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Library Technician course recognition in Australia: The challenges of a distributed national education program

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Abstract

This paper looks at the challenges presented for the Australian Library and Information Association by its role as the professional association responsible for ensuring the quality of Australian library technician graduates. There is a particular focus on the issue of course recognition, where the Association's role is complicated by the need to work alongside the national quality assurance processes that have established by the relevant technical education authorities. The paper describes the history of course recognition in Australia; examines the relationship between course recognition and other quality measures; and describes the process the Association has recently undertaken in order to ensure appropriate professional scrutiny without unnecessary duplication of effort and expense.

Introduction

In 2000 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) developed its *Guidelines for professional library/information educational programs - 2000* (IFLA, 2000). These international guidelines were developed primarily to address the quality of graduate and professional level library and information services (LIS) programs, and they are therefore very general in their scope given their potential application across such a broad spectrum of educational environments. The *Guidelines* encompass the broader education framework (context, mission, goals and objectives etc), curriculum, faculty and staff, students, administration and financial support, and instructional resources and facilities. In their study of standards of LIS education across the world, Dalton and Levinson (2000) identified three models that aim to establish and maintain the standards for LIS education: governmental monitoring; formalized LIS accreditation/approval processes; individual course/departmental standards. The processes in place in the United Kingdom, through the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), in the United States through the American Library Association (ALA), and in Australia, through the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), all represent the second model of formalized LIS accreditation/ approval processes, although each is distinctive (Hallam, Partridge & McAllister, 2004).

In Australia, ALIA acts as the standards body for the library and information profession. ALIA holds responsibility for the recognition of LIS courses offered by universities and by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), principally through colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses, which provide a library and information studies qualification. The course recognition process is directly linked to the categories of membership of the Association, specifically in terms of the Associate membership, which requires members to hold an ALIA-recognised LIS qualification at undergraduate or graduate levels, and the Library Technician membership, with members holding an ALIA-recognised library technician qualification.

While formal education programs for librarians in Australia were introduced in 1944, with a qualifying examination representing entry into the library profession, the first course for paraprofessional staff was only launched in Melbourne in 1970. This library technician course was developed in response to the changing dynamics of the workforce and a shortage of professional librarians (conditions that are actually echoed in Australia today), with a curriculum that focused on vocational, practical skills as opposed to the theoretical knowledge covered in librarianship courses. Under the education standards process, ALIA stands in an unusual situation, recognising not only the professional courses offered by universities, but also eighteen courses that lead to library technician qualifications.

Significant changes were made in the area of education for library technicians and library assistants in 1999, with the development of the new national training package, the Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package. The agency responsible for the formulation of the Museums and Library/Information Services package was CREATE (Cultural Research Education and Training Enterprises Australia), with 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. The training package currently comprises three specific components: the Competency Standards, ie units of competency which reflect discrete workplace outcomes; the Assessment Guidelines, which describe the industry requirements for assessment; and the Qualifications Framework, which details how the units of competency are packaged into nationally recognised qualifications (IBSA, 2005).

This paper discusses the challenges facing the professional association in recognising courses that constitute part of a national training package, but are delivered at the local level by individual RTOs. In 2006, ALIA's Education Reference Group met with library technician educators to discuss the concept of a peer review process for the programs, so that educators could meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern and to share ideas and expertise in order to establish a community of practice that could potentially enhance the quality of library technician education across the country. The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) had been introduced in 2000 as a set of standards which seeks to achieve nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia's vocational education and training system. ALIA is currently working with library technician educators to collaboratively develop meaningful and relevant course recognition criteria for library technician courses that will not only encompass the quality assurance processes required by the AQTF, but also build the desired community of practice that has the potential to add strength and engagement to paraprofessional education in the Australian library sector. The Working Party, comprising two members of the original Education Reference Group, plus the Education Manager of ALIA, is faced with a number of challenges in moving the course recognition agenda forward, specifically with regard to the current fluidity of the vocational education environment in Australia.

Historical review of formal recognition of library technician courses

The current context for library technician education in Australia benefits from a review of the journey travelled in the past. Discussions regarding the need for formal library technician training took place throughout the 1960s, and the first course for technicians was established at Box Hill Girls' Technical College (Victoria) in 1970. 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.

(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).

These calls were heard within the LAA, with Neil Radford, then Chair of the Board of Education noting that:

There appears to be an urgent need to establish standards for courses for library technicians. These courses have tended to develop along somewhat different lines from state to state and both technicians and their employers have expressed concern about the quality of some courses.

