Austin Health Sciences Library

Response to the ALIA Professional Pathways Consultation Paper

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Introduction

We thank ALIA for the opportunity to provide a response to the consultation paper, and to the considerable work that ALIA has committed to addressing the changing needs of the LIS sector.

We at the Austin Health Sciences Library have discussed the consultation paper and together wish to provide feedback on both the framework itself, and the proposed pathways which aim to address the issues raised in the consultation paper. We also have comments about the consultation process itself.

As a health library, there are considerations that apply particularly to our context. Health libraries are small but vital. Health sciences librarians are working in an environment with professional health workers in which fulfilling their information needs is often complex. Some of our feedback will relate to this context specifically, while other feedback will relate to librarianship generally.

Our team have a diverse set of skills and come from varied educational and professional backgrounds including state and academic libraries. We all have an accredited library qualification and ALIA membership.

The problem

As we understand from the Consultation Paper, the Professional Pathways process is hoping to address the following problems (emphasis ours):

- "**barriers to entry** from the harsh costs of attending university or TAFE, resulting in high levels of student debt and the reduced ability to afford additional career-oriented study programs"
- "the **sustainability of LIS education**, when the progressive closure of academic programs over recent years has led to fewer ALIA-accredited courses being available"
- "**lower numbers of graduates** seeking employment in library and information services, especially outside of major metropolitan areas"
- "serious implications for the creation of a **diverse and inclusive LIS workforce** that truly reflects the communities it works with"
- "**strong competition for talent**"
- "government and academic organisations [are] unable to attract the right candidates with library qualifications, [so] they are **hiring people with different qualifications and competencies** for positions at all levels of their organisation… newcomers [need to] comprehend the distinctive traits of the LIS sector itself and develop an understanding of the values and ethical principles that shape our professional practice."

Our initial comment is that it is unclear how the proposed solution maps onto the problems outlined in the consultation paper. Exactly how will the new approach solve these issues?

For example, would diversity in the field be increased by an additional micro-credential pathway? How do we know this? Is it evidence-based or an assumption?

Prototype framework

We broadly agree with the components of the prototype framework and consider these to be a good reflection of the skills required in librarianship. However, we disagree with the proposed structure.

The **foundation domains do not fully cover what is supposed to be crucial foundational knowledge** for LIS professionals. Professional training in library schools emphasizes the design, organization, and management of information resources and systems. Foundational knowledge should be the core of the proposed framework, however the current structure doesn't depict it. At a minimum, information services and information management, digital technologies and community engagement should be included as foundational.

Professional recognition and career pathways

Our major concern with the proposed pathways relates to unintended consequences that may arise if the *requirement* for a tertiary qualification is removed, with the option of completing micro-credentials to be included. We understand that a tertiary qualification would still be *available* for entry to the profession, but that this would be *optional*.

Unintended consequences

The following are several consequences that we foresee being a risk if tertiary qualifications become optional.

Perception of librarians by our employers and patrons.

In a health library, our employers and patrons are highly educated; this is also true for law libraries, school and university libraries, and many special libraries. Degree-qualified employers are more likely to value university degrees; findings from the AACU Employer Report (Finley, 2021) states that "a majority of employers have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in higher education". It also found that "employers favour attributes of a college education that combine breadth and depth of learning."

The proposed micro-credential option does not offer the breadth and depth of learning provided in a degree. As fewer librarians will be tertiary qualified in librarianship, perception of our skill is likely to be devalued by employers.

LIS work is often undervalued and invisible (Dali, 2015; Hanell & Ahlryd, 2021). The removal of tertiary requirements can only exacerbate this.

Creating a two-tiered system

Adding a micro-credential option might create an unofficial two-tiered system where employers favour those with tertiary qualifications in librarianship (as we would here at the Austin). Accrediting people with only micro-credentials might be misleading them as to their future career options.

Undermining the profession

Removing the requirement for university qualification will degrade the professional knowledge of the sector as a whole. As stated above, micro-credentials do not provide breadth and depth of knowledge, and are simply not an equivalent to the comprehensive, interrelated series of subjects that are provided together in the LIS tertiary courses accredited by ALIA.

Furthermore, tertiary courses provide additional skills that are not achieved in topic-specific micro-credentials, including teamwork, critical thinking, planning, problem solving, and written and verbal communication skills. These skills are highly valued by employers (Finley, 2021).

As more people in the sector choose the micro-credential option, fewer people within the sector will have the breadth and depth of knowledge of the field. LIS expertise within the sector would be reduced and librarianship may become fragmented.

Addressing the wrong problems

The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveyed Australian employers on measures across foundation, adaptive, collaborative, technical, employability skills, finding that there is high employer satisfaction with university graduates (QILT, 2022). If this is not true for some employers in the LIS sector while it is across other disciplines, it suggests that the issue lies with current course structure and content. Is this the real issue that needs to be addressed? Are micro-credentials going to solve the problem of addressing employer needs?

Austin Health Sciences Library
Response to Professional Pathways Consultation Paper

Will people from diverse backgrounds be more likely to enter the profession if there is a micro-credential option? Is this really the barrier for LGBTQI+ people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, or CALD people? If we make this assumption then other structural issues will remain.

Effects on salaries and conditions

Medical librarians are included in the Allied Health Practitioners Award, and eligibility for ALIA membership is a requirement. Tertiary qualifications are therefore implicit in our agreement, and consistent with other Allied Health Practitioners who are tertiary-qualified professionals.

It is unclear what the implications of removing the tertiary qualification would be, and whether we could continue to be covered in this award. As a feminised profession we already experience disparities in terms of renumeration compared to other professions (ALIA, 2020a). This might lead to librarians being removed from the award to an administrative or other award which would not recognise our skills in the same way, with a likely reduction in salary, benefits and professional standing.

