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The missing link? Alumni chapters and the professional development of librarians

Introduction

In the current dynamic information environment, the ongoing development of librarians' skills and abilities is a critical factor in ensuring the future of the profession. The responsibility for providing professional development opportunities has commonly been attributed to employers, professional associations and, to some extent, educational institutions. At the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), a new group is developing ways to support professionals in their career learning – *The Information Professionals* alumni chapter. The chapter was established in 2003 to build stronger links between QUT's library and information studies and teacher-librarianship programs, educators and graduates out in the field. This paper discusses the formation of *The Information Professionals* chapter and its success in achieving these aims. It reports on the outcomes of a pilot study evaluating chapter members' participation in alumni events as part of their continuing professional development (CPD) activities. The paper discusses future opportunities to enhance the role of the alumni chapter as a core part of members' CPD strategies and outlines suggested methods to further collaborate with the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) CPD programs.

Alumni associations in Australia

The word "alumni" describes a university's graduates and former students. In Australia, alumni associations do not have an established history of engagement with graduates, unlike the United States of America where alumni associations are valued, not only fundraising for scholarships and development, but for promotion of the university by acting as de facto recruiters and advocates, for adding knowledge and experience to teaching and research activities, and by providing assistance with mentoring, career and employment services (Baker, 1997; Dolbert, 2002; Sharda & Butler, 2004). Baker (1997, p328) notes that while the term "alumnus" may be unfamiliar to many Australian graduates, the statutes of Australian universities require institutions to keep in contact with their graduates and to demonstrate an ongoing interest in their educational development. QUT has recognised this role and identifies its objectives of alumni engagement as:

- Committing to the professionalism and lifelong learning of QUT graduates
- Contributing industry expertise to curriculum development and delivery
- Building relationships with graduates, business, professions and associations to enable mentoring programs, work experience and the like
- Gaining alumni assistance in fundraising and philanthropic ventures
- Including alumni in the university's decision making processes through membership of the university council and faculty committees (QUT Alumni Office, n.d., p23)

An alumni association for library and information science graduates

QUT has a thirty year history of providing library and information science (LIS) education. The concept of an alumni chapter for graduates of librarianship and teacher-librarianship qualifications evolved from three noteworthy innovations introduced at QUT's School of Information Systems. Firstly a survey of students entering and exiting the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies began to provide evidence on student expectations of both librarianship education and the profession (Hallam & Partridge, 2005). This was complemented by a research project examining the required discipline knowledge and generic capabilities of library and information professionals in the twenty-first century through focus groups with QUT alumni and other industry professionals (Hallam & Partridge, 2004). Thirdly a formal student mentoring partnership was established in partnership with ALIA to connect students with professionals (Hallam & Gissing, 2003). The theme which emerged in all three activities was the need for an ongoing link through which dialogue between current industry professionals, LIS educators and professional associations could be continued (Hallam & Partridge, 2004). It was thought that an alumni chapter could create opportunities to maintain these channels of communication and address issues about the lifelong learning and continuing professional development of information professionals.

From this background, *The Information Professionals* alumni chapter was initiated in 2003 by QUT academic staff Helen Partridge and Gillian Hallam who recruited a group of volunteers, all recent graduates (one to four years post-study), to form the first chapter organising committee. An alumni chapter is defined as "a formal, organised association of alumni wishing to network with other QUT alumni for professional, industry, faculty, geographic or special interest purposes" (QUT Alumni Office, n.d., p2). The concept of an alumni chapter was welcomed by the graduates and the committee established the chapter with a three-fold goal:

- to host social events;
- to encourage networking among its members; and
- to create professional development opportunities for past, present and future students.

Through the participation of graduates in the chapter, the committee aimed to strengthen links between QUT and library and information professionals. Membership was extended to include graduates of all librarianship, teacher-librarianship and information management programs at QUT with the aim of increasing interaction between information professionals working in a diverse range of school, academic, public and corporate libraries and settings. Former and current staff members of QUT are also able to join. Membership is free of charge. The chapter was launched in February 2004 with twenty-nine foundation members. Membership has grown to eighty at the time of writing.

