

# *Constructing the Future Professional: Survival, Adaptability and Change in the Library and Information Profession*

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Change is more certain than progress, but we can try and make change mean progress. In the library world change is all around us. Some of it is due to the passage of time, which leads to libraries growing by mere accretion. Some is due to increase in the population providing and using libraries. These two factors cause changes in size. There is also technological change, which affects developments within libraries and in the world at large. Within, there are new methods and services. Without there are new technological innovations such as radio and television, with important library links. There are changes in society at large, in education for example, which affect the libraries in turn.

(W. Radford, An address given at the Annual Prize Function of the School of General Studies, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1970)



## Background

This paper has its origins in a paper delivered at the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual ANZTLA Conference held online on the 7-8<sup>th</sup> of July 2022. The theme for this conference was *adapt, create, innovate* and this theme forms part of the inspiration for the presentation and for this paper. The other inspiration is drawn from the introductory quote at the start of this paper by founding Library and Information Science (LIS) educator Wilma Radford from 1970 which asks us to consider change as being more than simply change but as an attempt to shape progress. This quote serves to highlight that change has been integral to the information professions from the beginning. The distinction Radford makes between change and progress is important I believe to all our thinking about the LIS sector as she implies some agency over change and the direction the profession takes. This agency, I would argue, has assisted the profession and Australian libraries to adapt and move forward successfully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The intention of this paper is, therefore, to reflect on change and progress within the information professions through a brief examination of our history and development. I also provide some suggested reading for further reflection and ask some questions about our future. Firstly, so it is clear what my personal perspectives are on the Australian industry, I will outline my positions on a few selected areas relevant to this discussion. I would also encourage others to reflect and articulate their position on the profession, issues related to their practice, and the place of education for themselves as part of their professional journey. My views have been developed over a long career as a practitioner, educator, and researcher in the Australian LIS sector and are not set in stone. As new knowledge and perspectives emerge, they have changed and probably will continue to do so—but for now I have the following contentions which reflect my position.

### **Contention: Library types have distinct but largely unrecognised characteristics**

Distinctions between various library types are often not understood outside the professional community and these need to be made explicit and be acknowledged if our work is to be understood and effective.

It is important for libraries and professionals outside the public library sector in particular to acknowledge and articulate that a one-size-fits-all model for practice may not be in our best interests. This of course has always been the case but the clear articulation of the specific skills, knowledge, and ethics of practice, which guide particular library types, and conveying this to the public may be increasingly important in the survival of specialised libraries.



## Contention: Libraries are not neutral

There is no such thing as “neutral” practice, so we should be reflective practitioners, educators and researchers and aim to understand and acknowledge what we bring to our work so as to mitigate institutional inequity and bias as much as possible. One of the issues around the idea of library neutrality is that it is rarely understood in the same way by everyone. Our critical and reflective practice needs to ask questions such as, what does this phrase mean? What do we mean by neutrality and neutral about what? And finally, is neutrality the correct word? Key to all of this is our ability to be critical and reflective practitioners.

There is a lot of contemporary literature about this discussion in a wider sense and I am sure there are items which have influenced you, but take a look at the following as a starting point:

1. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy*, 1st ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

I would also suggest reading broadly on contemporary topics such as critical librarianship and equity and diversity in LIS.

## Contention: The value of historical perspectives of LIS practice

Historical perspectives are a valuable and essential means to reflect on our contemporary practice both critically and effectively. Any historical review of the Australian LIS profession provides ample evidence of the *how* and *why* of the profession and its current positions and practices. Such insight strengthens the profession by allowing us to reflect on past successes and mistakes, thus enabling us to be positively critical of change and the profession by ensuring through historic knowledge that it is in fact progress. Australia does not have an extensive library history bibliography but various journal articles have been written over time and a great place to start are the proceedings of the intermittent Australian library history forums, which have been held since 1984. These are a little hard to track down as they have been published in various formats and are irregular but contain a great deal of interest. The first is listed below:

2. Elizabeth Morrison and Michael Talbot eds., *Books, Libraries & Readers in Colonial Australia: Papers From the Forum on Australian Colonial Library History Held at Monash University 1-2 June, 1984* (Clayton: Graduate School of Librarianship, Monash University, 1985).

