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# BEYOND A DREAM: THE REAL PICTURE OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES SECTOR IN AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, the library and information services (LIS) sector in Australia has become increasingly aware that people are indeed the key drivers in the profession and that a strong future will depend on ensuring that recruitment, retention and professional development issues are clearly understood and managed. The paper discusses Stage 2 of the *neXus* research project which aims to develop our understanding of the LIS workforce.

While *neXus* Stage 1 investigated into the current LIS workforce at the individual level, with the findings discussed widely across the industry, *neXus* Stage 2 reviews and analyses workforce issues and practices at the institutional level. The project involves a survey of the policies and practices currently in place in individual institutions, focusing on the recruitment and retention of professional and paraprofessional staff, succession planning, and staff development activities. The data collection phase was undertaken in March-April 2008, with a good response from a range of libraries that represent the diversity of employers, public, academic, TAFE, school and special libraries, in both metropolitan and regional areas.

The research allows us to begin to build a real picture of workforce practices in Australian libraries. The paper itself presents the initial findings from the study and seeks to identify areas of good practice that can help the industry successfully establish a sustainable future. The project has been funded by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the consortium of National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA).

## Introduction

In recent years in Australia, as in many other Western countries, workforce planning has become an increasingly important issue for the library and information services (LIS) sector. At the *Library of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Symposium* hosted by the State Library of Victoria in March 2006, Dr Vicki Williamson challenged the LIS profession to boldly face the future: “For those of us left in the profession, collaborative research and development is the key to our future. Workforce analysis, especially around public library and academic library personnel, is needed. We also need to undertake a current workforce skills audit and plan recruitment and education strategies for the library workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Williamson, 2006). The State Library of Victoria, in conjunction with the Victorian public library network, commissioned the Workplace Research Centre to undertake an exploratory study to identify key issues that impacted on recruitment and retention of staff in the public library sector in Victoria. Full details of the research project, with recommendations for future workforce strategies for Victorian public libraries, are published in the report *Workforce sustainability and leadership: Survey, analysis and planning for Victorian public libraries* (Considine, Jakubauskas and Oliver, 2008).

Beyond the state of Victoria, however, a national industry study has been conducted. The national study adopted the working title of *neXus*, in order to focus on the fundamental belief that there was a nexus, a deep connection, or arguably a series of connections, between education, curriculum, recruitment, retention, training and development that was necessary to sustain and develop the LIS workforce in Australia. Stage 1 of the *neXus* project sought to collect data that would, as well as presenting a snapshot of the profession itself, begin to inform the profession about the issues it faced in terms of workforce planning. A major survey instrument was developed to collect the data about the demographics, educational background and career details of the LIS profession in Australia in 2006. During the course of 2007, the findings were presented to a number of industry groups, on a sectorial or geographical basis, culminating in a final report (Hallam, 2008). The present paper provides an overview of Stage 2 of the *neXus* project, which reviews and analyses workforce issues and practices at the institutional level. The paper presents a high level analysis of the study’s respondents; the conference presentation at *ALIA Dreaming08*, in Alice Springs in September 2008, will offer deeper insights into the actual research findings.

### ***neXus2*: the institutional study**

Stage 2 of the *neXus* project commenced in early 2008, following a preliminary pilot study competed with the academic library members of the CAVAL consortium. Support for *neXus2* was offered by both ALIA and the consortium of National and State Libraries of Australasia (NSLA), as well as several groups of university libraries, eg the Libraries of the Australian Technology Network (LATN), the Western Australian Group of University

Librarians (WAGUL) and Queensland University Libraries Office of Cooperation (QULOC). The goal of *neXus2* was to help the LIS sector better understand the diverse issues that impact on the recruitment and retention and the training and development of library staff. This study therefore considered the institutional or employer perspectives, rather than the individual or employee perspectives which were the focus of *neXus1*.

### **The research approach**

The research approach for *neXus2* required the active participation of library management in order to obtain data at the organisational level. While *neXus1* sought respondents via the general LIS e-lists, a more targeted approach was used in *neXus2*, with the invitation to participate distributed through coordinating agencies such as NSLA, Public Libraries Australia (PLA), the Australian Law Librarians' Association (ALLA) etc, or directly to the university librarian or chief executive officer of large libraries. An extensive online survey was made available to respondents from late March to mid April 2008, with some late submissions received at the end of April. One single response was to be submitted by each organisation that participated in the research, with the institutional data compiled by representatives of the senior management team or human resources/staff development personnel. Importantly, the project is aligned with similar international studies, allowing the data collected to be compared and contrasted with LIS workforce policy and practice across several different countries. The preparation of the current paper therefore coincides with the in-depth analysis of the research data, which will feed into a formal report to be published later in 2008.