(Radford, 1978, p.105)

The Association, however, while apparently concerned about ensuring a consistent standard of technician graduates, was largely unconcerned about the standardisation of the curriculum. As a member of the Board of Education, Ian Miller, reported at the time:

[The Association] believed that the exit abilities of students should be the appropriate measure of the quality of the course content. In other words, the LAA and more particularly the Board of Education would expect to find a variety of different paths being chosen to reach the same exit level standards.

(Miller, 1979, p. 10)

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 a *Statement on the Recognition of Library Technician Courses*. In keeping with Miller's claims about plurality, 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.

It is relevant that the discussions that preceded the introduction of the technicians' courses took place at the same time the profession was grappling with the issue of professional education and leading moves to have courses established within universities or colleges of advanced education. A focus of these negotiations was the issue of the appropriate level for a first professional qualification—that is, should the basic level of entry be a three year Bachelors program or a graduate qualification of one year. It has been argued (Carroll, 2007) that the technicians' qualification was devised with the expectation that professional education would be at the graduate level, and that a therefore highly professionalised workforce would require a pool of technical assistants. As events transpired dual pathways (undergraduate and graduate) were developed for entry at the professional level, with technicians' courses nevertheless being established to provide a third pathway into library work.

As a result the emphasis of much of the early literature regarding library technicians in Australia was on establishing the exact nature of their workplace roles (Ramsay, 1978). There was a particular concern with separating the technician's role from that of entry-level librarians, and in negotiating matters related to career paths for technicians, including the options that should be provided if they later wished to complete a professional qualification (Radford, 1978: Young, 1979: Hyland, 1990: Ladd, 1992).

Following the introduction of the course recognition there was very little – if any – investigation of the role or success of the recognition process in ensuring the consistency or standard of technicians' courses. Debate continued to focus on the role of the technician in the workplace and how this might relate to their education (Smeaton, 1985; Hyland, 1990). When Jean Whyte provided a 'short history' of Australian course recognition in 1985 she wrote very little about the recognition of the technician courses. She did suggest, however, that the LAA had become involved in recognising these courses more in the interests of

maintaining the boundaries between professionals and technicians rather than an interest in the state of technicians' education *per se*.

Why did the Library Association of Australia decide to try to control the education of library technicians? Because this was seen as part of a duty to improve libraries or because we wanted to preserve what is *not* technicians' work?

(Whyte, 1985, p. 23)

Irrespective of the reason for recognition of technicians' courses, by the late 1970s a pattern for the management and recognition of these courses had been established, and it would remain largely unchanged for the next two decades. That is, state education authorities were responsible for the overall regulation of colleges providing training; curriculum was developed independently by each college; and recognition was granted by the LAA (after 1990 the Australian Library and Information Association); with the recognition process managed by the Association's Board of Education, and based on the description of tasks included in the *Statement on the Recognition of Library Technician Courses* (later the *Statement on the Recognition of First Award Courses: Technician Level*). The Board of Education conducted the recognition, which included a visit to training colleges by a representative team, every seven years for each recognised course. In the interim years colleges were required to submit an annual report advising the Association of any relevant changes to the management of courses, resources, curriculum, and staffing.

Given the requirement for the Association to recognise both professional and technician courses, the cost associated with recognition was a substantial impost on the LAA and ALIA. In 1979 it was estimated as being 9% of the Association's budget (Bower, 1979). There was an early appreciation that there was a potential duplication of cost and effort when recognition was given for those courses which were also tightly regulated at the state level, as was the case with the technical colleges and the colleges of advanced education. As Neil Radford noted in a paper given to a 1980 conference on Australian library education:

...the Board's course recognition work is very costly. Certainly the general Council and the general treasurer are becoming increasingly uneasy about the proportion of the Association's scarce resources which are channelled to this work . . . It is frequently argued that because [some courses] are already closely controlled by the state higher education authorities, which conduct their own assessments for accreditation, there is little point in the LAA duplicating this work and conducting its own assessment. I would argue that while it may be the higher education authority's responsibility to ensure the academic quality of courses conducted under its auspices, it is still the professional association's obligation to satisfy itself that entrants to the profession receive an adequate preparation.

(Radford, 1980, p. 45)

This duplication of effort between state education authorities and the professional association is one which continues to vex the recognition process for library technicians' courses in Australia today.