These proceedings are a great place to get an insight into changing interests and concerns and can cover topics not easily discovered from an Australian perspective.



## Contention: The active role of LIS professionals

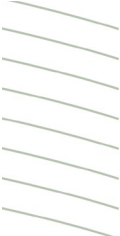
Librarians/archivists and libraries/archives are **active** agents in constructing knowledge ecosystems and have been **active** participants in social and cultural agendas over time. Acknowledging our active role in our profession and its practices means taking responsibility, and by taking responsibility we can more effectively implement change and be reflective practitioners. This includes acknowledging our responsibility in valorising particular knowledge and rejecting others and our part in the colonial project.

For this topic, perhaps start with:

3. Hollie C. White, “Decolonizing the way libraries organize,” (paper presented at IFLA WLIC 2018, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, August 24-30, 2018), <http://library.ifla.org/2221/1/207-white-en.pdf>

We can use this critical historical and reflective lens to also acknowledge in a positive way that the capacity of the profession in Australia is to adapt, create and to innovate. While acknowledging their establishment as part of the colonial project, Australian libraries and the profession have been guided by a largely common aspirational mission: to provide opportunities for self-improvement, universal access and self-education for all (or perhaps more accurately—nearly all). This story has been extraordinary and demonstrable as systems, technologies and even the world as we know it has shifted and changed, yet the profession and its institutions have not only survived but have increased in relevance and reach. If we look at the work of the profession for the last 100 years in Australia it has been one of change, innovation and aspiration not just for ourselves but for the communities we work for.

I would suggest the information professions have achieved their survival not by being compliant but in many ways by being, in the now very well-known words of Mike Moore in his introduction to *Stupid White Men*,<sup>1</sup> ‘subversive’ as we quietly sit at our desks not just ‘plotting the revolution’ but enacting it. This subversion is evidenced through the common professional values of our workplaces—our national and state libraries and archives, our small community libraries, our school libraries, our special libraries, etc. Yet the work we do is often made invisible; hidden behind our institutions and our collections—as if by magic items appear on the shelf, on our computer, are digitised, organised and made accessible. This is not a new problem but one we have worked on and sought an answer to for at least as long as there have been libraries in the western tradition in Australia. As one startling example of this frustration tells us, the expertise and professional knowledge of the profession has long been misunderstood. Take, for example, the words of the Chief Librarian of the Melbourne Public Library discussing the popular perceptions of the work of the librarian at the first Australasian Library Conference in 1896. If we can ignore the gendered



assumptions about his discussion for a moment, his frustration at the perceptions about the profession are recognisable. He writes of these perceptions of the librarian as perceived as being:

A rather pleasant sinecure, a nice occupation for a man of some education with a taste for literature, but a disinclination for any kind of hard work. That is to say if a man failed in his professional career, or if as a literary man he has made neither name or money in the world of letters, it is considered a good thing to make him a librarian. It is taken as a matter of course that he can do the work required without any particular training.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the same paper he writes “The librarian of the past bore always the academic stamp; he was of a certain class and for a certain class. The librarian of the future will work for no class but for all men.”<sup>3</sup>

My reading recommendation for those of you who would like to deepen your understanding of the profession is to look back at early writings like this—particularly during the professional formation of Australian LIS when everything was open to debate. The papers are relatively brief but can highlight threads which join us professionally. My first suggested reading is any, or all, of the papers in the following.

4. Library Association of Australasia, *Account of the Proceedings of the First Australasian Library Conference Held at Melbourne on the 21st, 22nd, 23rd and 24th April, 1896: Together With the Papers Read, List of Delegates, Etc., and the Constitution and Office Bearers of the Library Association of Australasia* (Melbourne: Robt. S. Brain, Government Printer, 1896).
5. Library Association of Australasia, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Library Association of Australasia at its Second General Meeting, Held at Adelaide, October 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th, 1900* (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1896).

