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A degree of uniqueness; the future LIS graduate

Abstract

This paper reveals the research and renewal undertaken by the School of Information Studies (SIS) at Charles Sturt University (CSU) during 2008 and 2009 in researching the future of professional Library and Information Studies (LIS) education in Australia. That research included a think tank, focus groups in five cities, surveys, statistical evaluation, and detailed input from leaders of the profession in Australia and overseas. As a result, a program of Curriculum Renewal, covering all courses offered by the School, began in late 2008. The program's initial phase comprised the restructuring of the curriculum in the first half of 2009 and the necessary content development during the second half of 2009 for planned new offerings in 2010. Planned offerings in 2010 include new specialisations in librarianship, information and knowledge management, and records and archives management.

As well as initiatives in developing new specialisations, inspiring the new curriculum there is a vision of the kind of person the future CSU LIS graduate will be. They will have practical experience, be citizens with a sense of responsibility to society, be reflective about the sustainability and ethics of their actions, have a respect for people from all cultures including indigenous Australians, and will have gained an international perspective on their learning.

This paper concludes that the future of LIS education will be led by CSU in its new, unique and broad approach to educating the future LIS professional.

The future now

Schools of Library and Information Studies (LIS) today operate within the context of a highly mobile and dynamic information environment. Data is being gathered at unprecedented levels – it has been estimated that the amount of information created, captured and replicated in 2007 was 281 exabytes (or 281 billion gigabytes), with over 100 million Youtube users alone creating more data than all of the world's medical imaging activities. (Brodkin, 2008)

While much of this data may be transient and of interest to few beyond its creator, a significant proportion does provide benefits to increasing understanding in the largest imaginable range of situations, providing the building blocks for developing the world's knowledge base.

The need to organise this data into information and then to manage that information so that people can successfully access it, over time and distance, is a priority, supported by governments around the world. The concept of the digital or knowledge economy, creating the foundation for a country's future prosperity, is seen as the key element in building strong and vibrant economies.

In support of this broad and global aim, the School of Information Studies (SIS) at Charles Sturt University (CSU) exists to ensure that graduates of its programs have the ability to provide leadership and meet the challenges posed by this new and dynamic information

environment. Graduates will understand the nature of the information life cycle – from creation, management, use and preservation; have highly developed information handling skills; possess the flexibility to adapt to this rapidly evolving environment; a strong client focus and the ability to take leadership in developing innovative solutions to the problems posed by the expanding data universe.

Their programs of study will be supported by staff engaged in a wide range of research, often in collaboration with other academic disciplines or in joint endeavours with industry. This research may take the shape of investigation of a specific issue, eg. information use and plagiarism by secondary school students, improving effectiveness of web search interfaces; or looking at broader concerns, for example legal implications related to web archiving and the impact of the internet on society.

In this environment, the School aims to develop professionals that can make a substantial contribution to achieving the aims of the knowledge economy, exploiting its potential for enriching society and empowering individuals.

The road to the future

If you are familiar with the current programs of the School of Information Studies at CSU, then you may be wondering what I am talking about. Surely SIS is renowned for its librarianship programs, and, yes, it has been a leader in some areas of information management. But how can it make a claim to be providing the information leaders of this new and dynamic information environment? How did SIS get to this point?

Information Studies at CSU

Charles Sturt University is Australia's largest provider of Distance Education (DE), with nearly 33,000 students in 2008, 62% of whom study by DE. CSU has been delivering librarianship and information studies degrees through DE since 1974. In 2009, the School of Information Studies (SIS), based on Wagga Wagga campus, comprises courses and academic staff which provide professional programs in the areas of library and information management, information architecture, audio-visual archiving and teacher-librarianship at bachelor, masters and doctoral levels. In 2010 the programs devised through a process of curriculum renewal will encompass far more.

