Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

I make this submission in my role as Program Director of the Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Management; and the Masters of Library and Information Management programs (courses) offered by the School of Computer and Information Science at the University of South Australia.

I have been an academic with the University of South Australia for over 20 years, following several years of employment in both the Commonwealth and State Public Service. I hold a PhD in Information Systems which focused on virtual communications and have numerous published articles in scholarly journals and international conferences in the research areas of: the digital divide (libraries and their impact on regional and remote communities), communities of practice, virtual communications and sports information systems. I have been teaching *Information Technology Project Management* for many years as well as *Digital Recordkeeping*, and *Contemporary Issues in Information Systems*.

The purpose of this paper is to present an argument for improved educational and employment opportunities for Teacher Librarians in Australian schools, by focusing on the role of higher education in achieving these outcomes. The following terms of reference are those which are most applicable from the tertiary educational perspective:

- the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to educational and community outcomes, especially literacy;
- the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians;
- the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Recommendations

This paper presents a summary of recommendations, followed by a discussion of the rationale which led to the development of these recommendations. While some evidence is anecdotal, appropriate supporting literature has been provided when available.

The following actions are recommended:
- Commonwealth-supported subsidised University places are extended (beyond the current undergraduate teaching awards) to encourage qualified teachers to pursue postgraduate studies in the Teacher Librarian streams;
- The Government (either at the State or Commonwealth level) provide incentives for qualified teachers to continue studying Library and Information Management at the post-graduate level.
  - This can be achieved through the provision of scholarships for qualified teachers continuing to study, or
  - By providing prizes to the top graduating student(s) from the Teacher Librarian streams;
- There are incentives for students to complete tertiary studies in Teacher Librarian steams through the provision of improved working conditions and a review of career paths aligning with other teaching staff nationally;
- The Commonwealth Government provides incentives for further academic research into the Teacher-Librarian discipline area. This may be in the form of Australian Research Council or other nationally competitive grants;
- There are incentives for Universities to ensure their programs/courses are well served by academic staff who are qualified to teach and actively research in the Teacher Librarian discipline;
  - This can be achieved through priority teaching and learning grants and focus on Teacher Librarians through funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
- The establishment of a peak body and working group which would consider:
  - A review of the postgraduate programs/courses for Teacher Librarians; and

- o National policy and standards for the working conditions (including remuneration that is commensurate with qualifications and experience) of Teacher Librarians in school libraries.

Rationale in Support of these Recommendations

Digital Divide, Education and Information Literacy

There is no doubt that in general Education for all levels of society is perceived as a critical issue, and has the ability to evoke strong public opinion and argument.

Low literacy rates, slow adoption of technology and the lack of infrastructure development are some common barriers for Education in developing countries, leading to decreasing economic growth compared with industrialised countries, and resulting in the acceleration of the 'digital divide' (Sein & Ahmad 2001).

Why does this matter for Australia?

The digital divide implies a widening of the gulf between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' with respect to information, communication and technology (ICT) throughout the world. The digital divide is not restricted to developing countries; just as low information literacy is not restricted to developing countries. However, Education within a library environment can have broad and distinct changes to society, especially in developing countries at the community level (Ashraf, Swatman & Hanisch 2008).

One major mitigating response to the digital divide is the development of ICT. Such a response includes promoting the availability of more computers, widening the telecommunication network, and hastening the growth of internet service providers (ISP) (Mansell & Wehn 1998; Kumar & Best 2006). The federal funding from the Digital Education Revolution and the Building Education Revolution initiatives have improved these resources.

However, studies have shown that providing more computers does not necessarily result in bridging the digital divide, but may actually restrict access to basic needs, such as education, healthcare, capital, shelter, employment, clean water and food (Young, Ridley & Ridley 2001) for those who are not able to process the information (Ashraf, Hanisch & Swatman, 2009).