Current issues impacting on course recognition of paraprofessional programs

The Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package was first developed in 1999 (IBSA, 2004). Version 2 of the training package, was released in 2007 (NTIS, 2008), following the review and evaluation of the initial package. 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, 2008). The training package describes the knowledge and skills or competencies required by library and information workers up to and including library technician level, if they are to perform effectively in their workplace. It groups the competencies at the various levels into national qualifications (Certificate, Diploma, etc) that align to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2008). A further review of the Museums and Library/Information Services Training Package is anticipated in the near future.

Around about the time of the introduction of the Training Package, the professional association, ALIA, underwent a major organizational restructure. The implementation of the new structure meant that the Board of Education, which had responsibility for the course recognition processes, ceased to exist in 2000. The responsibilities of the Board of Education were transferred to the Board of Directors, and a new committee appointed by the Board, the Education Reference Group, was given the task of reviewing the Association's education policies to ensure their relevancy to the changing educational contexts. The revised policies were endorsed by the Board of Directors in 2005-2006: the 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) all underpin the philosophies and values of Australian library education. The specifics of the course recognition process are available on the ALIA website (ALIA, 2008). The key criteria 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.

The Board of Directors felt that that there was no pressing need to subject the new library technician programs to the course recognition process. The curriculum content of the training package was seen to be appropriately aligned with current industry needs as a result of the input into its development – and redevelopment – provided by ALIA and its representatives. In mid 2006, however, members of the ALIA Education Reference Group expressed their interest in exploring the opportunities for a revised approach to paraprofessional course recognition. This was felt to be necessary in order to determine the relevancy of the existing criteria for course recognition, and to build on the common dimensions of the national training package by considering the potential value of peer review as an evaluation process in line with the premise that, “stakeholders and clients are the best judges of an organisation's quality and performance” (AQTF, 2008a, p.6). Peer review also offers participants the chance to discuss and share good practice and to develop a community of practice for library technician educators. First and foremost, however, ALIA

needed to be confident that course recognition was still valid and appropriate for vocational LIS courses in the 21st century.

In Sydney in September 2006, ALIA hosted a meeting of library technician educators from all states of Australia to discuss the potential for peer review of courses. The forum was facilitated by a working party comprising two members of the ALIA Education Reference Group and the Education Manager. The discussions were based on the notion that while the course design and curriculum content were effectively determined by the National Training Package, a peer review process could potentially allow educators to consider how the different courses were resourced and delivered and to explore the range of learning activities and assessment approaches. In this way educators could potentially share best practice and learn from each other. Each representative at the forum gave a short overview of the key characteristics of their own program, highlighting aspects of the course which were distinctive, innovative or particularly valuable to students. There was a strong focus on the importance of the design and delivery of learning activities and assessment, rather than on the course content *per se*. Feedback from the participants indicated that they felt the forum was very valuable to them all as library technician educators and that the role played by ALIA to bring them together to discuss matters of common interest was a significant one for the Association.

This initial meeting was followed by a further professional development day held in Melbourne in October 2007, when the library technician educators attended a workshop to consider a potential framework of excellence in learning and teaching; to guide the peer review process, and to establish some points of measurement. The educators worked in four groups to determine the value of an example taken from the higher education sector, the *Teaching Capabilities Framework* (QUT, 2004). Each group was asked to work through one of four principles of teaching excellence in order to determine its application for vocational education, and the relevance of the content and the terminology. The four principles were:

- Engaging learners
- Designing for learning
- Assessing for learning
- Managing for learning.

Ironically, as the ALIA team sought to work closely with library technician educators to determine how to support and encourage quality teaching, the vocational education sector itself was raising the stakes in terms of issues of quality. As noted, library technician courses are delivered by specific Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). RTOs are generally, but not limited to, Colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). 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 will 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). Statements such as these again raise the question of the relevancy of course recognition processes for professional associations such as ALIA.

Further advice was received in early 2008 indicating that further quality assurance processes were to be introduced in the vocational education arena: National Quality Indicators, with the goal of measuring the quality of:

- Learner engagement
- Employer satisfaction
- Competency completion.

All RTOs will be required to implement three quality indicator processes each year: a Learner Questionnaire; an Employer Questionnaire; and a Competency Questionnaire. In addition, a voluntary process is currently being trialled by 15 RTOs, which seeks to encourage and recognise high performance. The proposed Excellence Criteria seek evidence of strategic approaches to quality and continuous improvement in a number of areas, including learning and assessment, client focus and engagement with industry and communities (AQTF, 2008b).