SIS has, at present, students from every State and Territory of Australia, and there are, or have been, significant cohorts of Information Studies students studying in countries such as Hong Kong, Mauritius, and small numbers of students in places such as Singapore, Fiji, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Kenya, UAE, and USA. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are developed to the point where distance is no longer a barrier to delivering successful education programs to anyone in the world. Some students begin their programs at home in Australia, and even if they decide to move overseas they can readily continue their studies. At present there are Australian students of SIS who reside in, and continue studying from, the UK, Canada, USA, Germany, Scandinavia, UAE and New Zealand.

Following a university-wide Faculty restructure in 2006, the SIS moved to the Faculty of Education, and became the only stand-alone LIS school in Australia. SIS is the only school in the University to teach exclusively by distance. Its academic programs currently focus

heavily on two main fields: Library and Information Management (LIM), and Teacher Librarianship (TL). In both these areas it enjoys a good reputation and has strong enrolments. The School currently has 18 academic staff members and three full-time administrative staff members.

In August 2009, there are 1500 students in CSU's LIM and T-L programs.

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| Undergraduate LIM | 570 |
| Grad. Dip. / Masters LIM | 490 |
| Teacher-Librarianship | 440 |

The existing LIM curriculum continues to attract strong support from all sectors of the library world and also attracts a high percentage of students who enrol for purposes other than to receive a 'library' qualification. The T-L courses already supply a substantial niche market and there would seem to be less need than the 'traditional' LIM courses to diversify to maintain numbers. A Master of Information Architecture has been additional to the existing traditional LIM courses and was a response to the changing demands of the profession.

And changing demands is why I am really here - to talk to you about the new 'unique' undergraduate degree which will be available from the SIS at CSU from 2010, and how we came to develop and offer it. But first, I would like to answer the question: is there a future for the undergraduate degree in information studies in Australia? I am happy to say that there is!

Undergraduate education for the Information Professions

Since the late 1960s, undergraduate professional LIS qualifications have been recognised by ALIA. During the past decade, several schools or departments teaching LIS in Australia have closed their undergraduate LIS programs because of falling demand for their offering. Similarly, Bachelor programs in LIS in the UK, which were introduced widely and successfully in the 1960s, have, with a couple of exceptions, either closed or been developed into information programs with a minority of LIS curriculum. Is there still a future for undergraduate librarianship in either country?

The answer is that in the UK there seems no future for undergraduate studies in LIM. Through a survey of, and discussions with, the coordinators of undergraduate programs at five UK schools of information studies, it became clear that once successful undergraduate programs could no longer attract viable cohorts, and that 'generalist' librarians educated at undergraduate level in LIS have limited job opportunities (although there is still some requirement for them in public and school libraries). In the UK most employers recruit at Masters level.

As for Australia, however, part of the answer is found in the following quotation from the abstract of a paper published in 2008, and based on a 2007 survey of all types of library.

In the context of some recent calls for adopting a purely postgraduate level of entry to the profession, the overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey clearly believe that the education provided in LIS programs in Australia does equip graduates with the attributes required of professional librarians in their organisation, and that this does not depend on the level of the qualification. Some further discussion of graduate attributes and curriculum

issues indicates that there is a need for some reform of LIS education in Australia, and the need to build the number of graduates available as the profession seeks to renew itself. (Sanders, 2008, p. 102)

The role of the undergraduate degree in Australia differs markedly from the role of UG degrees in the UK. In particular, the place of the Library Technician as paraprofessional in Australian libraries is embedded to the extent that it can be seen as a position to which many aspire, in which many develop further, and beyond which many wish to move. Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force data from the 2006 Census shows there were 10,085 librarians, and 6,510 library technicians in Australia (Australian Library and Information Association, 2007b), so the Library Technician position plays a significant role in the provision of library services. Indeed, as one Library Technician educator noted: *'it would appear that we now have a continuum of incremental stages leading to a professional qualification so that the library technician would appear to be in effect a 'low level' librarian.'* (Carroll, 2002)

The Library Technician, as paraprofessional in Australia, holds a 2 year Diploma in Library and Information Services, and, as defined on the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) website, will usually work under the supervision of a librarian, and have a strong focus and vital role in customer service. Typical tasks may include