The Information Professionals alumni chapter has held three to four events per year with an average attendance of thirty-five people at each event. Chapter activities have offered members and guests an opportunity to learn more about their profession and to develop their professional skills. Events have included:

- Presentations by international guest speakers (British academics Professor Nick Moore in 2006 and Bidy Fisher in 2004),
- Discussion forum on the Brisbane City Council Library's "One Book One Brisbane" campaign

- Information session on QUT's new Masters programs in information management and teacher librarianship
- Presentation on international job exchanges by an alumni member
- Mini-EBL Conference showcasing speakers from the Third Evidence Based Librarianship Conference (held in conjunction with ALIA)

In 2004 a bursary was awarded for registration costs for a member to attend the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) conference at the Gold Coast. A recent popular addition to the events calendar is the monthly "Monkey Monday" gatherings held in the evenings at an inner-city cafe. This social gathering has attracted new members to engage in networking in an informal and comfortable setting. Attendance at events is not limited to QUT alumni. Currently enrolled students are eligible to join before they graduate. The chapter also encourages attendance by anyone interested in library and information professions, regardless of their employment status or educational background. Graduates from other universities and programs are welcomed and encouraged to join as Associate members to maintain contact and strengthen relationships between QUT and the wider industry.

Professional development in library and information science

Professional development has been succinctly defined as activity to enhance the ability to perform work-related functions (Gelfand as cited in White, 2001). Majid (2004, p58) suggests the major role of professional development is to fill the knowledge gaps that exist between LIS education and professional practice. As Fisher (2004) notes, even with the skills gained through formal education, information professionals need to continue to gain experience and update their expertise. Professional development activities can incorporate an extensive range of learning activities experienced in a variety of delivery modes. Responsibility for providing professional development opportunities has traditionally been seen as the role of employers, professional associations and educational institutions (ALIA, 2005c; Majid, 2004). ALIA's statement on professional development acknowledges the role of the individual in committing to professional development but highlights that employers and the professional association are responsible for providing opportunities for development (ALIA, 2005c). ALIA extends the personal responsibility element to an assurance to the wider community that its members "are keeping themselves up-to-date through such activities as professional reading, participation in seminars, courses and conferences, and workplace learning" (ALIA, 2005a). While this is an admirable sentiment, it should be noted that this is not enforced. Unlike the other professions, such as the law (for example Queensland Law Society, 2005), ALIA's formal continuing professional development is not a mandatory requirement for membership, accreditation or registration.

The literature does not rank alumni associations as a player in providing professional development activities in the library and information industries. But Dolbert (2002) notes that some American associations do provide alumni-focused professional development and academic seminars to encourage interaction among academic staff, graduates and current students. It should be noted that QUT does not yet offer formal professional development through short courses or training workshops in the LIS field. But as previously noted, QUT is committed to supporting the ongoing and life-long learning of its graduates and does so through the support of its alumni chapters and volunteers.

Professional development and the experience of QUT alumni members

Creating professional development opportunities for past, present and future students is a key goal of *The Information Professionals* chapter. This focus was supported by the evidence of a survey of ten members following the chapter launch in 2004. The survey indicated new members were most interested in using alumni events as a source of professional development (nine responses) and networking (seven responses). The pilot study conducted for this paper sought to determine if this goal had been achieved by answering the question: How does *The Information Professionals* chapter fit into the professional development plans of its members? A combined research approach was used for the pilot study:

1. A literature review was conducted.
2. A survey was posted online and email invitations sent to alumni members. Seventeen valid responses were received.
3. Interviews were conducted with three members of the chapter's current organising committee to supplement the survey data.

The survey respondents graduated between 1997 and 2005 with the exception of two respondents still to complete their qualification. The majority of respondents (six) had attended one or two events, four had attended three or four events, three responses had attended more than five and four people had never attended any events. All but one person intended to attend future alumni activities. Overall, members' experience of the alumni chapter and its events were positive with the only complaints relating to the timing of events. But disappointingly networking was strongly identified as the most valuable outcome of attending alumni events (nine responses) rather than the information presented by guest speakers at events (four responses).

Survey response A: Catching up with others from the course. Finding out what others have been doing.

