



Where are they now? A survey of Charles Sturt University library and information management graduates

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Charles Sturt University School of Information Studies undertook a graduate destination survey of students who had completed library and information management courses, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in 2003–2004. One hundred and twenty-three responses (from a total of 256 sent out – 48 per cent) were received and from these it was found that 87 per cent of graduates were in either full-time work or part-time work by choice. Less than 5 per cent were unemployed and looking for work. Nearly 75 per cent of those working were in 'library' jobs with only a small percentage in other information-related work. Three quarters of graduates had prior library experience with 65 per cent working in libraries during their study. Eighty-two per cent of graduates reported that their course of study had been useful or very useful in providing skills relevant to their current position. While generally, the results of the survey were very positive both for the individuals and for the profession as a whole, there was anecdotal evidence that suggested that inexperienced and/or older graduates found difficulty in gaining suitable employment.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH WAS TO OBTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT THE EMPLOYMENT status of library and information management (LIM) undergraduate and postgraduate students who completed their qualifications from Charles Sturt University (CSU) in 2003 and 2004. It is intended to be the first step in a longitudinal study of graduate employment from these courses. Although CSU's LIM group has kept informal records about graduate employment in the past which have helped inform decisions about course marketing, it was felt to be important to undertake a more detailed and thorough survey in order to better evaluate the success or otherwise of course offerings. Thus another major objective of this study was to obtain data on students' perceptions of how enrolment in and completion of the CSU degree helped them find employment.

These students had all studied via distance education (DE); Charles Sturt University prides itself on being a leader in this field. The School of Information Studies (SIS) has been delivering librarianship and information management studies through this method for over 30 years. It comprises three distinct groups, library and information management (LIM), teacher-librarianship (T-L), and information technology. From 2007, following a faculty restructure, information technology will move into another school, leaving SIS as the only school dedicated solely to LIM and T-L studies in Australia.

According to Hallam (2006:5), who used data collected in the ALIA Annual Course Returns, in 2005 in Australia there were around 1550 students enrolled in LIM/T-L graduate programs and about 950 students enrolled in undergraduate programs. CSU Division of Planning and Audit figures indicate that in 2005, 570 undergraduate LIM students were enrolled (60 per cent of undergraduate LIM students in Australia), and 846 postgraduate students in LIM and T-L enrolled (54.6 per cent of postgraduate LIM/T-L students in Australia), making SIS very much the largest school in the country.

The total number of LIM/TL students graduating in Australia in the two years 2003–2004 (the years covered by this survey) was around 1000 for graduate courses and 470 for undergraduates (Hallam 2006:6–7), comparable with figures from a decade previously of 1048 and 303 respectively (Willard, Wilson and Pawley 2001). Of the total graduates for the 2003–2004 period, CSU's Planning and Audit returns indicated the university graduated 441 LIM/TL postgraduates (44 per cent of the total Australia wide), and 200 undergraduates (42.5 per cent) of LIM undergraduates in Australia (CSU 2006).

The current survey included only LIM graduates (graduates of T-L were excluded), with students from every state and territory in Australia. While there were also students graduating from countries such as New Zealand, Hong Kong and Mauritius, and small numbers of students in places such as Singapore, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, UAE, and USA, they were not included in this survey in order to focus solely on the Australian situation.

The CSU survey was adapted from Genoni and Smith's (2005) study of Curtin University's library and records management graduate employment outcomes, using similar questions. This enabled a level of comparison over time between the surveys and also provided a basis on which to build the survey instrument. The survey was

sent out to CSU LIM graduates in November 2005. Graduates surveyed were from the Bachelor of Arts (Library and Information Science), Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Library and Information Management), and the Master of Applied Science (Library and Information Management) programs.

Employment

In addition to graduate destination surveys dealing with study and employment outcomes (most notably Genoni and Smith), other recent studies have tended to focus on the skills required by employers of graduates. Kennan, Willard and Wilson (2006) analysed job advertisements for library and information studies (LIS) graduates in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 1974–2004. Their results found, as expected, an increased demand for computer and information technology skills. They also noted an increased demand for skills in information 'behavioural' characteristics such as teamwork and interpersonal skills, in addition to the need for 'traditional' competencies. Their results also indicated a decrease in positions calling for ALIA-recognised qualifications. Over the period, there was an increase in positions calling for previous experience.

