

## ARTICLE

### **‘I’ is for ‘Information’**

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### **Abstract**

Education for the information profession in Australia is overdue for a serious debate and discussion about how well we are meeting the needs of the information professionals that we are educating. This article highlights some issues that have evolved as a result of the expanding information landscape, and offers potential opportunities that could be leveraged to provide the information professionals of the future with the breadth and depth of knowledge they will need to successfully operate in the information society.

**Keywords:** Library and information science; education; educators; Australia

### **Introduction**

This is an opinion piece, which should in no way be taken as a reflection of the views of my employer. Nothing written here is intended – or should be taken – as a criticism of any particular university, school or educator. The intention is to start a conversation about the broader information profession, the professionals we produce, and how we educate them. Some examples are provided for this purpose and should not necessarily be seen as solutions. While the focus is university education, because that is the sector in which I work, the arguments are equally applicable to the TAFE sector.

Calls for the examination of library and information science programmes in Australia, and indeed the world, are nothing new. It has been one of the few constants in issues facing the profession for the ten years I have been, first, a practitioner, and now an academic, in the field. The situation is compounded by the emergence of new areas of practice, such as digital curation, and new technology, such as cloud computing. All the while, we are maintaining those traditional subjects of cataloguing and classification, how to conduct reference interviews, and how to search databases – as valuable as those may still be.

Our field is ever expanding, not only in terms of the knowledge that we need (for example, information governance, information architecture, information policy, big data, data analytics), but also in the skills we need, largely due to the digital environment and what that means for how information is stored, accessed, used, preserved and reused. The digital environment is broadening the remit and scope of the information professional, not least in the new employment opportunities being created through organisations such as the Australian

National Data Service (ANDS). The digital environment affords cultural heritage institutions with the ability to showcase Australia's collections to its own citizens and the world – the lack of a national cultural policy notwithstanding. These developments indicate that the time is right for us to critically examine what we, as information educators, are teaching. I'm not talking about specific course content and curricula, but the bigger picture of what it means to be an information educator, and what it means to educate those who will call themselves information professionals.

What is an information professional anyway? For me, it is someone who in the course of their daily work performs some or all of the following information management practices: collecting, organising, describing, storing, providing access to and preserving information (Dupont, 2007; Given & McTavish, 2010; Myburgh, 2011), remembering that information now exists in both physical and digital form. If this work is performed in a library, these information professionals are called librarians (traditionally, although some have much more creative titles, such as Metadata Processing Analyst, Data Collections Analyst, Informatics Specialist, Data Services Specialist, and (my favourite) Community Animator); in an archive they are called archivists; in museums they may be called a curator; and in an art gallery they may be called a registrar. Therefore, for me, an information professional is not only synonymous with 'librarian' but also with archivist, curator and registrar.

But even more broadly than these roles, doesn't the previous description of an information professional also describe much of what an IT professional does, to a greater or lesser extent? According to Shah (2015), the role of an IT professional has 'primarily and predominantly been, to facilitate [the] communication of information or data, from man, to machine, and then back to man' (para. 12). And if said librarian, archivist, curator, or registrar is dealing purely with digital documents, is there in fact a difference between them and an IT professional? There are certain socio-cultural aspects to our role that may not even occur to the IT professional – 'access for all', 'every reader his book', 'no censorship' and so on; but these aside (and I am in no way advocating that we disregard them) is there a difference? The technical skills that are seemingly becoming mainstream are going beyond the ability to search databases, yet to what degree are we, as educators, going beyond that? There are some LIS programmes that are doing great things with HTML coding, information architecture and website design, for example, but at a postgraduate level, is that really what we should be teaching? Shouldn't a master's qualification be a first level *professional* qualification, not Information 101? Perhaps that depends on what we think the profession itself actually is – or what we want it to be.