It should be noted that these developments inevitably place a degree of uncertainty on the ALIA course recognition process. The curriculum content is ostensibly determined by the competency standards of the National Training Package, while the quality assurance processes currently being developed within the AQTF 2007 framework seeks to monitor the issues of staffing, resourcing, infrastructure and quality assurance mechanisms. Theoretically, the Quality Indicators aim to scrutinise the relevancy and quality of the training being delivered, while the Excellence Criteria support high quality practice and continuous improvement. It will be interesting to learn more about the process in the coming months, to determine the extent to which the emergent AQTF processes measure the performance of the RTO as an entity, or the quality of the learning and teaching in individual programs delivered by the RTOs. At this point in time, ALIA seeks 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 its course recognition processes not only avoid 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).

A series of teleconferences were held in April 2008 to further engage the library technician educators with the principles of quality teaching. Each group from the October 2007 workshop had been asked to continue the development of their specific dimension of teaching excellence (ie Engaging learners; Designing for learning; Assessing for learning; Managing for learning), but the pace of everyday life had seen some slippage in terms of the

ongoing development of the documents. One of the challenges for the Working Party has been to engage as many library technician educators as possible in the review of course recognition and the potential for peer review. It appears, however, that only a small core group of people have been able to attend both the 2006 and 2007 forums hosted by ALIA, and the teleconferences were attended by a number of educators who had not attended those forums. Continuity and consistency of communication is therefore an issue of considerable concern for the Working Party.

The teleconferences revealed yet another development that had not been discussed at either at the face-to-face forums, again an indication of the rapid progress of the quality assurance processes under AQTF 2007. Teleconference participants indicated that in recent months (ie subsequent to the October 2007 meeting), they had been asked by their institutions to complete a considerable amount of documentation to prepare their courses for an official audit as part of the AQTF 2007 process. However, while ALIA has stressed the need to avoid irrelevant duplication in the preparation of evidence about the quality of library technician courses offered, it appears that very little information has been proactively provided to the Working Party to help illuminate the potential relationship between AQTF 2007 and course recognition. Nevertheless, this dynamic environment, charged with the need for increased transparency and accountability, has resulted in significant challenges for the Association as it reviews its own quality assurance processes.

Conclusion

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, 2005c). There seems to be a keen awareness that the Association has an important role to play as the facilitator of communication between educators, and to steer and guide the interaction through regular forums and meetings. Participants attending the library technician educator forums report that they benefit greatly from the opportunities to be together, and that these are highly valued as professional development activities. On the other hand, the Working Party senses a degree of passivity on the part of the educators, in that there appears to be little incentive to take individual or collaborative responsibility for moving the process forward. Despite a couple of examples of meaningful collaboration between institutions in specific geographic areas, the Working Party is concerned whether there will be sufficient engagement and momentum to effectively establish the peer review process as it has been envisaged to date, or whether a more formal, structured approach is required.

The idea of course recognition itself appears to be regarded by some educators as a negative assessment process, with the professional association wielding the big stick, rather than an avenue for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, which will benefit the LIS industry in the long term. For example, some educators tend to focus more intensely on the site visit as an scrutinising inspection with the panel of educators and employers seemingly hoping to find reasons to ‘fail’ the institution as a course provider, as opposed to considering the potential leverage that can be achieved by a visit of ‘experts’ who meet with the key institutional players to highlight the value to the course to the LIS sector and to showcase innovation and excellence in learning activities and outcomes. The Working Party is unsure whether this view might result from historical anecdotes about past site visits to the TAFE colleges by the Association (although none have actually taken place in the past decade),

whether it is felt that other industry bodies might have a more critical, censorious approach, or whether the culture of the institutions themselves might dispirit the staff.

This paper has highlighted some of the immediate challenges facing the Australian Library and Information Association in what may be described as the quicksand of vocational course recognition. While the accreditation of professional courses offered by universities can be seen as a clear picture of long established and widely practiced processes to ensure the quality of education programs, the picture is somewhat distorted in the area of paraprofessional education. Where once the professional association was regarded as the bastion of high educational standards, the need for rigour and quality in vocational education has now been recognised and addressed by the relevant educational authorities. The real questions facing the Australian Library and Information Association are whether the paraprofessional course recognition process has become anachronistic, and whether it might be better to allocate the funds spent on course recognition to support and encourage a community of library technician educators to thrive and grow through professional development and networking.

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