Marion et al (2005), in a 2004 analysis of job advertisements in Australia and USA, reported similar results with the emphasis on the importance of good communication, team and interpersonal skills. They noted that, overall, employers in Australia and the USA are looking for 'many of the same skills and competencies'. Willard, Wilson and Cole (2003), in their survey of LIS graduates from the University of NSW 1997–2001, reported similar results, although they found a demand for cataloguing skills as well. Middleton (2003) surveyed graduates from Queensland University of Technology courses and identified a number of skills needed by graduates, covering areas such as communication, information service delivery skills and management skills. Myburgh (2003), in contrast to Bajjaly's similar US-based study (2005), concluded that information professionals need to be provided with high-level communication and interpersonal skills as well as managerial and IT skills to help them meet the demands of working in a rapidly changing world.

Thus one of the major aims of the current survey was to ascertain the relevance or otherwise of the CSU qualification in fitting our graduates for the employment market.

Methodology

In addition to the survey categories devised by Genoni and Smith and adopted here, students were encouraged to contribute free-text comments throughout the questionnaire about their experiences. This proved valuable in getting a more personal understanding of some of the findings and allowed students to expand on their responses.

Lists of 2003–2004 graduates were obtained from the division of Student Administration at the University. The survey was piloted in October 2005. One minor change was made after the pilot (relating to the terminology used for Field of Work categories). The final survey was then posted in November 2005 to 256 graduates residing in Australia. Inevitably, one of the limitations of a study based on student contact details two or more years old was that some of the students' addresses had

changed since graduation. No attempt was made to find new addresses, and the 12 surveys returned as 'address unknown' were discounted from the total.

The results were collated and SPSS software used to analyse the data. The free-text comments were also collated and reviewed as part of the overall evaluation process. As anticipated, they frequently provided a valuable insight into the thoughts and feelings of individuals.

Student cohort

Sixty-five responses were received from those completing the BA (49.6 per cent); 28 from graduate diplomates (43.1 per cent) and 30 from masters graduates (50 per cent), making an overall response rate for the survey of 48 per cent. Within this cohort, the majority of students completing were mature age (60 per cent in the 30–50 year old range) with only 20 per cent of those completing their qualification being 30 or under. Nearly 20 per cent were 51 or older. These figures were fairly constant regardless of the level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate).

This confirms Genoni and Smith's finding (2005:340) that 'the information professions attract a decidedly mature age group of students', suggesting that many people move into librarianship as a second career or are already working in the industry but upgrading their qualifications. For older graduates without that experience there were a number of responses commenting on the problems they faced. Thus one noted that 'as an older student I think I underestimated the difficulty of changing careers' with another concerned that 'it is very hard for mature-age people to obtain work in libraries as they are often overlooked in favour of 'young' graduates'.

The ABS Labour Force Survey (2005) also reinforces the view of librarianship as a generally 'grey' profession: librarians have a median age of 46, and close to 70 per cent are in the 35–54 age group. This contrasts with the rest of the workforce, which has only 46 per cent in this age bracket, making the ABS comment that 'librarians are markedly older than the average for Australian occupations'. Given this concern over the greying of the workforce, it is reassuring that 50 per cent of the respondents to this survey were under 40. It appears that this may be a trend, with recent figures for the undergraduate intake at CSU showing more than 60 per cent of new students under 40, with 30 per cent under 30 years old.

All of the courses are taught in distance mode and thus physical location should not really be an issue for students. However, Table 1 below indicates the very strong preponderance of graduates from NSW regional and city areas and very low numbers from Victoria, which might also be considered part of a natural catchment area for a campus based equidistantly between Sydney and Melbourne. While this is true for the period surveyed, recent admissions statistics indicate that later intakes have included much higher numbers of Victorian students (equivalent to Queensland), possibly indicating the impact of the closure of Victorian LIS undergraduate courses in recent years.

Table 1: Place of residence, all students (per cent)

	NSW	ACT	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	Other
Metropolitan	28.5	4.1	5.7	13.0	4.9	-	1.6	-	4.0
Non-metro	28.5	-	-	8.1	-	1.6	-	-	-
Total	57.0	4.1	5.7	21.1	4.9	1.6	1.6	0	4.0

Employment outcomes for LIM graduates

The survey showed that 66.7 per cent of respondents were in full-time employment. This compares to Genoni and Smith's (2005) results which found 70.5 per cent of graduates working full-time. More specifically, the CSU survey also found that 87 per cent of graduates were either in full-time employment, or in part-time employment by choice (20.3 per cent). In total, 26.8 per cent of graduates were in part-time employment (by choice or not), confirming that the librarian workforce has a large part-time component, although lower than the general total reported by Teece (2006) that 37 per cent of librarians were in part-time positions. In addition, more than one-third of CSU students who were employed while studying were in part-time positions. This is also noted by Hallam (2006:8) who reports that

Anecdotally, it appears that graduates often obtain part-time work in the first instance – either while still studying, or after completing the course – and secure full-time work within 6–12 months. In recent months, however, students in South East Queensland have reported that most jobs on offer are in fact for full-time work, and they would actually prefer part-time employment.