Both the breadth and depth of skills and knowledge that are now called for in order to be an information professional has moved far beyond simply adding modules in order to respond to changes in technology, something that Myburgh (2003) called 'disjointed incrementalism': that the LIS profession is only able to manage incremental change, when it is perhaps more extensive and widespread change that is required. While I don't profess to have the answers, there are some avenues that could form the basis for robust discussion. These suggestions also may not necessarily be new, but I offer them here as a way to move the discussion forward.

## **The Web-based Information Science Education (WISE) Consortium**

One avenue that I propose for investigation and discussion is the potential for the Web-based Information Science Education (WISE) Consortium – or a similar model – to play a role in information education in Australia. This international collaborative initiative is a consortium of universities from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Each university pays an annual membership fee, which allows them to open a limited number of places in individual subjects to students of other WISE member institutions. Students pay their tuition fee for the subject to their home university. At the end of the year, WISE prepares a balance sheet showing which schools are net consumers (that is, more outgoing than incoming enrolments), and which schools are net providers (more incoming than outgoing WISE enrolments). Net consumers are required to pay a small amount per student in addition to their annual fee. While there are Australian universities who are part of the WISE consortium, the concept does not appear to have taken hold in Australia as well as it potentially could. The reasons for this are unclear – perhaps the uncertainty as to whether the school will be a net consumer or net producer, and what (if any) impact that may have on future enrolments could be reasons why Australian universities have been reticent in exploiting this option.

A local – and by that I mean Australian – WISE model may be worth considering. As the majority of universities offering LIS education are providing ALIA accredited programmes, it seems to be a rather large duplication of effort for each university to offer core subjects that meet the ALIA requirements. For example, each programme will have a subject that in some form or other addresses cataloguing and classification. These naturally are not exactly the same in content, as each institution and educator will put their own slant on it, but at the end of the day it can be assumed that they are reasonably similar, otherwise the accreditation may not be forthcoming. Imagine what might be achieved if all the LIS programmes banded together to offer a single set of these core subjects – that is, all students, regardless of location, would study the exact same subjects with the exact same lecturing staff. So instead of say, 25 academics at 5 different institutions all teaching (in essence) the same core subjects, it might only require 5 academics – one from each institution (the numbers used here are purely speculative and for illustrative purposes only). The other academics would not become unemployed – they could then create areas of specialisation, such as teacher librarianship, law librarianship, audio-visual archiving, or cultural heritage informatics.

Pymm (2012) notes the potential of the WISE consortium, particularly in relation to specialised subjects where faculty may not be readily available at the student's home institution. In March 2016 there were 98 topics listed, as a sample of what is available through WISE. Not all could be considered specialisations, with inclusions of metadata and collection development topics, but the scope and variety of specialist, niche subjects on offer is well beyond the current capacity of Australian universities and educators. It seems to me that there is a well-stocked bar and no one is drinking.

### **A generalist information undergraduate degree?**

Speaking specifically with reference to challenges associated with developing an archival curriculum, Pymm (2012) notes the need to:

fit in what has traditionally been seen as core archival knowledge (appraisal, arrangement and description, functional analysis etc.) as well as including generic

skills covering business, project management and advocacy approaches; building a research capability and commitment; and doing all this within an umbrella of understanding the big picture and context within which archives operate. Oh, and ensure a considerable level of IT knowledge and understanding. ('Education' section, 2nd para.)

Pymm goes on to highlight that such a 'crowded curricula [...] is not unique to the archives and records fields' ('Education' section, 2nd para.), and that 'any education for the [information] professions today has to ... acknowledge some core generic skills and attributes which seem common across the spectrum' ('Education' section, 3rd para.). In order to achieve this, Pymm (2012) suggests a three-tiered programme of education:

1. An intensive introductory programme 'which serves as the essential framework, but is flexible enough to enable a level of "tailoring"' ('Education' section, 4th para.)
2. A second tier level of subjects relevant to the cultural heritage sector and the broader information disciplines (including records, archives and IT). Suggested subjects include 'data curation and digital preservation; traditional preservation, access and users; metadata and descriptive standards; copyright and related legals ... more targeted IT knowledge covering digitisation, web presence and open standards' ('Education' section, 5th para.)
3. Professional-focussed subjects. Pymm mentions records and archives specifically, but also acknowledges that this could include any information-related professional programme, provided faculty with the requisite skills and knowledge are available.