Unfortunately, the work of an information professional can slip under the radar leaving us vulnerable. This is not a new problem but one we have worked on and sought an answer to for at least as long as there have been libraries in the western tradition in Australia. The longevity of this points to some fundamental inequities which have existed within the make-up of the profession, perhaps most obviously the ongoing status and expectations associated with those occupations dominated by women. Many solutions have been sought, including attempts to exclude women at the professional level in an attempt to raise the status of the profession. A recent paper highlights the struggle of Australian women librarians for pay equity:

6. Diane Kirkby and Caroline Jordan, “‘These Labourers in the Field of Public Work’: Librarians, Discrimination and the Meaning of Equal Pay,” *Labour History (Canberra)* 117, no. 1 (2019): 79–107.

And from an historical perspective, this biography is something to consider:

7. Sylvia Martin, *Ida Leeson: A Life* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2006).

I would suggest what our history tells us is that the most successful and powerful means we have to sustain and progress the profession is to work collectively; that is, for the four pillars of our profession—education, practice, association and research—to work together. This idea is captured in Figure 1.

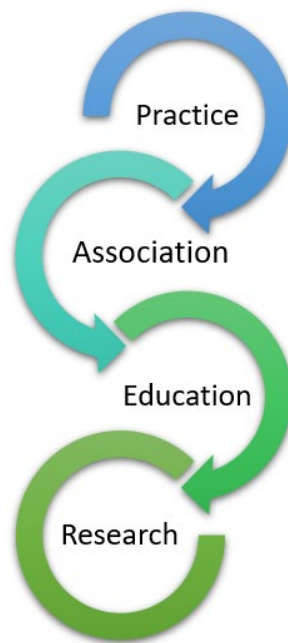
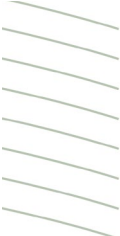


Figure 1: The interdependence of the four pillars of Australian LIS.

## Historical formation

In 2022 we are celebrating the 85th anniversary of the establishment of the Australasian Institute of Librarians (AIL, the LAA, now ALIA) at the New Education Fellowship Conference held in Canberra in 1937. This significant event brought together educators and librarians from all over the world to form the first truly national association in Australia. Historically, the moment when in 1937 the professional association was established, the four aspects of the sector (education, association, research and practice) were then to work formally to drive it forward. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) the Australian Institute of Librarians was pivotal in establishing an ongoing agenda with professional university level education as the central mission drawing the profession together and directing the ambitions of the profession along with its professional standards. If you would like to know more about this, David Jones' book *Uniting a Profession* is a great place to start:

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8. Jean P. Whyte and David J. Jones, *Uniting a Profession: The Australian Institute of Librarians 1937-1949* (Kingston: Australian Library and Information Association, 2007).

From a critical perspective, the foundation story of the AIL is also worth our reflection. Unlike in the United States and United Kingdom, the CCNY in Australia did not intend to fund the building of libraries but to deliberately promote the idea of professionalism and professional education. Think about the period when this occurred and the link the US community saw between democracy and libraries and the agenda becomes clearer—a professional association with a common mission to provide free and open access to information was considered a cornerstone of democracy and in supporting the establishment of such associations you were in effect supporting democracy. You will see this funding replicated in a number of countries and for a number of professions as libraries in this period came to be characterised as ‘arsenals of democratic culture.’<sup>4</sup> For background on this, perhaps first look at:

9. M. White, “Carnegie Philanthropy in the Nineteen Thirties—A Re-Assessment,” *History of Education Review* 26, no. 1 (1997): 1-24.