Government statistics show that librarians have a below-average proportion of full-time jobs (67 per cent), (Australian JobSearch 2005) and the current CSU survey supports this with 66.7 per cent of respondents in full-time employment. (See Table 2)

Table 2: Employment status (per cent)

	Undergraduate	Grad Diploma	Masters	All graduates
Full-time work	69.3	57.2	70.1	66.7
Part-time work (prefer full)	9.2	3.6	3.3	6.5
Part-time work by choice	16.9	25.0	23.3	20.3
Unemployed – not looking	1.5	0.8
Unemployed – looking	3.1	7.1	3.3	4.1
No response	..	7.1	0	1.6

Kennan, Willard and Wilson (2006) found that despite their expectations there was no evidence of an increase in the casual LIM workforce. This confirms the trend noted by Teece (1998) and Genoni and Smith, the latter stating 'that indeed there is evidence of a shift towards permanency rather than contract employment' (2005:345). This has been further confirmed by this survey, which indicates that for all graduates, the vast majority were in 'permanent' or tenured positions. (See Table 3)

Table 3: Form of employment (per cent)

	All graduates
Permanent/tenured	87.2
Limited term contract	6.0
Casual	6.8

Unemployment

A federal government website, Australian JobSearch (2005), reports that unemployment for librarians is low (2 per cent), which again is reflected in the survey outcomes shown in Table 2 with 4.1 per cent of respondents describing themselves as unemployed but actively looking for work. These results do not however, indicate whether graduates may have taken alternative work or accepted something a lot less than their ideal, as some of the additional comments received in the survey suggest: 'I am currently over-qualified but I am seeking a more appropriate position', or '...the Masters degree was not sufficient to gain employment as a LIBRARIAN'.

An interesting comparison can be made when isolating the responses from BA(LIS) graduates in this survey. In the Australia-wide Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), which surveys bachelor degree graduates only, the figure nationally for all bachelor graduates unemployed and seeking full-time employment in 2005 was 9.6 per cent. (Graduate Careers Australia, 2005:3). In the GDS for 2005 for CSU BA(LIS) graduates it was 2.2 per cent, and in this survey it was 3.1 per cent. As Table 4 shows, this is the best result for CSU graduates for several years, and significantly better than the national average. Unfortunately, the range of fluctuation over the years makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions from these results.

The much lower figure shown for 2005 is hard to explain but could be due to an improved response rate (93 per cent, with 62 out of 67 surveys returned) which returned an unemployment figure (2.2 per cent) closer to that found in the current survey (3.1 per cent). Both these figures support the findings of the Australian JobSearch survey of low unemployment for librarians.

Table 4: CSU BA(LIS) graduates available for and seeking full-time employment (Graduate Destination Survey)

Year graduated	Percentage seeking f-t employment
2000	10.0
2001	9.3
2002	8.0
2003	11.9
2004	13.3
2005	2.2

It should be noted that while the current survey sought information from graduates between 18 months and two years after completion, the GDS collects its data about four months after completion. Further, the GDS sample for CSU BA(LIS) each year comprises 30–60 returns, and has a response rate as high as 90 per cent (reflecting the short time period between graduation and survey) while for this current survey 65 undergraduate responses were received, around a 50 per cent return rate.

Genoni and Smith (2005) noted that between their two surveys there was an increase in full-time work and a decline in the number of those unemployed and looking for work. The number of graduates who had been employed 'continuously' or 'fairly continuously' improved to 83.2 per cent in their latest survey. The current CSU survey found that for all respondents, 95 per cent reported being 'continuously' or 'fairly continuously' employed – an impressive figure. This despite the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) reporting future job prospects for librarians as 'average'.

In the longer term (2010–11), Australian JobSearch reports that the employment prospects for librarians are expected to fall slightly.