More recently the debate concerning the digital divide has broadened beyond physical access to computers and telecommunications. Today, the digital divide debate includes issues such as access to information and the additional resources, such as content, language, education, literacy, community and social resources which allow people to use technology. Hence, the current challenge of bridging the digital divide can be expressed in terms of the dimensions of societal concerns, including increasing people's opportunities, developing appropriate content and people's capacities in using ICT (Amariles et al. 2006; Baliamoune-Lutz 2003; Mansell & Wehn 1998).

Developed countries are connecting with modern technologies that accelerate their economic growth, enabling them to enjoy unprecedented opportunities and improving their standard of living. While small initiatives can provide quite dramatic changes in developing countries (Ashraf et al, 2008) there remains the digital divide in many areas of developed countries (Brown, 2008). This notion is further exacerbated when considering the widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' of information literacy and information management skills (Brown, 2008).

The important point from this discourse is that people need skills to access, process and then use information. Without these skills, people will experience the digital divide, and become further isolated, no matter how developed their nation may be.

The contemporary organisation involves accessing and managing resources in a world which is now dominated by digital records. Standards and systems, such as functional taxonomies (Mine, 2007), are an essential part of contemporary organisations, to the extent that the Commonwealth Government has mandated digital recordkeeping policies and procedures (National Archives of Australia, 2006), so that digital records are maintained for evidence and with information integrity. As Cunningham and Phillips (2005, p.303) state 'evidence of government decisions and activities, including government online

activities, needs to be captured and preserved in an accessible form for as long as it is needed, in some cases indefinitely'. In order for digital records to be considered reliable sources of evidence without integrity concerns, further research in this area is required and will continue to be required as technology advances and digital records integrity are at risk of being compromised.

In Australia, because Education is perceived as important and worthy, there exists the opportunity, and more importantly the responsibility, to ensure the next generation of information managers are ready for their roles in the contemporary organisation.

For people to develop the skills and attributes necessary for working in a contemporary organisation, all students, (from primary, secondary to tertiary levels) need qualified educators to ensure information literacy and management is fostered. It is pertinent to recall that some current school children will become information managers, who create and implement future policies concerning the management of information. Other children will become knowledge workers who access, process and use information in their daily work.

Role of the Teacher-Librarian

With this mind, it is essential to determine how best to ensure that students receive up-to-date education pertaining to access, organisation and management of information. It is the dual role of teacher and librarian (or information manager) that is required in Australian schools to fulfil that role. As Spence (2002) reminds us:

> a (qualified) teacher librarian can contribute to the school community to a significant degree, particularly with ongoing curricular changes and ICT impacting on teacher workload. Teacher librarians ease that workload, not by re-shelving books but by using their expertise to collaborate with teachers; not by covering books but by providing valuable professional development in the use of ICT; not by checking books in and out but by joining committees to develop policies and practices that enhance student learning; not by chasing overdues but by working directly with students to develop their reading and information literacy skills.

With federal funding initiatives such as the Building Education Revolution and the Digital Education Revolution, it is incumbent on educators at all levels to provide not only the infrastructure, but the skills and ability so that the asset of 'information' is not poorly managed or compromised (Cunningham & Phillips, 2005).

The role of teacher librarian is now more important than ever. Their skill base and knowledge requirements have increased substantially with the digital age, to the extent that undergraduate education alone is not sufficient for this role. From a tertiary perspective, the dual role requires both undergraduate teaching qualifications combined with postgraduate information management/library and information management qualifications.

Educators of future knowledge workers must keep pace with the change in ICT. For example, Web 2.0 technologies have impacted society dramatically, but the measure of this impact is yet to be fully researched or published in the literature. There is a danger of trivialising the impact of Web 2.0 technologies and assuming that younger generations 'who are good with computers' will know how to access information and source the correct information. From a business perspective, the efficient and effective use of human resources as well as information management is necessary for business strategy and ultimately competitive advantage. Hence further research by information management academics is needed to inform public debate. However, without educational pathways for information management academics and teacher-librarians this expertise will diminish.

Following this, there is the potential risk that our students will not have the skills to engage professionally in the information technologies/environment. This is likely to impact national productivity, as access to information is now critical to the competitiveness of organisations.

