Establishing Professional Pathways to Facilitate a Sustainable and Educated School Library Workforce in Australia

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Introduction

This paper presents an overview of a research project commissioned by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in November 2021 to address the specialised needs of school libraries within the context of ALIA's (2022) vision for developing a professional pathways framework to achieve:

> A diverse, valued and supported Library and Information Sector (LIS) workforce with the skills, knowledge and ethics needed to deliver quality library and information services that anticipate and meet the needs of the population.

This was a direct result of Dr Gillian Hallam's (2022a) work on the *Professional Pathways Technical Report* which involved an extensive literature review and environmental scan in Australia and overseas, to inform the development of future frameworks which align with current and emerging developments in the international LIS field. As part of this review, Hallam identified three areas of specialist LIS practice that would require bespoke treatment to support their more complex needs, one of which was the school library sector.

Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this project was "to ensure that library and information professionals working in school libraries are clearly differentiated, appropriately qualified through relevant,

contemporary course content, and able to access appropriate and recognised continuing professional development wherever they are in Australia, through their state association and through national providers". The project's aim was to identify necessary skills for school library staff; to support library and information science (LIS) course development and accreditation; potential micro-credentials for LIS and non-LIS qualified staff; and continuing professional development (CPD) for those working in school libraries.

Given school library staff often face significant challenges including limited resources and isolation, and a lack of understanding of their role amongst their peers and employers (ALIA, ASLA, & AEU, 2020), the project was also designed to identify professional learning challenges and opportunities not just for teacher librarians, but also those librarians, library technicians and library assistants working in schools. The inclusion of all types of school library employees differentiates this project to other research undertaken in the school library sector, the majority of which have focused solely on the status of teacher librarians in Australian schools.

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of relevant literature will be presented in the full paper regarding the school library context in Australia; the role, nature and impacts of school libraries in supporting teaching and learning in schools; and an examination of research undertaken regarding the status of school library staffing, qualifications and training, and continued professional development (CPD).

Methodology

The project employed an initial scoping phase which involved a review of the literature and professional documentation specifically targeting the school library context across all Australian states and territories and across all three school education sectors – government, Catholic and independent systems. The second phase involved a series of individual interviews with key stakeholders (including LIS academics and education system support staff), and focus groups with four main school library employee groups, i.e., Teacher

Librarians, Librarians, Library Technicians and Library Assistants. A total of 47 participants were involved in focus groups and interviews to identify current continuing and professional development needs of the four employee groups, and identify gaps in current offerings and areas to be addressed or needing greater emphasis. Participants were also invited to share any concerns, issues, or challenges they had experienced as a school library employee, and to suggest any possible changes or solutions to address these.

The third phase of the project involved the design and implementation of an online questionnaire (the 'ALIA Professional Pathways in School Libraries Employee Survey') to broaden the scoping and gap analysis to a larger population of school library employees in Australia. The five-part survey instrument consisted of a total of 28 questions (some included sub-questions), with the majority of these collecting quantitative responses. Some of the questions also provided an open comment section for respondents to provide further detail (qualitative responses). A copy of the complete survey instrument will be included as an appendix in the full paper.

The data collection period commenced in Term 1 from February 28 and the survey closed on April 30, 2022. 693 full responses were collected. Quantitative data were analysed using a combination of SurveyMonkey and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were generated from the demographic data in terms of counts and percentages, along with comparative analyses of responses by employee group, position title, qualifications, and ALIA membership. Qualitative data sets were coded and analysed based on emerging themes and issues, then specific qualitative responses were identified to support key findings and provide examples of school library employee voice to illustrate concerns, issues, and challenges raised, or solutions and recommendations shared by respondents.

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

Focus group and survey data highlighted the important role of qualified school library staff, and the emergence of greater diversity in backgrounds, positions, and roles of those working in school library teams. Results from the survey provided a snapshot of the nature and demographics of those currently working in school libraries in Australian schools. The four

main employee groups were well-represented in this sample to identify patterns or trends, particularly those working as TLs, library technicians and library assistants.

The survey sample highlighted the school library workforce as being predominantly female, and a significantly ageing school library workforce, with a predominance of employees over the age of 40 years, with more than 60% aged 50 years or over, and only 15.6% of school library employees 39 years of age or less. This suggests the majority of Australia's school library workforce (no matter what employee group) do come to employment in the school library sector later in their careers, and once they gain employment, the majority remain working in the school library sector until retirement.

This has implications for movement of employees (or lack thereof) within the school library sector, with few opportunities for either qualified LIS or non-qualified LIS people to enter the sector at times and does raise issues regarding succession planning and sustainability for the school library sector into the future.

One area of concern regarding sustainability for a skilled school library workforce involved those working as paraprofessionals, with over three-quarters of library assistants working in part-time positions only and just over one-quarter (28%) of them being employed on either a fixed-term contract and casual basis. Therefore, a lack of full-time employment combined with a lack of permanency (along with other issues such as 'term-time only' contracts) could impact the number of these employees actively seeking professional pathway options and/or willingness to invest in further education or training.

Other key findings include issues with position/salary scale disparity, underemployment of those holding a professional qualification, a blurring of the lines between position titles and roles and level of employment, few pathway options for those wishing to become a qualified TL, not attracting younger people into the school library sector, significant number of library assistants working in school libraries without any LIS qualification or training, and professionalism and professional identity within the school library context presenting key challenges given the disparate backgrounds and nature of those currently working in the sector, to name a few.

A comprehensive summary of findings and implications will be presented in detail in the full paper.

Implications and Conclusions

The following recommendations are based on the findings and conclusions, while also taking into consideration the ALIA Professional Pathways Board's recommendations in response to the *Professional Pathways Technical Report* (Hallam 2022b, p. 4). This was to ensure recommendations regarding professional pathway initiatives for the school library sector were closely aligned (and not competing) with ALIA's broader Professional Pathways Strategy.

1. Establish a Professional Pathways for School Libraries Working Party.
2. Clearly articulate existing pathways and identify new pathways for those working in, or aspiring to work, in the school library sector.
3. Work with educators to develop new professional pathways options at both the TAFE and university levels (including micro-credentialled programs for school library employees).
4. Develop an employer engagement strategy targeting school systems as employers of school library workers to promote professional pathways, and further education.
5. Establish a suite of CPD targeting the school library sector to build core knowledge, skills, values, and ethics of all employee groups working in school libraries to assist in strengthening professional identity (both individually and collectively) and professional engagement of school library employees in Australia.

Further detail of each recommendation will be presented in the full paper.

References

Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). (2022). *Professional Pathways Initiative.* https://professionalpathways.alia.org.au/

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Biography

Dr. Lyn Hay is Director of the Leading Learning Institute and has worked in K-12 and tertiary education for over 35 years as a teacher, teacher librarian, university lecturer and researcher, and educational consultant.