The *neXus2* survey involved four separate questionnaires, each seeking information about organisation-specific statistics about the number and types of staff; about recruitment and retention policies and practices; about staff development activities; and about succession planning. In the invitation to participate, respondents were asked to request a Survey Identification Code as the first step. This allowed the research team to manage the different parts of the survey and correctly link each submission to the relevant institution. The survey could be printed as work sheets to collect and collate the data offline, prior to entering the data online as part of the survey submission process. Senior management of the library organisations were encouraged to use the project as an opportunity for discussion and reflection on professional issues within their own organisation. Importantly, the rich qualitative information provided in response to some of the questions is of significant value for the profession at large.

A total of 191 institutions requested the Survey Identification Code, although there were a few instances of initial duplication by staff at the same institution. While the survey was open, there was regular and open correspondence with many of the potential respondents, principally to provide some latitude with deadlines, given the complexity of the data collection. A number of people did contact the research team to indicate that the task was more demanding than they had anticipated, that there were significant reasons that restricted the opportunity to collect the data (eg library relocation; overseas travel etc), or

that the staff were already stretched and stressed, so that ultimately it was decided that the institution would not to participate in the project.

### The respondents

The final number of respondents was 101, with 82% completing all four parts of the survey. 10 respondents submitted only one questionnaire, 2 respondents submitted two questionnaires, while 7 respondents submitted three of the four parts. Of the 101 respondents, 5 of the respondents represented the National Library of Australian and 4 of the State Libraries; 22 were public libraries; 20 were university libraries; 8 were libraries in colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). There were also 34 special library respondents drawn from the legal sector (10), Federal government (10), State and Territory government (6), the health sector (7) and the corporate sector (1). In addition, there were 11 school libraries, with 2 government schools and 9 private schools responding.

The geographic representation was not fully aligned with the population base of Australia: there was a significantly higher proportion of respondents (13%) from the Australian Capital Territory, which principally reflects the number of Federal government libraries that submitted responses, located in Canberra. There was a disappointing number of responses from Tasmania (1) and the Northern Territory (3). The comparison of the distribution of respondents with the resident population figures provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is presented in Table 1.

Tab.1: Geographic distribution comparing *neXus2* respondents with ABS resident population (ABS, 2006)

State	Resident population (ABS)	<i>neXus2</i> respondents
NSW	33.1%	28.0%
Victoria	24.7%	20.0%
Queensland	19.6%	21.0%
Western Australia	9.9%	8.0%
South Australia	7.5%	6.0%
Tasmania	2.3%	1.0%
Aust. Capital Territory	1.5%	13.0%
Northern Territory	1.0%	3.0%

The distribution of responses from public libraries were predominantly in Victoria (45%) and NSW (36%), which underscored the ongoing work in the area of in workforce planning in Victorian public libraries, outlined earlier in this paper, and the strategic interest demonstrated regionally by the Public Libraries New South Wales – Metropolitan

Association (PLM). University libraries were well distributed across the States and Territories, with 50% of all Australian academic libraries submitting responses.

The size of the institutions varied to provide a good range of institutions in the responses: 19% were very large (with more than 100 full time equivalent (FTE) employees); 11% were large (51-100 FTE); 24% were medium-sized (21-50 FTE); more than third were small: 13% had 11-20 FTE, 13% 6-10 FTE and 19% 1-5 FTE. This reflects the distribution of respondents across the library sectors themselves, with special libraries and school libraries falling into the category of organisations with smaller numbers of staff, and the National, State, university and the dominant public libraries representing those with large numbers of employees.

### **The preliminary research findings**

There is a general perception in the LIS sector in Australia that the level of contract or casual work is increasing, at the expense of ongoing appointments. The highest number of temporary/contract/casual staff was reported by academic libraries and the State/National libraries, whereas it was far less common in school and special libraries. There was also more likelihood for casual or contract staff to be in the professional area, ie librarians, than the paraprofessional area, ie library technicians. Nevertheless, one university reported employing between 21 and 50 contract or casual paraprofessional staff. The organisation noted that it was an integrated information service rather than a library service as such, so that there was also a high number of non-LIS staff (more than 100), encompassing Information Technology (IT)/Systems, web design, graphic design, educational technology, human information behaviour, management and finance. Two thirds of respondent organisations reported employing IT/Systems staff, while about one quarter had web design staff. Graphic designers, educational technologists and human information behaviour staff were less common (12, 7 and 9 respectively), although interestingly these were spread across the various types of library (State, public, academic, TAFE, specials and schools).

About one quarter of respondents indicated that they had specific management, finance and marketing appointments. While a small number of libraries employed people for their specialist skills (eg research specialisations in academic libraries, archivists), it was also apparent that many libraries employed staff for their generalist skills without any specific qualifications (eg customer service, delivery, administration etc). A few comments were received to indicate that these staff were often encouraged to gain certificate or diploma level qualifications, with support from the organisation itself.