While not specifically stating that levels one and two in the above proposal are at the undergraduate level, this could be implied by the reference to 'the idea of shared courses across faculties ... [as] an established practice, particularly at the undergraduate level' ('Education' section, 4th para.). Level three, incorporating 'professional-focussed subjects' speaks to my earlier question about a master's level qualification being a professional qualification and not Information 101.

It is important to note that this proposed undergraduate degree is not an LIS degree. My reasoning for this concept is for it to appeal to the broader information professions, including those on the 'hard science' end of the information spectrum (that is, IT and IS professionals). Informatics, as defined by Fourman, forms the cornerstone of this idea:

Informatics is the science of information. It studies the representation, processing, and communication of information in natural and artificial systems. Since computers, individuals and organisations all process information, informatics has computational, cognitive and social aspects. (Fourman, 2003, p. 1)

An undergraduate degree in informatics has the potential to produce well-rounded information professionals on both ends of the information spectrum, by providing the cognitive and social aspects that may be missing from current IT education, and the increased technical competence and confidence that is needed by professionals who will work in libraries archives and museums, today and into the future.

Serendipitously, as I was writing this article the University of Maryland's School of Information Studies announced a new inaugural undergraduate programme: a Bachelor of Science in Information Science (BSIS) to begin in the northern hemisphere's autumn of

2016. According to the press release ‘the undergraduate program joins the three existing graduate degree programs in Human Computer Interaction, Information Management, and Library Science’ (University of Maryland, 2016, para. 3). The Dean, Brian Butler, outlined the motivations for the new programme:

Information science is an interdisciplinary field, drawing from other areas of study such as computer science, management, education and the humanities, but with a focus on individual and institutional users of information and their information needs. This degree provides an opportunity for students to develop a unique combination of skills in information management, technology, and user-centered design that prepares students for careers in a wide variety of industries and public sector jobs, ranging from financial services to libraries and museums. This program also provides the basis for increased collaboration with other departments around campus (University of Maryland, 2016, para. 4)

Once this generalist degree is completed, students may have a better idea of what information specialisation they wish to follow, whether that be library, archives, records, cultural heritage, systems, analytics, and so on. Pursuing this option achieves two things: first, it eliminates the need for Information 101 introductory subjects in the masters degree; and second, the masters degree can then concentrate on the professionally-focussed subjects, as suggested by Pymm (2012).

This model then, is similar to that used in the medical field in Australia – an undergraduate degree that qualifies you as a general practitioner, and if you want to specialise, then you select a specialisation based on your area of interest and undertake further study. Some may argue that the financial rewards for masters-qualified librarians are not the same as a specialist doctor (for example, a psychiatrist), and this is going to put an unnecessary financial burden of university fees onto potential entrants to the field. However, I argue that students are currently required to do an undergraduate degree prior to undertaking a masters in LIS, so this aspect doesn’t change. Additionally, the number of years of study is not necessarily an indicator or indeed a determinant of financial reward. I have a friend who failed his final year of high school, has no formal tertiary training, but now runs his own IT business and earns far more than what I do after 10 years of university education. And he doesn’t have a HECS debt!

However, this option is not without concerns, particularly with regard to current entry requirements for post-graduate study in LIS. Any undergraduate degree can be used for entry into LIS. As a profession, I think it is time we had a debate about whether this is still feasible. I accept and agree that our profession has benefitted from the wide range of undergraduate degrees that are now present in our profession – indeed, I would not be where I am today if the ‘any undergraduate degree’ requirement was not in place when I applied for my graduate diploma – but we need to be realistic about what it is an information professional now needs to know. Our knowledge base in many ways has doubled – we still need to know how to care for and provide access to physical documents, but now we also need to know about digital documents - and I use ‘documents’ in its broadest sense to include objects.

