

RAILS 2023 Panel Proposal

Co-designing the Future of LIS in Australia through a Research-Practice-Education Partnership

Abstract

This panel is designed to elicit a robust discussion at the RAILS 2023 Symposium on the current status of LIS education, research, and practice. Many of the issues discussed resonate with LIS globally. The panel consists of an LIS researcher, and LIS practitioner who recruits LIS professionals at an academic institution and an LIS educator.

The assumption underlying this proposal is that librarianship and associated information fields are professions and that a university education informed by research is one of the factors required to qualify as a profession. The dwindling number of educational institutions offering librarianship, and the resulting loss of educators and researchers from within these institutions, has caused many issues and libraries are finding it more difficult to fill professional positions due to smaller pools of graduates.

The panel will begin with a brief (5-10 minute) opening position statement from the three panellists on three core areas of LIS: education, research, and professional practice. Following this, we will invite RAILS participants to imagine and co-design a sustainable future for LIS. We will do this through facilitating conversations and activities where dialogue and engagement generate new, shared meanings based on expert knowledge and lived experience.

Background

Education

University LIS education is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia, emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Wilson et al. 2012). It was seen as necessary for professional standing. This saw a rise in the academicization of LIS educators as universities require formal qualifications such as research masters and PhDs for academics (Wilson et al, 2010). Since then, changes in Australian higher education funding and priorities, perceived differing priorities between practitioner professionals and academic professionals (Nguyen & Hider, 2018; Middleton & Yates 2014), disagreements about whether LIS education should be “learning to be” or “learning to do” (Weech et al, 2029; Hider et al., 2023) and other factors have seen the decline in LIS programs in Australia from a high of 16 in 1988, to a more reasonable ten in 2008 (Wilson et al 2012), to only three in 2023 accepting new students.

Research

A report by Middleton and Yates (2014) commissioned by ALIA found that publications reflect different professional concerns for practitioners and academics. And while both practitioners and academics publish papers, the report does not differentiate between peer reviewed research publications and other types of publications. Disciplines (and thus the professions associated with them) need to be informed by research and it is likely (although not currently confirmed) that the greater proportion of LIS research in Australia is conducted and published by an ever-decreasing pool of LIS academics. Initiatives such as LISRA, RADAR and LARK Circles aim to bridge these gaps.

Professional Practice

For libraries, and for information and knowledge management organisations, it has become increasingly difficult to hire graduates with LIS degrees due to the dwindling pathways/supply of people entering the profession. This has been strongly felt for professional roles in academic libraries, where an LIS degree or equivalent experience is required. These issues were compounded by COVID-related retirements and redundancies. Increasingly non-librarians are being hired into librarian roles, people with administration, teaching or research experience, which has caused tensions within organisations. These people often require on the job training, sometimes “translation” to the world of libraries, and do not have a disciplinary background in LIS, making it challenging for them to engage in or with LIS research.

Co-designing the Future

Following 6-minute presentations from each of the three panellists, a co-design approach will be used to engage RAILS participants in topics that reflect the interests and expertise of those in attendance. Some of the issues discussed are likely to include:

1. **Communication and Awareness:** Researchers may not be aware of the practical challenges faced by librarians: librarians may not be aware of the latest research and developments in the field. How can we bridge these gaps?
2. **Research Relevance:** Some researchers may focus on theoretical or abstract topics. Practitioners may prioritise immediate operational concerns and not engage with the latest research findings. How can we improve the relevance and use of research in the field?
3. **Access to Research Outputs:** LIS Research is often locked behind paywalls or restricted access, limiting its availability to practising librarians who may benefit from the insights and findings. What are the options for open access initiatives?
4. **Institutional support:** Practising librarians often have limited time to engage with research due to their day-to-day operational responsibilities. Researchers may face pressure to publish frequently, which may affect the depth and rigour of their work. What institutional supports might help overcome these issues?
5. **Collaboration Opportunities:** Opportunities for meaningful collaboration between LIS education institutions, researchers, and practising librarians may be limited. How can we increase them?
6. **Skill Relevance and Professional Development:** Newly graduated librarians may find a disconnect between the knowledge and skills they acquired in their education and the demands of their jobs. How can these disconnects be addressed?

References

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