Future of education for library and information science: Views from Australia

Gülten S. Wagner  
School of Computer and Information Science, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St., Mount Lawley, 6050, Western Australia, Australia  
E-mail: g.wagner@cowan.edu.au

Received 3 April 2000

This paper provides a brief review of writings and thoughts on future directions of the profession as well as education for library science from educators and professionals in Australia. Education for library and information science in Australia is relatively young (less than fifty years old) (G.S. Wagner, *Education for Information* 15 (1997), 171–177.) and hopefully more pliable and less resistant to change.

1. Introduction: Expanding boundaries of library and information science

Boundaries of library and information science is expanding, incorporating newer disciplines. This will have ever more significance in defining information professions in the future. An important characteristic of information professions is their interdisciplinary nature. They maintain rather “soft” boundaries not only amongst themselves, but also with related disciplines, such as: the communications, cognitive sciences, systems science, psychology, linguistics, sociology and computer sciences. The mapping of these disciplines and their relationships is important as ground breaking research activities often take place in cross-disciplinary boundary regions. Two illustrations by Ingwersen [2] help to demonstrate alliances of library and information professions with neighbouring disciplines.

We need to keep in mind that disciplines which make up the information professions have evolved differently. Two of them are rather recent sciences: information science and documentation; whereas library science can be traced back to approximately the 5th millennia. Documentation science developed as an area of information profession as a result of the “document explosion” after World War II. Information Science, the most recent of the three, has evolved since the 1970s.

Gorman provides a similar classification placing traditional librarianship in the core surrounded by related information professionals: archivists, information managers, record managers, information officers, information brokers and consultants, indexers, documentalists, and information scientist. As Gorman states:

It is important to have a clear picture of what we mean by the information profession because this has an implication for the education that we provide. Later I will suggest that the ‘best’ library schools are those that stop existing as
‘library schools’ per se and take on a wider educational role in the information industry by educating a large family of retrieval-based information providers . . . [i.e., both the traditional librarianship and the related information professionals – as listed above.] [3, p. 2].

Gorman makes a very important observation pointing out “the essence of information work changes little as one moves from across the circle- as the boundaries of professional parameters change encompassing related disciplines such as archivists, record managers, documentalists, information scientists and beyond including programmers, systems analysts and others” [3, p. 5].
2. Thoughts on the future

Conferences and seminars
Over the last two decades a number of conferences and seminars have taken place in Australia dedicated to the examination of future of library and information profession. The theme of the 1979 Biennial conference of the Australian Library and Information Association’s (ALIA) was “Alternative Futures”. In 1983 ALIA Council organised a “Futures Search Conference” to reexamine the educational processes needed for the members of the Association. The following year, in 1984, ALIA annual conference focused on the Information Professional, debating what specific skills are needed by a young graduate entering a first job.

ALIA’s Corporate Plan in 1987, and since that time, has recognised the expanding boundaries of information services – opening its membership to related information professionals. Averil Edwards, ALIA’s President for 1989 in her “A Vision for the Future; ALIA in the Approach to the Twenty First Century” (1990) reported that the Board of Education, the accrediting body of the association, will extend its accreditation to the information courses [4]. An information auditing seminar, which took place in 1994 at the University of Technology, Sydney, investigated what the organisations are doing with information and what they should be doing to meet organisational objectives.

Reading the Future for Library and Information Services Education and Practice Conference in Melbourne in 1996 made several important recommendations, including: a call for better collaboration amongst library information schools; incorporating generic transferable skills into the LIS curriculum; benchmarking for measuring success of service delivery [5].

2.1. Future for the information education

As educators in library and information science the future is never far from our thoughts, but the start of the new millennium gives us a special reason to re-examine where we are coming from and where we should be heading. A review of the literature of library and information science by some leading educators and professionals in Australia reveal some insights and predictions.

Where are we coming from? Twelve years ago Raymond pointed out that many of the inadequacies of library and information education in the US and the UK have some similarities in Australia – “small schools, short programmes, inadequate academic staff, lack of research, few higher degree students and fewer of the highest calibre, for example” [6, p. 119]. By 2000 some of these problems have been resolved by forming closer alliances with related disciplines and forming combined schools (such as the School of Computer and Information Science (incorporating departments of Computer Science and Library and Information Science) at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia; and School of Information Management and Systems (incorporating departments of Management of Information Systems
Ten years later, in 1996, Carmel Maguire asked “Why are library information studies in danger? Some of these problems were also identified in Raymond’s article but remain unresolved:

1. Size – they are small in numbers of staff and students; 2. Status – they are neither based in the traditional Nineteenth Century disciplines in universities, nor able to make money from lucrative consultancies or sponsorships. LIS schools are therefore neither traditional nor modern enough to enhance the status of universities which have to be entrepreneurial to survive and which still want to be seen to preserve the traditional scholarly values. 3. The LIS knowledge base is diffuse. It is impossible to cover in a single small school and yet paradoxically most LIS schools, especially in the largest and most prestigious universities, do not mesh well with schools in allied disciplines. Neither is there much more cooperation beyond goodwill among the LIS schools in this country. The time which might have been spent on cultivating of political alliances with other schools and with each other has often been invested elsewhere, mainly I suspect at the teaching coal face . . . The reward is in fact peril number 4, which is isolation [1, p. 38].

