawing on sound practical knowledge and skills to support the delivery of library and information services that meet client needs. Over the past forty years, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has monitored the quality of library technician courses. Since 2005, ALIA has run national professional development days for library technician educators with the goal of establishing an alternative model for course recognition focusing on the process of peer review to benchmark good practice and stimulate continuous improvement in library technician education. This initial developmental work has culminated in 2009 with site visits to all library technician courses in Australia. The paper presents a whole-of-industry case study to critically review the work undertaken to date

Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has a keen interest in the quality of the education programs offered at both the professional and paraprofessional levels to develop library and information services (LIS) personnel. Within the vocational education and training (VET) context, the direct involvement of the LIS sector in the development of the Museums and Library and Information Services Training Package (1999)resulted in significant changes that were necessary to address industry concerns about the quality and relevance of the curriculum for library technicians. While the *Australian Quality Teaching Framework (AQTF)* (2007) has subsequently introduced a strong quality assurance dimension within vocational education, ALIA has remained concerned that there should still be appropriate professional scrutiny of the programs, yet without unnecessary duplication of effort or expense.

ALIA acts as the standards body for the library and information profession in Australia, supported by a series of education policies: *Library and information sector: Core knowledge, skills and attributes* (ALIA, 2005a), *Courses in library and information management* (ALIA, 2005b) and *ALIA's role in education of library and information professionals* (ALIA, 2005c) These various policies underpin the philosophies and values of Australian library education, and record the Association's commitment to an ongoing engagement with the administration of both professional and paraprofessional education. ALIA acts as the standards body for the library and information profession, which includes responsibility for the recognition of LIS courses leading to a library and information studies qualification. The recognised courses can be offered at professional (Bachelor) level by universities, or at paraprofessional (Diploma) level by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), with the latter consisting principally of colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). The course recognition process for the Diploma course is directly linked to the categories of membership of the Association, with library technicians eligible to join the association as members at the paraprofessional level. In the VET sector, course recognition has two goals: to ensure that the vocational institutions and their units, schools, or programs meet appropriate standards of quality and integrity, and to maintain the

quality of education these institutions offer to ensure that students and graduates meet the workforce needs of the sector.

ALIA course recognition aims to foster excellence in the provision of education for the Australian library and information services sector and to ensure that all students undertaking a course experience a quality program, with an appropriate curriculum delivered effectively and supported by the required resources. Courses at library technician level should aim to produce graduates with sound practical information knowledge and skills which enable them to support effectively the delivery of library and information services that meet client information needs and assist them to become information literate.

In recent years ALIA has run national professional development days for library technician educators to explore the opportunities for introducing a model for course recognition which focuses on the process of peer review to benchmark good practice and stimulate continuous improvement in library technician education. This developmental work has culminated in 2009 with site visits to all library technician courses in Australia. These evaluative activities seek to actualize the Association's paraprofessional education policies within the context of contemporary pedagogies, using strategies that encourage collaboration amongst the diverse stakeholders.

Historical review of formal recognition of library technician courses

Discussions regarding the need for formal library technician training took place throughout the 1960s, and the first course for library technicians was established at Box Hill Girls' Technical College (Victoria) in 1970. This course was developed in response to the changing dynamics of the workforce and a shortage of professional librarians (conditions that are echoed in Australia today), with a curriculum that focused on, practical vocational skills as opposed to the more theoretical knowledge covered in librarianship courses. Victoria was the focus of early development and within several years courses had also been established at Prahran and Footscray Technical Colleges, before spreading to other states in the mid 1970s.

These early Victorian courses were managed by the Library Courses (Vocational) Standing Committee reporting to the State Council for Technical Education (Pivec, 1975), and courses in other states were developed and managed by similar authorities. There was concern, however, that the separate development of courses within each state would result in inconsistencies in terms of their curriculum and quality. As Edward Flowers noted, by the mid 1970s:

> *Concern was being felt at the undesirable divergences which had developed between library technician courses established in different states, divergences which made it difficult to secure reciprocal acceptance of library technician qualifications between the states, so impeding library technician mobility, and the achievement of satisfactory Australia-wide salary scales and working conditions.*
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> (Flowers, 1979, p.371)

Pressure began to build for the then Library Association of Australia (LAA) to take a role in these courses, largely with a view to ensuring a degree of standardisation between states. In a 1975 overview of the early developments in technicians' education Catherine Pivec expressed a hope that the LAA would "…produce for the first time guidelines for standards for courses etc, leading to possible accreditation of courses Australia-wide, so that parity of qualifications interstate will be achieved (Pivec, 1975, p.53).

It was with a view to achieving some standardisation between courses that the Library Courses (Vocational) Standing Committee convened a national workshop in Melbourne in 1976. An outcome of this meeting was the preparation of the *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* (Library Courses, 1976), a first attempt at ensuring a basic degree of consistency between the various courses. It was also suggested at this meeting that "…recognition of courses could be undertaken by the Library Association of Australia, using procedures similar to those already adopted for professional courses" (Ramsay, 1978, p. 137).