- *focussing on operational and technical aspects of library and information:*
 - *assist with loan and reference queries at the counter and by phone*
 - *assist with internet and online database searches*
 - *maintain library resources, records and systems*
 - *enter and edit data into computerised databases*
 - *operate photocopier*
 - *arrange inter-library loans*
 - *develop and present promotional programs, including displays and library tours*
 - *undertake copy cataloguing and classification*
- *at a senior level - supervise other library or clerical staff; manage a small library or information service or head a section in a large library or information*

(Australian Library and Information Association, 2007a)

A 2007 survey of Course Coordinators of undergraduate LIS programs indicates that senior academics believe that education provided in Bachelor programs equips graduates with the attributes required of professional librarians, particularly those students returning to education, for example, paraprofessionals and mature students. As one coordinator stated:

I think this concern [about the level of professional entry] is based on a desire by librarians to ape other professions which have graduate only entry rather than on the merits of the arguments. It is perhaps also based on the idea that a librarian has to be a subject specialist in the area that they provide services in, which has some merit for the employment of some staff in university or research libraries, but is not generally a necessity. It also assumes that the undergraduate programs are preparing students only to become librarians, which is manifestly not the case. Other information related areas of employment do not have these status concerns. In general, I would say that our undergraduates are more flexible and adaptable, go into a much wider range of information related positions and more readily acquire new information skills than many (but not all) of our postgraduates.

In determining the future of undergraduate education in Australia, it is therefore important not to follow slavishly the lessons of other countries, but rather to study the environment in which our graduates will seek employment and discover what the graduates can offer to the profession in this country. This is supported internationally in a recent article which seeks to explore significant changes in LIS education in the UK, where it is noted that the role of the information professional is determined by the needs of the people they serve and of the environment in which they operate. (Um and Feather, 2007, p. 261).

Many undergraduate LIS-related degree programs in the UK and Australia which remain successful include those which have combined with other subject areas, such as communication, publishing, media studies, digital media, English; those which are offered in part-time or distance modes of delivery; and those which have retained their specialist LIS staff. UG programs in the UK which are still recognised by the professional body, CILIP, but which include very little traditional LIS curriculum, typically combine information management with business or computing studies. This may well be the future for LIS undergraduate education in Australia as well.

Background to decision to review SIS programs at CSU

In 2007, when the SIS became part of the Faculty of Education, the Dean of the Faculty was requiring all of the Faculty's academic units to undertake reviews of their purpose and activity, especially in relation to national and international priorities and trends, the University's commitment mission, and the needs of the profession and community. Information Studies was to be no exception, and thus began the research and renewal undertaken by SIS during 2008 and 2009 in researching the future of professional LIS education in Australia.

Researching the discipline in 2008

Some aims of the review were to revitalise the curriculum, research and address relevant change factors, examine what competitors are doing, and to move beyond the current, narrow focus of our programs. The research encompassed:

- a three-day 'Think Tank' and Strategic Planning Workshop in February, which included prominent external participants from the fields of Library and Information Studies and Information Management;
- reports from the ALIA Education and Workforce Summit in March;
- reports from the Education for Information forums, sponsored by the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management at the University of New South Wales.
- five focus groups, held in four Australian capital cities in May;
- surveys of libraries;
- statistical evaluation;
- the reports of three SIS working parties on curriculum, research, and sustainability & development.

Reports from all the above were then provided to an Information Studies Discipline Review Committee (ISDRC), appointed by the Dean of the Faculty of Education and consisting of the

Dean, senior academics from the Faculty, an external senior academic, and the Chairs of the three internal working parties.

External Advice

Outcomes from the **Think Tank** of experts in the industry are very difficult to summarise, as the nature of the 3 days included a great deal of brainstorming and ideas generation, without the aim of forming specific policies or directions as a result. However, the main pointers for curriculum development were the need for universities to lose their silo mentality, take a broader perspective on information education, present a diverse range of information specialisations with a common core, and improve their image and marketing. Employers want graduates who understand the value of information to their organisation, and who have the technical and people skills to serve the diverse needs of a wide range of people in a wide range of information situations. Specific issues raised include the increasing inter-generational divide, rapid growth of user-generated content, user demands for instant gratification, and increasing needs for fast, accurate and reliable information from all information services.