Maguire held LIS schools responsible for having a scatter-gun approach where “schools load up curriculum with everything hoping that something will stick in the job marketplace” [1, p. 38]. The end results are staff suffering permanent fatigue and students failing to thrive! Maguire sees opportunities for LIS schools in three disciplines: computer science; management; and education.

- Computer science – “It has size, status, market-pull – why not get a rub-off for LIS?” [1, p. 39]. She reasons that computer scientists are not “fussed about” access to information; LIS schools strength in this area will provide them a niche if an alliance is established.

- Management – “The study of management, especially an awareness of financial systems and of marketing principles can give job leverage in some niche markets in corporate libraries and information services” [1, p. 39].

- Education – cooperation with education departments in the past has been limited to education for teacher librarians. But, the need for information literacy in society is identified by Macguire as a growth area where LIS schools can benefit from teaching/learning theory and practice in an alliance with education departments.

Many fine library and information science schools, both here in Australia and overseas, which failed to form such strategic alliances or were slow in developing winning adaptations to their course offerings were forced to close their doors to students forever during the 1980s and 1990s.
2.2. Winds of change

Gary Gorman, expanding on Buckland’s views, offers three fronts where changes are taking place: “Listed in ascending order of need for, or susceptibility to change, the categories are professional values, professional parameters, and information technology.” [3, p. 2]. According to Gorman professional values are the least affected by change. They include “social values as they influence library policy and professional issues – for example, the mission of the library service, the principles of selection, the librarian’s attitude toward readers, and the role of the librarian” [8, p. 781] Gorman points out in the same article two significant professional values which practitioners “regard as the keys to our identity and our success in society”. They are: accountability (i.e., marketing; promotion and distribution of services; planning, including financial planning and control; rationalisation and resource-sharing; and performance evaluation) and personal orientation (i.e., client relations; staff relations; complaint handling and conflict resolution; information packaging; information services; and user-friendly technology). The direction of change in professional values has been towards placing the user/client ahead of the system as well as the implementation of more accountability on the part of service providers. The rate of change in these areas has been positive and gradual but steady [3, p. 2–4].

Changes in professional parameters have been more dynamic in comparison with professional values according to Gorman. As necessitated by expanding professional boundaries, professional parameters are evolving at a much faster rate than that experienced in the area of professional values. Gorman [3, p. 4] citing Wilson lists five key professional parameters:

- Information retrieval theory (cataloguing, classification, indexing);
- Information gathering behaviour (user studies, bibliometrics, knowledge utilisation);
- Historical studies of books and recorded communication;
- Bibliographic control; and
- The nature and operation of information organisations [9].

The third and the last area of change is in the information technology where the most dynamic changes have been occurring. Information technology has rewritten the rules of access to information in terms of time and place and speed of interaction. Unfortunately contributions from the professionals in this area has been those of a follower rather than a leader!

3. Educating library and information professionals: The challenges

How do these changes affect education for library and information science? “If professional values are changing minimally, professional parameters slowly and information technology rapidly, it follows that education of information professionals
has to reflect minimal change, moderate change and total change – all at once!” [3, p. 5].

Educating librarians for the future can be determined by examining what skills will be required by library information professionals to enable them to adapt to new and changing demands in society. Nicolson sees the solution in the role of knowledge manager who has skills in: information technology; industry or subject knowledge; information management; adding value to information by analysis and synthesis; teamwork, interpersonal communication; change management; sharing and collaborating. She concludes:

The knowledge era is characterised not by the lack of information but the overload of information. Knowledge management provides an opportunity to position oneself. The knowledge challenge to librarians is to use the profession’s specialist information skills to leverage the intellectual capital and collective experience of our organisations to create value and a sustainable competitive advantage in a knowledge-based economy [10, p. 35].

Bridland expands on the skills which will be required from information professionals on the face of economic and social developments in Australia. During the last two decades, Australia, following the example of Europe, the UK, and the USA, went through accelerated socio-economic changes increasing its participation in the global economy:

Changing work practices such as work design as part of enterprise bargaining, integration and deployment of quality management practices, multiskilling, use of national industry and enterprise competency standards, outsourcing, downsizing (or rightsizing), performance-based pay, flatter organisational structures and so on all have implications for the ability of people working in the library and information industry to accept lifelong learning as a fact of life. The challenge of leading the profession into the 21st century and enabling it to thrive is very much dependent on the quality of education and training and the calibre of people it can attract. Once part of the profession, the responsibility for ensuring responsive, high quality of education and training is a tripartite one shared among library education, managers and employees in industry. ALIA can provide support in this, but the challenge to lead is ours [11, p. 26].

4. Conclusion

There are many competing information agencies and services and the ever growing Internet resources and facilities. Library and information agents no longer have the monopoly in accessing and using information for the users (or consumers of information). As shown in Fig. 3 information can be accessed directly by not going through libraries.

Institutions offering education for information need to become much more seriously involved in directing their research and scholarship to the organisation, management, evaluation, dissemination and the use of recorded knowledge (in all formats
– digital, multimedia, or paper-based) – by all members of the society – regardless what alliances Schools of Library and Information Science form with related disciplines. One can safely predict that survival of education for information depends on this.

References

[7] Carmel Maguire was the Professor and Head of the School of Information, Library and Archive Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Currently she is one of the Honorary Visiting Professors at the same School. Carmel Maguire, The future of LIS education – from monument to its past! Education for Library and Information Science: Australia 13 (1996), 37–42.