Onerous management of new pathways

The consultation paper does not describe the accreditation process for micro-credentials. However, to succeed as intended, this option would need to be managed closely by ALIA, who presumably would need to assess and verify a multitude of courses or become an education provider itself. This could result in significantly more administration for ALIA, and lead to greater expense.

Further attrition of students from existing courses

Many librarians come to the profession after gaining qualifications and experience elsewhere. Some of these people go on to gain library qualifications. If there is an option to complete micro-credentials instead of tertiary qualifications, how many will choose this option? The micro-credential pathway is likely to lead to further attrition of students into the existing LIS courses, making the courses still less sustainable.

We are aware there have been a significant number of course closures in the fields of Library and Information Science (LIS) and Archives. These include the undergraduate program offered by Curtin University, and the postgraduate programs offered by Queensland University of Technology, the University of Technology Sydney, RMIT and Monash University (ALIA, 2020b). Further student attrition could precipitate the closure of the few remaining courses, leaving Australia with no tertiary option at all.

Uncertainty around uptake of new micro-credential option

There are many people working in the LIS sector who do not have LIS qualifications, however it is unclear whether these newcomers would consider a series of micro-credentials. People who already have a library job might not see the value of spending time and money on micro-credentials, any more than they would a tertiary course. How has this been investigated?

Micro-credentials are not eligible for government assistance in the same way that tertiary courses are, so would require upfront payment. How much would they cost? Would employers be encouraged to pay for their staff, and would this affect uptake? Is this really a more accessible option?

Further attrition of ALIA membership

A tertiary qualification is necessary for health librarianship. If this requirement is removed, then ALIA accreditation will not align with the needs of our sector. Health librarians might reconsider paying membership fees to an organisation that no longer represents them. This would be particularly true if librarians are moved from an Allied Health award to an administrative award.

More broadly, if the profession is devalued, there might be less impetus to join the professional organisation.

Additional comments and questions

- *Will the new pathways be recognised internationally?* Note that some countries require a Masters degree.

- While there are few librarians seeking employment outside of major metropolitan areas, reducing the requirement for qualifications is not an ideal solution. We note that it is currently difficult to hire enough regional nurses, but we aren't responding to that by removing the requirement to have a nursing degree. The degree is meaningful.

- *It is not a problem per se to have non-librarians in a library*, for example, IT, HR, social workers, communications, are all professionals that currently work in libraries and we respect and value their expertise. They don't need LIS qualifications to fulfil their role.

- *What are the measures of success for the program?* How will ALIA assess its effectiveness? (e.g. Number of librarians employed goes up? Librarian workforce is more diverse than before? Increased ALIA membership?)

Concerns about the consultation process

Transparency of the process – a genuine consultation?
ALIA is performing a consultation process; however it is unclear how or if feedback will be incorporated into the new pathways. Is ALIA prepared to abandon the micro-credential option if significant objections are raised?

Our feeling when reading the consultation paper, is that the decision has been made already and merely seeks our agreement.

We don't feel that issues we have raised are being taken seriously in the process. Some issues that our colleagues raised during the focus group phase have not been addressed in the consultation paper. In the health libraries session, many of the questions were not directly answered. We don't feel our concerns are being heard.

To what extent is the proposal evidence based?
LIANZA (NZ) and CILIP have been held up as examples. How have they assessed the success of this program? Have we heard from anyone other than the architects of these programs about how successful they are?

==ALIA has not consulted with ALIA-accredited course providers.== Discussion with the education sector is vital as it will affect the viability of their courses.

==ALIA has not consulted with employers.== The new framework might not fit with organisational frameworks or expectations. This is particularly salient for the health library sector but is true for all sorts of libraries.

Risk assessment

It is unclear from the consultation paper whether any risk assessment has been conducted in relation to the proposal. We would like to see serious consideration given to the above issues, recognising that once the proposed solution is implemented it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reverse the decision.

Alternative suggestions

There might be alternative ways to encourage people into librarianship, to complete qualifications, improve diversity, and to increase ALIA membership and involvement.

- Make LIS qualifications more flexible, with greater recognition of prior learning. This would reduce the cost of the course, and duplication of learning for those who have relevant qualifications or experience.
- Encourage employers to provide cadetships to provide experience to new graduates.
- Introduce traineeships whereby people could study while working. Encourage employers to use this option, particularly in regional areas where it is difficult to find LIS qualified staff.
- Provide scholarships for qualifications, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee, low income and other minority groups (including financial assistance to cover the unpaid work experience portion of the degree). Encourage employers to provide these to existing or potential staff.
- Encourage greater uptake of ALIA membership from existing qualified librarians. How does ALIA provide value to members? What are the benefits of joining? What would encourage higher uptake and what are the roadblocks? What proportion of librarians are currently ALIA members?
- Lobby the government to address the issue around digital infrastructure/digital divide so people in rural and remote areas can study and continue to work in their communities.
- A greater focus on address diversity at the local level to meet needs of local communities, for example, the excellent project that YPRL introduced to partner with the local Somali community (Ferguson, 2022).
- Advocate for higher salaries for librarians, so that it is more worthwhile to gain further qualifications in LIS.

Conclusion

The proposed Professional Pathways will have far-reaching consequences for the LIS profession and the viability of the profession itself. We appreciate the efforts so far of the Professional Pathways team and acknowledge that change is needed. Nevertheless, we would like further consideration of the issues we have raised and ask that ALIA reconsider the proposal to remove the tertiary education requirement.

Now more than ever, libraries have an important role in our society in providing trusted information for users. As noted in ALIA's core values policy statement, "Australia's library and information services are fundamental to the free flow of information and ideas"(ALIA, 2018). We believe that a strong library sector with properly trained librarians is crucial to effectively uphold these values.

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