More readily summarised are the outcomes of the **Focus Groups**. The proliferation of information, tools and technologies can create a high degree of uncertainty in users about what is 'valid' information, and what are 'useful' tools. There is a greater need for understanding information seeking behaviours, and of what is needed to support them. In the workplace in particular, younger people tend to be sophisticated users, and tend not to seek help, especially in the corporate work-force, and have high expectations of what is available. On the other hand, in most information services, a high percentage of users do not know what they want, or how to get it.

In terms of professional practice, the focus groups identified a need for business understanding and the ability to define the value of what the librarian, or information professional, contributes. The management of IT needs, physical spaces and physical collections are still major functions in most sectors (other than corporate). Many new tools are being used and considered important in the emerging workplace, including software tools which utilise metadata, and social networking and collaborative work tools. And personal skills and abilities are a growing requirement of employers, who see the future graduate as needing a core understanding of the information universe (e.g. societal information issues, building social capital, the information life-cycle), of business skills (analysis, advocacy, decision-making, budgeting), of skills in working with clients (e.g. cross-cultural understanding, customer service, networking), of information management (e.g. cataloguing, collection management, databases knowledge, metadata and classifications, working with digital repositories, etc.), and the ability to understand, manage and support research.

Final Decisions

The ISDRC produced an overall final report, with detailed appendices covering all of the input. That Report then was provided to a selected group of leaders of the profession (practitioners and academics) from Australia, Hong Kong, USA and Canada. As a result of this exhaustive research and discussion, SIS received a number of clear and actionable recommendations, and in 2009 has prepared a new strategic plan and begun to implement most of the recommendations. Above all, it is being guided by a new mission statement.

New Mission

To deliver information and knowledge related academic programs and research to the professions;

to develop innovative thinkers who have the skills, knowledge and confidence to contribute to national well being;

to provide graduates who are highly skilled and adaptive information and knowledge professionals;

to produce research that is internationally recognised;

to lead information education in the provision of flexible learning and teaching.

Curriculum renewal

Most pertinent to this discussion is restructuring of the curriculum in the first half of 2009 and the necessary content development for planned new offerings in 2010. In particular, the new undergraduate degree, a Bachelor of Information Studies, will contain the option for students to undertake a wide range of electives, or to concentrate their electives choices into the following specialisations:

- **Librarianship**
- **Information and Knowledge Management**
- **Records and Archives**

As an example, the Information and Knowledge Management specialisation will include subjects like Advanced Information Retrieval, Introduction to Information Architecture, Web Interface Usability, Web Design and Publishing, Knowledge Management Systems, Creating Digital Content, Value Added Information Services, Information Technology for Information/ Knowledge Management, and Project Management.

Of interest to Library Technicians is that they will receive exemption from one-third of the degree. In re-designing the curriculum, considerable note was taken of the TAFE Diploma of LIS curriculum, to ensure that its graduates could be exempted from content which they have already studied.

All of the input from our research and discussions with the information professions indicates that the subjects we will be teaching will fulfil their needs. Above all, it stresses the need for information studies graduates to be more broadly information educated, and that employers will be pursuing graduates with a wider range of skills and abilities. There is recognition in the information industry that attributes held by business, IT and education graduates are in some demand in the LIM and broader information fields. For example university libraries are increasingly needing to recruit professionals with skills other than librarianship, including IT skills, web design and business analysis, teaching/education qualifications; public libraries mention skill shortages as diverse as service delivery to children, information evaluation, systems management, stronger skills in IT, supervision and management, finance and marketing. The new curriculum delivers almost all of these.

A recent survey of job advertisements listed the new skills being sought by employers as including web design and maintenance, and e-resources, along with an increase in the importance of interpersonal skills, behavioural skills, client services and management skills. (Kennan, Willard & Wilson, 2006) A more recent, unpublished study by a CSU SIS

academic found many positions requiring the skills to develop and adapt social networking technology, develop community relationships, manage projects, and create and deliver digital information.