This contrasts somewhat with the view expressed by Holt and Strock (2005) of the US situation that there is a 'cause for alarm... especially in finding an entry-level job'. Such anecdotal evidence is supported in Australia to some degree by some of the comments received in the survey and from recent discussions on a course forum where current CSU students discussed the difficulties of finding appropriate employment. Comments such as 'I had to be persistent and imaginative to get myself to this place'; 'People keep telling me that, in order to get a good position, I need to consider moving somewhere less "desirable"' and the common complaint of 'It's a perplexing situation; you need a job to get experience and you need experience to get a job' elicited strong support from other students on the forum. These discussions seem to reflect widely held views.

Field of work

Willard, Wilson and Cole (2003) noted that graduates are finding a 'range of information work' and that skill in information management 'increases performance in many positions'. However, the current survey reported 75 per cent of students describing their field of work as 'librarianship' with only small numbers employed in related information work. (See Table 5) This suggests that for most CSU graduating students, the traditional fields are still the predominant source of employment.

Table 5: Field of work, percentage of CSU students

Area of employment	Percentage of graduates
Librarianship	74.8
Computing	4.1
Records management	1.6
Other information related	7.3
Other	5.7
No reply	6.5

Level of work

The survey reported that the majority of graduates were employed at the professional level. However Table 6 indicates differences in employment levels between courses. One factor influencing the result may be the level of prior relevant work experience. Table 6 shows the high level of prior employment experience of undergraduates and Masters students compared to students undertaking the Graduate Diploma. This can partly be explained by the admissions criteria for the undergraduate degree which, amongst other criteria, calls for prior experience or prior relevant study. Masters students are generally upgrading their qualification, rather than undertaking initial training. This high level of prior experience also relates to the high proportion of older students undertaking all of the courses.

Table 6: Level of work since completion and prior work experience (percentage of graduates)

	Undergraduate	Graduate Diploma	Masters	All graduates
Professional	75.5	57.1	66.7	69.1
Para-professional	20.0	28.6	13.3	20.3
Non-professional information work	1.5	14.3	10.0	3.3
Other	3.0	..	10	7.3
Prior library experience	86.2	57.1	70.0	75.6

The majority of CSU students already had substantial library experience, with 97.6 per cent working either all or some of the time while studying, mostly in library or information-related work. Of these students, 67.4 per cent were working full time for at least part of the time they were studying. Table 7 indicates the range of employment those students were involved in during their study.

Table 7: Field of work while studying (percentage of graduates)

	Undergraduate	Graduate Diploma	Masters	All graduates
Librarianship	76.9	42.8	60.0	65.0
Other information related	7.7	17.9	13.3	11.4
Computing	4.6	10.7	10.0	7.3
Other	4.6	28.6	16.7	13.0
No response	6.2	3.3

For all students, it may be assumed that the course of study undertaken has enabled them to consolidate their choice of career with 65.0 per cent employed in librarianship while studying, rising to 74.8 per cent 18 months after graduation.

Relevance of degrees to subsequent professional employment

In their 1998–2002 survey, Genoni and Smith found that 92.4 per cent of respondents reported that their qualification was essential in, or helped with, gaining their current employment (2005:347). This compares with 83.6 per cent of the CSU graduates surveyed (see Table 8), many of whom commented favourably on the positive aspects of the course in gaining employment. Thus one graduate noted that 'the course work studied at CSU is completely applicable to my current position as Branch Manager....' with another noting 'the subjects were very relevant to my employment' and a third saying 'I use these skills every day in my work'. However, these perceptions are not shared by every graduate, with one responding that 'most of what I learnt on the course was theoretical and not applicable to my jobs' and another saying 'TAFE gave me much more practical skills which are much more useful in my work...in a small library' indicating the difficulty of designing subjects which meet the needs and expectations of every student and employer and possibly, a misunderstanding of the role of a university course of education compared to that at the TAFE level.

In addition, for undergraduates, many reported that choice of their non-library academic major made a significant contribution to their success in their current position. As one person said 'The IT strand (major) I took helped with my main role with electronic services and administration of a library management system'.

Table 8: Qualifications helped gain position (percentage of graduates)

	Professional (80 respondents)	Para-professional (24 respondents)	Other (12 respondents)	Total (116 respondents)
LIM degree essential	75	16.7	16.7	56.9
Not essential but helped	18.8	54.2	25	26.7
May have helped marginally	..	8.3	8.3	2.6
Was not relevant	6.3	20.8	50	13.8

Of those in professional positions, 93.8 per cent reported their degree as either essential or helping in gaining their position. This is to be expected, as the majority of these positions would call for some form of mandatory qualification. For the para-professional and other categories, the need for an LIM degree was less pronounced. Again, this is to be expected given that these positions rarely call for a fully professional qualification. It is interesting to note that many did report it as helping in gaining para-professional positions – possibly another form of ‘credential creep’.