It is also worth mentioning that 2022 is the 50th anniversary of a very controversial and divisive report: Encel, Bullard and Cass’s *Librarians: A survey* (1972),<sup>5</sup> a publication which was to help shape the Australian LIS profession and its Association and something worth reading. In 1972 it was published to some outcry as it highlighted many issues largely ignored until its publication. Its significance lies in the emphasis it placed firstly on the status of women in librarianship at the time and secondly in the way its recommendations were to shape the Association. The authors summarised the position of women as being the ‘curious role of women who make up approximately 85% of the profession, but otherwise enjoy only second-class status’.<sup>6</sup> Other significant recommendations included a call for individual membership only, the establishment of special interest groups within the Association and that ‘all responsible positions in libraries should be occupied by qualified librarians, and preferably by members of the Association’.<sup>7</sup> For more on the controversy around this report read:

10. D. Jones, “Raw Nerves: John Metcalfe and the Encel Survey of Librarians in New South Wales,” *Australian Library Journal* 62, no. 2 (2013): 111-124.

The central discussion of the Encel report about power and professionalism remains relevant in positioning the profession in terms of equity. It also considers contemporary questions about the role education and the Association play in ensuring our professions reflect our communities and do not perpetuate disadvantage or consciously or unconsciously promote inequitable power relationships.





## Education

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is also a landmark moment in the history of LIS education celebrating (roughly) 50 years of education for library technician and undergraduate education in Australia. This is an opportunity to reflect on the nexus between education and professionalism and consider the future. Professionalism and what this means is the heart of how we think about this relationship and what it implies. The Encel report defines this as the imposition of constraints and obligations on the individual practitioner.<sup>8</sup> These constraints and obligations have overseen and guided our practice, determining our approach to our community and service. The Association has been key to establishing these constraints while education has ensured that these understandings have been passed on from one generation to the next. Disseminating not only knowledge and skills but an understanding of the professional values and ethics is central to the educational mission. Reynolds, Welch and Carroll discuss this concept of ‘learning to be’ in the context of LIS as well as that of being a ‘professional citizen’ in which education, association and practitioners work with students and new graduates to build a ‘sense of responsibility and loyalty to and guardianship of the profession, other professionals, local community and society.’<sup>9</sup>

For more on these idea on this you can read:

11. Sue Reynolds, Bernadette Welch, and Mary Carroll, “Passionate Practitioners: Engaging Not Just the Head but Also the Heart,” *Education for information* 29, no. 3,4 (2012): 243–251.

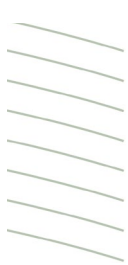
A question for us to consider is why education is such an integral part of defining professional identity in LIS and how can educators, practitioners and the Association continue to facilitate this.

## Convergence

Recent discussions around the requirements for education have been driven by a number of factors—the obvious decline of institutions delivering education, the new technological challenges being presented to the profession, perceptions about the courses being delivered and their capacity to deliver new skills and knowledge and an increasingly popular perception that the GLAM sector is converging. The idea of convergence has been around for a long time. Recent research suggests that it may be more of an alignment or familial connection than a convergence with some core knowledge and skills remaining discrete to various professional groups but more importantly the driving professional mission being different depending on the sector.

For more on this see:





12. Philip Hider and Mary Carroll, “Prospects for a Combined GLAM Curriculum,” (paper presented at VALA2018, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, Melbourne, 13-15 February, 2018), [https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/22570761/21489116\\_Conference\\_paper\\_OA.pdf](https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/22570761/21489116_Conference_paper_OA.pdf)

and

13. Mary Anne Kennan and Jessie Lymn, “Where Is the I(nformation) in GLAM? Education, Knowledge and Skill Requirements of Professionals Working in GLAM Sector Institutions,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 68, no. 3 (2019): 236–253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2019.1613708>.

A question for us is: Are there areas of our professional practice which are unique and important to our professional identity and which remain non-negotiable in any re-imagining of the profession?