A model that provides a compromise is to follow what some education faculties in Australia do: either a 3-4 year undergraduate degree in education where you become eligible for teacher registration; or a 3-4 year degree in another faculty (say in science) followed by a postgraduate qualification in Education, which also leads to eligible teacher registration. This

path is often followed by people who want to be subject specialist teachers (for example, a science teacher). This option could be the preferred model for people who want to be subject specialist librarians. Examples in the current climate are law librarians and health librarians.

## **Changing the mindset**

The mere fact that we continue to call this field and the associated education for it Library and Information Science might be one of the reasons we are not predominant in the areas where we know our skills can make a difference. If information professionals include librarians, record managers and archivists, then why the library component in LIS? Why not Archives and Information Science, or Records Management and Information Science? Don't get me wrong, I am not against librarians – I am one, after all – but why do we give libraries the privilege of being included in the title of our field of education? Could it be that the stereotype that is intrinsically linked with Library and Librarian is perhaps what leads to our skills, knowledge and capabilities being largely dismissed as irrelevant and outdated, particularly by the more systems-oriented people? We all know this view is more irrelevant today than it ever has been, but we laugh, take it on the chin, and say 'yes, we just read and put books back on shelves all day.'

I recall having a discussion in 2011 (which became somewhat heated) with library professionals about the suitability of the L-word in the term LIS education. The argument put forward by one librarian went along these lines: 'If we don't have the word "library" in the name of what we teach, how will people know what to study if they want to become a librarian?' So, what do you study if you want to become a geologist – a geology degree? No, you study a science degree, and you select subjects based on your field of interest, in this case geology, but it could equally be biology, bio-chemistry, or any number of topics.

Perhaps removing the L-word is part of the mindset shift called for by Weatherburn and Harvey in their contribution to this issue. Giving further weight to this possibility is the name change being explored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (University of Illinois, 2015) and the new programme being offered by the University of Maryland (University of Maryland, 2016). Why don't we study Information Science? Is it because it sounds too much like Computer Science? Would Informatics be a better option? Or Information Science majoring in Librarianship (or Archives, or Records or...?). After all, we have many people who have an Arts degree majoring in Philosophy/Literature/French/Politics et al. Is Information not an emerging generalist discipline?

## **Conclusion**

I do not think that 'the whole of librarianship is winding down to retirement' (Rundle, 2015) but I *do* think it is time that we took a good, hard look at what we, as information educators, are teaching. More than that: we, as a profession, need to see and be a voice in the bigger picture that is 'information'.

It may be that throughout their career a librarian will never have the need to apply information architecture principles, or write an information policy, or analyse research data, but the mere fact that they have more than a passing knowledge of it surely makes them a much more rounded, more holistically educated information professional? Would you go to a

doctor who had no knowledge of mental health issues, simply because they never intended to be a psychiatrist? Librarians, archivists, records managers, information architects and system developers are specialists of the information professions, but they all have one thing in common: information. How they deal with information may be different, but information is the overriding and unifying factor. I believe we need to harness this common factor for the benefit of future generations of not only information professionals, but of society in general. Let's ensure that what we know we can offer is robust and sustainable in the long term.

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## Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the information shared by Dr Brenda Chawner about the WISE Consortium model.

## **Notes on contributor**

Katherine Howard received her PhD from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in July 2015, being nominated for an Outstanding Doctoral Thesis Award. She is a lecturer in information management at RMIT University in Australia, where she teaches digital curation and archives and records management. Katherine is an active member of the international research project, InterPARES, and is passionate about the information field and the future opportunities it holds.