In addition, 82.2 per cent of CSU respondents agreed that the skills learnt in their course were very useful or moderately useful in their current position. This suggests that the course content generally is meeting current professional needs and is relevant to graduates in their day-to-day work. In separate Course Experience Questionnaires, completed by CSU students each year, a considerable majority of undergraduate and graduate students of the LIS programs for 2005 agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped develop or sharpen the skills described in Table 9.

Table 9: Higher-level skills acquired during the course

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Problem solving	74	71
Analytical skills	79	88
Written communication	91	71
Planning	74	56

The current survey indicated that most students believed that the skills learnt through the course of study were generally relevant to their current positions. Over 87 per cent of those in professional positions and over 95 per cent in para-professional positions reported this knowledge as being moderately or very useful. Previous studies such as Kennan, Willard and Wilson (2006) have indicated the importance of behavioural attributes such as communication, team work and interpersonal skills in gaining positions in the library and information-related industries. The results shown in Tables 9 and 10 suggest these skills are being acquired or further developed during an LIS student’s course of study at CSU. This is further confirmed by a range of student comments –

- ‘the management component has shown itself to be of the most use...’
- ‘I learnt heaps which helped me add to my knowledge and provide better customer service’

- 'management topics have become particularly relevant as I have progressed, for example learning about change management and how people react to change means I have the ability to 'predict' how people will behave and can plan accordingly when implementing change'

Not everyone agrees, of course, with one student finding 'the coursework focused on management issues...fairly irrelevant'. Once again this emphasises the difficulty in meeting the needs and expectations of all students and employers.

Table 10: Skills learnt relevant to position

	Professional	Para-professional	Other
Very useful	63.7	45.8	33.3
Moderately useful	23.8	50.0	33.3
Occasionally useful	12.5	0	16.7
Not useful	0	4.2	16.7

Further study

Students were asked whether they were undertaking further study since completion of their LIS degree. A surprisingly high number of students (23 per cent) reported they were undertaking further study across a wide range of disciplines and at varying levels ranging from TAFE certificate to doctoral. Less than 25 per cent of those undertaking further study were doing so in library and information management, with a similar number undertaking studies in education.

Conclusion

For any course, keeping the balance between the need to be relevant to the profession (and retain accreditation), maintaining necessary academic standards and ensuring students find the course relevant and fulfilling is not an easy task. Given the rapid change in our profession over the last two decades, and its continuing evolution, ensuring course work remains relevant is an ongoing and challenging role for the university. Course accreditation by professional bodies provides one means of assessing the relevance and appropriateness of a particular course, another is feedback gained from recent graduates. Targeted surveys such as this, which look closely at the usefulness and impact of the course on graduates' work lives, make an important contribution to course development and our understanding of how the profession is developing.

The results, we believe, are encouraging for both CSU and the profession. The strong majority who report positively on the role of their course in acquiring relevant work skills to enable them to find a position and do well in it is encouraging, suggesting that generally, course content, design and delivery had met their needs. However, the need to maintain this relevance is the key to the long-term survival of the CSU course and is something of which the staff of the School of Information Studies is keenly aware. One interesting finding from this survey was the strong showing of 'library' positions as still, by a large degree, the main source of employment for CSU graduates. The rhetoric often delivered by LIS educators about fitting our graduates for the broad range of information and allied professions seems contradicted by the limited attraction of students to these fields or perhaps of employers in these areas looking at LIS graduates. Further research here would be useful.

While the figures reported in this study give cause for general optimism about employment prospects, the relevance of the course to students (and by extrapolation, to the profession), and perhaps an increasing number of younger people being attracted to the profession, it is also true that other sources, including anecdotal evidence, paint a less positive picture – for instance, the blog on Librarian Careers Information: Resources for Prospective Librarians (Australia) (Bhatt 2006).

Ongoing research, into graduate destinations and employer requirements, as well as investigations into wider perceptions of libraries, their role and staffing numbers and composition (particularly in the academic environment) is essential for the profession and its educators.

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Readers should note that while the Charles Sturt programs are currently titled Library and Information Management, and this name has been used throughout, the graduating students covered by this study were from the courses known as Library and Information Management (postgrad), and Library and Information Science (undergrad).

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