Together with other government initiatives, including the Information Economy and the National High-Speed Broadband Network, it is relevant to note that information is abundant and growing rapidly. But access to correct information is problematic. The challenge therefore for teacher-librarians is to ensure that students are 'knowledge rich' but not overloaded with information, such that they cannot distinguish

between what is needed to improve productivity and what is not. It is essential that education plays a significant role to ensure that resources are used effectively and that outcomes of such initiatives are not diminished.

From this background, there clearly exists the need to both further research in the academic discipline of information management and the encouragement of increased numbers of qualified teacher-librarians in Australia. To increase both areas, incentives are required. This will develop a strong nexus between research and education, therefore supporting further the Digital Education Revolution initiative.

It is recommended that:

- Commonwealth-supported subsidised University places are extended (beyond the current undergraduate teaching awards) to encourage qualified teachers to pursue postgraduate studies in the Teacher Librarian streams;

By continuing with the reduction in costs to tertiary students who have completed a teaching degree and then continue with a library and information management award, this is an incentive for more students to develop skills which they can employ in the classrooms.

- The Government (either at the State or Commonwealth level) provide incentives for qualified teachers to continue studying Library and Information Management at the post-graduate level.
  - This can be achieved through the provision of scholarships for qualified teachers continuing to study, or
  - By providing prizes to the top graduating student(s) from the Teacher Librarian streams;

By providing both scholarships and prizes for high achieving teacher-librarian students, this would increase both the status of the awards and the student numbers.

- Incentives for students to complete tertiary studies in Teacher Librarian steams through the provision of improved working conditions and a review of career paths in line with other teaching staff nationally

Ultimately, students will undertake programs/courses that provide strong career paths, financial security and job satisfaction. As these roles are of national significance in ensuring that Government initiatives succeed, then it follows that the teacher-librarian role requires remuneration and conditions which are commensurate with their value.

From a University perspective, increased places for students studying teacher-librarian qualifications are required, as well as incentives for academics to devote their research time to information management issues.

At the University of South Australia, over the past few years there has been a steady demand (16% of postgraduate students undertaking the library and information management programs) who become teacher-librarians. 15% of the 2008 graduates of library and information management are employed as Teacher-Librarians; while 17% of the 2009 graduates of library and information management are also employed as Teacher-Librarians. Currently 16% of the library and information management students are studying the teacher-librarian stream. However, despite some recent local press, this figure is considered inadequate to fulfil the number of available places in schools in the state of SA.

A concern is that without continued strong tertiary student demand, Universities cannot justify the devotion of their teaching and research resources to what industry (Australian schools) consider is a key workplace need. The shortfall of qualified Teacher-Librarians in Australian schools is likely to impact on national productivity in the future. Hence, the Government needs to act quickly and decisively to improve demand, while at the same time encouraging research. Such incentives provide an important solution.

Hence, it is recommended that:

- The Commonwealth Government provides incentives for further academic research into the Teacher-Librarian discipline area. This may be in the form of Australian Research Council or other nationally competitive grants

By providing the above incentives, career academics would be further empowered to justify fully to their University that the discipline area of information management is worthy and viable. This would also ensure quality research continues and the status of the relevant awards is then acknowledged.

- Incentives for Universities to ensure their programs/courses are well served by academic staff who are qualified to teach and actively research in the Teacher Librarian discipline;
  - This can be achieved through priority teaching and learning grants and focus on Teacher Librarians through funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

By providing the above incentives career academics will have the ability to investigate further emerging teaching and learning issues or new methodologies associated with the discipline area.

It is further recommended that:

- The establishment of a peak body and working group which would consider:
  - A review of the postgraduate programs/courses for Teacher Librarians; and
  - National policy and standards for the working conditions (including remuneration that is commensurate with qualifications and experience) of Teacher Librarians in school libraries.

Through the establishment of a national working group, which reviews both the tertiary level study and the career opportunities for teacher-librarians, a consensus about the role in Education, and more specifically in Australian schools would be possible.

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