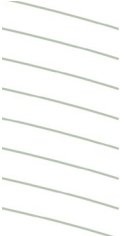
Underpinning this discussion has been a more broadly based questioning of the future of libraries, the profession and of LIS education and how we can best meet these challenges to sustain its future. These challenges and the questions raised by them about the future of the profession and the information institutions have led to a raft of research and reports into the future of the sector and the skills and knowledge sets needed to take it in to the future.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, Gillian Hallam has produced a technical report on these issues in which she extensively explores the profession and education for it:

14. Gillian Hallam, *Professional Pathways Frameworks Project: Technical Report Overview* (Canberra: Australian Library and Information Association, 2022), <https://read.alia.org.au/file/2123/download?token=R4stMgVO>.

## The Future

Despite the undeniable magnitude and complexity of the changes we are confronting, these changes are essentially new only in their velocity, convergence and technological expression.<sup>11</sup>

A reframing of the knowledge and skills for professional practice has empathised the need to ‘balance aptitude with attitude’<sup>12</sup>. Recognition of an increasingly diverse skill set and the need not just for core professional skills but also a commitment to professional learning and engagement emerged. While the skills and knowledge required for work in the information professions has always been fluid and open to debate, the issue of ‘attitude’ is something which provides a challenge for the profession and professional education. What has become central to the discussion is how do we best graduate professionals with both the skills (aptitude) and the attitudes to sustain and enhance the profession?



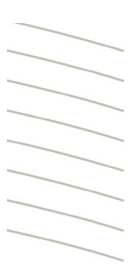
To perhaps provide background to Hallam’s recent report, the following extensive American study is useful:

15. John Percell, Lindsay C. Sarin, Paul T. Jaeger, and John Carlo Bertot, *Re-Envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*, (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

There is no doubt that people see value in our institutions and collections; however, it continues to be uncertain that they understand the value of the profession, its unique skills, knowledge and ethics and how these features sustain and drive it. As a profession we have spent over a hundred years attempting to convince governments and communities of our worth, trying many different strategies and often laying the blame on ourselves, our education, our practices and even our personalities, gender or the way we dress! I am increasingly convinced that it is not something we have done wrong—we have a strong, capable and knowledgeable workforce, an association which effectively advocates for the profession, a contracting but responsive educational system and a strong research agenda. We have excellent students, practitioners and researchers with a range of aptitudes which feed well into the 21st century workforce. Adaptability and innovation are clear in our approach to work and as a profession a strong sense of professional citizenship is evident. Perhaps we are just too hard on ourselves and need to recognise our strengths and our value and acknowledge it. Our agenda, status and education are often driven from outside by community understanding of our work and common stereotypes which seem to be insurmountable and continue to impact on our future. Maybe the focus needs some readjustment as there appears to be no easy answers to how others perceive our work. Let’s try and swing the lens around. There is no doubt that we have an enviable ‘brand’ which resonates with the community at large and to some extent protects us. We continue to work on sustaining and improving the profession and those attributes of adaptability, subversiveness, creativeness and innovation, which have been hallmarks of the profession, continue to sustain it. It is a profession which has been a leader on many fronts, including opening up educational pathways, creating inclusive spaces and in the uptake of technology. Acknowledge and celebrate this.

What will be the future of the information professions? This may be where we need to be reflective practitioners to ensure change means progress. To start I might ask:

1. Whose future are we talking about—all segments of the industry?
2. What do we do well?
3. Is there a common thread and set of attitudes and aptitudes, past, present and future which draws our profession together so we might examine what the future looks like and needs or do we need to be more granular in our approach?
4. What is the relationship between the skills and knowledge we need as information professionals and the needs of the organisations we work in?



5. How do we construct and convey the identity of the profession effectively?
6. How do we adequately prepare and future-proof the profession?
7. Is convergence really happening and what are the implications, opportunities and challenges of convergence in the GLAM sector?

Saying knowledge is power may be a truism but it remains a powerful reminder of how to achieve agency. We are a profession committed to knowledge therefore understanding and articulating our professional vision, its development, knowledge and skills should be critical to our efforts towards the future sustainability and agency of the profession. Read widely and read deeply, engage with the profession and its research, reflect on how best to be a professional citizen, and post difficult questions. If we can do this it will allow us to clearly and knowledgably imagine and shape the future.