Subsequently the Association's Board of Education developed criteria for the recognition of technicians' courses based on recommendations from the 1976 workshop, and in 1977 the Association formalised its *Statement on the Recognition of Library Technician Courses*. The *Statement* was primarily concerned with the 'tasks' for which technician graduates should be prepared by their education rather than attempting to impose a detailed or standardised curriculum. The institutions offering courses for library technicians were subsequently invited to seek recognition of their courses, with Radford noting that "the goal is to persuade employers to appoint as library technicians only those who have completed a course recognised by the Association" (Radford, 1978, p.105). Formal recognition was commenced in 1978, and in the same year the LAA established a category of membership for library technicians.

Over time, Australia has seen up to 18 library technician courses provide vocational education programs. Significant changes were made in the area of education for library technicians and library assistants in 1999, with the development of the new national Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package. The agency responsible for the formulation of the Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package was Cultural Research Education and Training Enterprises Australia (CREATE), supported by considerable industry consultation. In 2004, advice on training for the cultural sector was transferred to Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) as the relevant industry skills council. As the peak industry body, ALIA has significant input into the design and development of both the original and the revised versions of the training package (ALIA, 2006).

Current issues impacting on course accreditation of paraprofessional LIS programs

Since 2006, through a program of professional development (PD) days, members of the ALIA education policy committees have met with library technician educators from all States and Territories. These meetings have provided an important forum for technician educators to discuss issues of mutual concern and to share ideas and expertise. They have also allowed the ALIA representatives to discuss with educators the concept of quality teaching and to explore the way forward in terms of the Associations involvement in course recognition. In particular it was

hoped that this would facilitate the establishment of an active community of practice that could potentially enhance the quality of library technician education across the country. At the 2008 meeting, the participants worked to develop meaningful and relevant course recognition criteria for library technician courses. While the specifics of the course recognition process are available on the ALIA website (ALIA, 2008), the overarching criteria currently encompass:

- Course design
- Curriculum content
- Assessment
- Staffing
- Resourcing
- Quality assurance mechanisms
- Infrastructure.

A site visit by a panel of educators, employers and ALIA representatives is included in the course recognition activities.

In 2007, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) released a revision of the Australian Quality Training Framework, known as AQTF 2007, as a national set of standards to assure "nationally consistent, high quality training and assessment services for clients of Australia's vocational education and training system" (AQTF, 2007, p.1). The AQTF comprises three components:

- The Essential Standards for Registration
- Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies
- Excellence Criteria.

AQTF documentation states that the beneficiaries of AQTF 2007 would include both individual learners and, in the wider sense, industry stakeholders, as well as the RTOs themselves and the State-based registering bodies. It is argued that learners will "have equitable access to quality

training and assessment services tailored to their needs and the learning outcomes they seek", while industry, which would include ALIA and employers, will "have confidence that RTOs are delivering training and assessment services that achieve the skill requirements of nationally recognized qualifications developed by industry" (AQTF, 2007, p.2). Further advice was received in early 2008 indicating that additional quality assurance processe—National Quality Indicators—were to be introduced in the vocational education arena. These National Quality Indicators have the goal of measuring the quality of:

- Learner engagement
- Employer satisfaction
- Competency completion.

It should be noted that these developments inevitably placed a degree of uncertainty on the ALIA course recognition process, as it becomes potentially redundant in an environment that is closely managed by national and state education authorities. In particular the curriculum content is determined by the competency standards of the National Training Package, and the quality assurance process currently being developed within the AQTF 2007 framework monitors the issues of staffing, resourcing, infrastructure and quality assurance mechanisms. Despite the potential for duplication ALIA remains committed to playing an active role in monitoring the education environment. It is the Association's belief that it is the industry/professional body which is best placed to understand the changing needs and circumstances of the LIS workforce, and that it has an obligation to the wider LIS profession to ensure that technician education is appropriately targeted, responsive and delivered.

Over the past couple of years, therefore, ALIA has sought to work closely with library technician educators to better understand the processes and activities that are mandatory to them as part of the AQTF 2007 framework. ALIA seeks to ensure that the course recognition processes not only avoid unnecessary duplication of effort, but also legitimately meet the fundamental goal "to foster excellence in the provision of education for the Australian library and information services sector and to ensure that all students undertaking a course experience a

quality program, with an appropriate curriculum delivered effectively and supported by the required resources" (ALIA, 2008). The educators' PD days sought to add an industry perspective on the quality assurance processes required by the AQTF; to build on the desired community of practice which could add strength and engagement to paraprofessional education in the Australian library sector; and to prepare educators for the program of site visits in 2009. Site visits were a long-established part of the course recognition process, and it was ALIA's belief that although expensive, they added an important element of personal engagement and scrutiny that could not be achieved by other mechanisms. Indeed in an environment which now involves multiple levels of secondary accountability, the Association believes that site visits by a panel of LIS professionals is a unique and increasingly important component of what ALIA delivers in terms of education management.