The female dominance of the library profession was acknowledged: about a quarter of respondents, primarily special and school libraries, indicated that 96%-100% of staff were female. 82% of all organisations reported the percentage of female staff being over 70%, although one university library and one TAFE library reported that the figure was more balanced, with between 51%-60% female staff. A few comments were provided by respondents to state that it was generally hard to recruit male staff, especially in regional

areas, and often the lack of mobility amongst employees limited the opportunity to attract new staff, although one organisation (public library) reported that they had found it far easier in recent years to employ male staff. The very small number of libraries with more than 50% male staff were all law libraries and non-traditional information services, each with under 10 staff in total. Two thirds of all respondents reporting having no members of staff who were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, with only two Queensland libraries indicating that they employed over 11 indigenous staff. Cultural and linguistic diverse (CALD) staff were, however, more common, especially in the larger library services such as the National, State and Territory libraries, university libraries and public libraries. It was noted that special libraries were the least likely institutions to have CALD backgrounds. More than half the respondents employed people with a disability and those with the higher numbers (11 or more disabled staff) were predominantly the National and State libraries.

94% of respondents reported that they used an official salary scale for the remuneration of staff, those that did not proved to be legal or corporate special libraries. It was noted that official salary scales may be used for support staff, rather than professional staff, or that senior staff were on a contract. More than half of the salary scales were part of government awards, with universities reporting the Higher Education Worker Award and Enterprise Agreements. A series of questions focused on the relative competitiveness of LIS salaries: 58% of all respondents indicated that they disagreed or disagreed strongly that the professional salaries could be considered competitive with other discipline areas, while only 29% who agreed or agreed strongly that they were competitive. 13% were neutral. However, 87% of public library respondents indicated that they felt the salaries were not competitive, compared with 67% of academic library respondents and 66% of National/State library respondents. On the other hand, 48% of special library respondents felt positive about the salary levels, especially law librarians, of whom 60% were confident about the competitiveness of the remuneration. However, in the health sector, the figure was lower: only 29% of health librarians agreed (none strongly agreed) that the pay was competitive.

In terms of paraprofessional salaries, 26% felt the remuneration was competitive, 47% felt it was not competitive, while 20% remained neutral and 7% did not submit a response. Only 5% of public library respondents reported that they agreed that paraprofessional salaries were at market levels, compared with 48% of special library respondents, and 60% of law library respondents. Comments provided in the survey revealed that there was a feeling that there was little distinction at the entry level between professional and paraprofessional staff, that in the health context, that health library staff were slipping behind in pay restructuring for clinical staff, and that in the local government context, the skills of other disciplines (engineers, surveyors, lawyers etc) were valued more highly than the skills of the library staff.

The work environment is presented by institutional respondents as being positive and productive: 95% believed there was a culture of lifelong learning, 91% that there were family-friendly procedures in place, 90% felt that professional staff produced quality work,

that 83% were highly motivated and 86% were satisfied with their jobs. Only 60% believed that the empowerment of professional staff was important to the organisation, but 82% felt that a culture of trust and cooperation between employees and employers was promoted by the organisation. In terms of turnover, there was greater concern about low levels of turnover than about high levels of turnover. 33% of respondents felt that turnover was too low in their library, compared with only 11% who felt it was too high.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented, as a first step in the research analysis process, the high level data collected as part of the *neXus2* research project. The study is timely: in late March 2008 ALIA hosted a national summit meeting to consider the LIS education and workforce issues that have come to the fore as a result of the ageing workforce population and the perception that there is a crisis in both education and recruitment to the profession. Six key topics were identified for the focus of the Summit: the potential skills shortages in the LIS sector today and in 5-10 years' time; the different avenues into the profession (undergraduate as well as postgraduate entry, as well as paraprofessional pathways); the current course recognition processes that lead to professional membership of the association; the relationship with 'allied' professions such as archives, records management and IT professionals; the challenges associated with recruitment into the profession to add school leavers, new graduates and people changing careers to the workforce, and the need to increase the engagement of employers in upskilling of existing staff through staff training and professional development.

Following on from the *neXus1* project which helped develop a clearer understanding of the individuals in the workforce, *neXus2* seeks to help the profession understand the institutional policies and practices that govern staff recruitment and retention, as well as staff training and development. In the coming months, the more detailed analysis of the research data is to be completed so that the findings can be disseminated to the wider profession in Australia and internationally. Importantly, the data will be reviewed not only from the whole of sector perspectives, but also from the specific perspectives of the component sectors, eg public libraries, academic libraries and special libraries. There are significant changes taking place in the Australian workforce, at both the macro and micro level, which cannot be divorced from the information environment in which the LIS profession operates. While the *neXus* project cannot provide all the answers, the research findings can potentially help the library profession better comprehend some of the workforce issues that are pertinent to the LIS sector in Australia, especially at a time when it faces a rapidly changing world of information technology, new media and the convergence of traditional and non-traditional dimensions of professional work.

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