Further, research into the future staffing needs of Australian libraries in 2007 indicates that this seems to be a transition time for the profession in terms of the size, growth and retention of staff, with one of the main issues raised regarding future demand for professional librarians being the attraction of good graduates to other than library careers. (Sanders, 2008)

New structure

In 2010, SIS will introduce its new degree (it is also proposed to introduce a BIS Honours degree in 2011), with its present largely library-orientated subjects supplemented by the broader information and knowledge management subjects demanded by the marketplace. A major factor in enabling this extra curriculum content has been the decision to remove from the undergraduate degree the necessity to undertake a major study in an area other than information studies (i.e. for those who have some familiarity with the CSU LIM degree, the non-library major has disappeared). This may cause some questions to be asked, because the traditional LIS degree at CSU has been modelled on a premise that the profession wanted its graduates to have a second area of subject expertise (just as Graduate Diploma students would have), but our research indicated otherwise. SIS is confident that the move will be welcomed by potential applicants and the employers awaiting them. As one university library respondent to my 2007 survey indicated:

The idea of subject expertise doesn't apply in all sectors and even in the university sector I don't know a lot of librarians who actually work in their first degree area.

Professional Experience

The new Bachelor of Information Studies will also have at its core a number of opportunities for students to gain relevant and varied professional experience. Students will each undertake a 3 week professional placement in a library or information agency, a four day group study tour to libraries and information agencies, undertake a minimum of thirty hours of professional activities (such as conference sessions, and compile a reflective and professional e-portfolio. Our focus groups indicated that in the discussion of education and training issues there is general agreement across all types of information agency that all students need workplace experience.

Leading the way

What will make the new degree particularly unique, however, stems from CSU's initiative to embark on a new set of curriculum principles which we believe will give our students the best quality education in future years. Widespread consultation within the University has generated a set of principles, which when embedded in all CSU degrees, will ensure that CSU graduates would be people who:

- have employability skills: effective communication; analytical skills and critical and reflective judgement; problem solving; team work; work planning,
- have had the opportunity for international experience,
- have been prepared for citizenship,

- are culturally competent,
- understand the culture and history of Indigenous communities,
- understand sustainability in financial, social and environmental senses
- have studied an internationalised curriculum
 - that is strong in the teaching of ethics
 - and has an enhanced clinical/practicum strand.

So, inspiring the new curriculum there is a vision of the kind of person the future CSU LIS graduate will be. They will have practical experience of the world they will graduate into, and be able to reflect upon and learn from such experience. They will be citizens with a sense of responsibility to society they live in, and reflective about the sustainability and ethics of their actions. They will have a respect for people from all cultures including indigenous Australians, and they will have gained an international perspective on their learning, through how, what, and perhaps even where, they have studied.

To give just one example of how this will be covered in the new degree, reflective judgement and employability will be both encouraged, and enhanced, in the new degree. Whether through their paid work, practicum, service-learning or academic teamwork, the acquisition of a capacity to reflect on and learn from experience is a necessary part of education for professional practice. Evidence of this capacity also demonstrates an important “employability skill”. Such evidence will be gathered in a variety of ways, including via a course-long e-portfolio.

With the recent introduction of a new learning management system, SIS is pioneering new modes of online teaching and learning, whilst continuing to strengthen its holistic approach to producing well-rounded graduates through teaching practice, support from the SIS team across both teaching and administration, and the encouragement of student engagement with professional activities (placements, conferences and workshops). Areas of innovation and quality include direct contact and engagement; team working and the fostering of learning communities; online learning; and professional engagement.

SIS is now confident that its research and curriculum renewal has set its programs in a clear and desired framework, and developed a curriculum which will deliver high quality and socially relevant information and knowledge related academic programs and research to the information professions. As per its new mission, the SIS is ready to lead the future of information education through its new, unique and broad approach to educating the future information professional.

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