The ALIA course recognition process

The 2008 meeting of library technician educators focused specifically on the content and structure of the course recognition questionnaire and the program of site visits scheduled for 2009. This forum provided an opportunity for the educators to work collaboratively and discuss strategies to help implement a uniform course recognition process whilst considering the diversity across the different institutions. Several issues were highlighted, specifically those associated with the importance of ALIA maintaining the quality of standards for the industry. Participants reviewed the content and structure of the course recognition questionnaire, which included:

- The ALIA criteria for course recognition
- The content and structure of the course recognition questionnaire
- The program for site visits
- Mutual expectations for the visit (educators and the visiting panel).

The 2009 Library Technician Educators' PD meeting will provide an opportunity to share and discuss some of the outstanding work undertaken in this sector with the goal of encouraging continuous improvement across the domain of library education.

The course recognition visits commenced in February 2009 and will be completed in June 2009. There are three members of the course recognition panel. The Chair of the course recognition visit is a member of ALIA's Education and Professional Development Standing Committee and a leading LIS educator .The Chair's role is to preside over the panel ensuring that it completes assessment of the course content according to the ALIA policy on the core knowledge, skills and attributes. The second panel member is a local practitioner and brings a great deal of experience, knowledge and local understanding of the immediate library technician community. The third panel member is the ALIA Education Manager who provides executive support and seeks to ensure alignment between educational policy and practice. As a lead up to the course recognition site visits and to streamline the process for the key stakeholders, ALIA organised a range of activities and events:

- A series of teleconferences: to enable library technician educators to pose questions for ALIA and the panel members relating to the course recognition process.
- A Library technician educators' wiki: to assist in streamlining communication between ALIA and library technician educators. It is a space to share issues, concerns and resources.
- A monthly library technician educators' bulletin: to provide answers to frequently asked questions and to provide a channel of open communication about the course recognition process.

At this stage of the course recognition process, the panel has visited ten out of fourteen institutions. To date it has been a valuable learning process for all involved, including the staff of ALIA, library technician educators, the panel members and other participants involved in the visit. The visit involves the panel meeting with industry representatives, employers, students/graduates, teaching staff and Head of School/Campus Manager. Each site visit results in an evaluative report with key recommendations for each institution, with a comprehensive report

on 'the state of the nation' to be released in October 2009. The panel has initiated is own quality assurance mechanisms, with all course coordinators and local panel members invited to compete an online survey about the effectiveness and value of the course recognition processes. Heads of School and Campus Managers will also be invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The data will be collated, to augment the final national report on library technician education in Australia.

ALIA's aim is to work more openly and more collaboratively with all key stakeholders in the course recognition process. The issues and challenges to be discussed at a national level are likely to encompass:

- The amount of time and human resources it takes to prepare for the course recognition visit (on the part of the educators, the Association and the panel members)
- Communication with students/graduates to encourage them to participate in the course recognition visit
- Strategies to formally engage the educators and the Association with the industry employers
- The relevancy and currency of the National Training Package to articulate the current and emerging industry needs

It has been acknowledged that the process is unique as, to date, no other Association has embarked on a whole of sector approach to the quality of education in the VET sector. ALIA has begun to meet with related information Associations to discuss the issues inherent in course recognition/accreditation. Partnerships between these information associations have the potential to lead towards the development of best practice in course evaluation.

Conclusion

The course recognition process in the LIS sector seeks to align ALIA's education policies with actual practice in vocational education. Traditionally, through the course recognition process, ALIA has sought to "work collaboratively with educators and training providers, employers and practitioners to promote the development and continuous improvement of courses in library and information management" (ALIA 2005b). Beyond this, ALIA has been working directly with library technician educators since 2006 to encourage peer review of teaching practice and to consider the impact of current and emerging industry trends on the Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package.

The work on the peer review element of the course recognition is ongoing. To date it has been easier to make headway in restructuring other elements of course recognition, including the reporting requirements and site visits. The current ALIA Education and Workplace Learning Standing Committee is, however, convinced that peer assessment — requiring technician educators to work collaboratively in developing and applying particular elements of accountability — will help to ensure the spread of best practice throughout the sector. It is also a form of quality assurance not being undertaken by other bodies and one which the Association is particularly well placed to implement.

There has been a danger that the idea of course recognition *per s*e might be regarded by some technician educators as a negative process, with the professional association wielding the 'big stick', rather than inviting educators to consider the role they can play in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and thereby strengthening the LIS industry. It is a further benefit of the site visits that they provide the Association—through its visiting panel—to assure educators that course recognition is designed to be a positive and supportive exercise. ALIA's goal is to encourage industry to increase their interest in matters of education, to open the dialogue and to build valuable partnerships between educators and practitioners, and to ensure that the LIS sector has a workforce with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will ensure a strong and enduring future.

This paper has provided a historical view of formal recognition of library technician courses, considered the issues impacting on course recognition of paraprofessional LIS programs and presented a case study of the current ALIA course recognition process. It is hoped that this whole of industry approach will result in a deeper understanding of good practice that library technician educators can effectively draw on to support and further develop their programs. This unique opportunity will enable library technician educators to benchmark their activities against those of other institutions, to reflect on their programs, to share resources, to develop partnerships and to form new and exciting groups which will not only stimulate innovative education programs but also sustain the future of the industry.

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