Response B: Networking and hearing other people's experiences

Interview 3: I don't get to go to a lot of conferences so I get to hear from these people who I wouldn't hear from. I love the networking side as well because with other groups you do tend to get the same core group of people but I've noticed with the alumni group we have the same number of people at each event but it's completely different people every time.

Respondents' main sources of professional development covered a wide spectrum with in-house work-based activities, professional reading and attending conferences attracting the highest scores. Attending ALIA and alumni events were also rated. Some members were engaged in writing papers, article or online blogs and three people were undertaking formal study.

Interview 2: Personally I'm not heavily involved in the profession. The chapter has become my way to contribute, my way of becoming a part of the profession. It's not a huge commitment but it is still fulfilling.

Interview 1: I think it's all very tempting to just give up on anything professionally but I think it would get very boring and you wouldn't really hear what is happening and think about it in different ways and also meeting new people.

Suggestions for how the alumni chapter could help members develop their professional skills and abilities provoked a wide range of survey responses, including:

- Holding practical events on how to address selection criteria and job-seeking skills
- Providing RSS feeds or email new flashes, making journal articles available online to members
- Online events for geographically-dispersed members
- Providing workshop opportunities in collaboration with other allied organisations or institutions
- Sourcing speakers from various backgrounds and fields

Response J: By exposing me to information and knowledge that I do not have access to at work, keeps me in touch with fellow professionals, makes me think about my knowledge/ideas/preconceptions.

Interview 2: Use QUT as a resource to get people that are there working for QUT to actually come along to events and teach us, give us an extra insight into practical things, selection criteria, simple things like that through to things on copyright and stuff with the other alumni chapters.

While it is acknowledged that the sample size of this study is relatively small, it does provide a snapshot of how alumni members see *The Information Professionals* chapter contributing to their professional development. It should be emphasised that this research was undertaken as a pilot and future research will focus on capturing a much larger sample of members to build on this evidence. It is also noted that the interview participants were all committee members who, as evidenced by their voluntary roles, demonstrated a high level of commitment and engagement with the wider profession and that future research should also seek input from less active members.

How can *The Information Professionals* chapter assist in members' professional development?

The Information Professionals' main focus remains on balancing events which are learning opportunities for members to be exposed to new ideas and activities which are more social in nature. While the chapter is clearly meeting its goal of encouraging networking between members, more should be done to engage members in professional development and to increase the perceived value of the chapter by actively contributing to members' skills improvement. In making this commitment to creating professional development opportunities, the chapter has facilitated events at which alumni members who are also enrolled in ALIA's formal continuing professional development (CPD) scheme can accrue points. ALIA's CPD framework identifies a number of categories in which participants can gain points. Attendance at alumni events which involve an element of learning, such as presentations, seminars, workshops or training, qualifies as an informal learning

activity eligible for CPD points. Attendance at networking, social events or annual general meetings does not accrue any points (ALIA, 2005b). While all survey respondents were actively engaged in at least one or more professional development activities, only one person was enrolled in ALIA's CPD program. (It should be noted that the survey did not investigate whether QUT alumni were also ALIA members and it is recommended that future research investigate this.) The reasons suggested by the interviewees for the lack of participation in ALIA's CPD program were confusion about the structure and flexibility of the program and the level of commitment required.

Interview 1: I'm just not sure I would have the dedication to keep it (CPD) up and actually get the accrued number of points.

Interview 3: I would consider going into the CPD program but I sometimes wonder what is involved. I just wonder at what point you are supposed to be entering into it and how much you should do of it.

The documentary evidence required by ALIA for recording CPD activities is a certificate of participation or a record of learning activities sheet. At this stage, the alumni chapter has not provided participants with a certificate of attendance and this is an area for improvement. While ALIA does not accredit professional providers or activities, with the exception of those professional training providers with whom ALIA has formal partnerships (ALIA, 2005d), ALIA could provide an attendance certificate template for use by its own groups and affiliates. By offering members proof of attendance, *The Information Professionals* could encourage its members to participate in the formal ALIA CPD scheme and to actively consider alumni events as a part of their career learning activities.

Speakers at alumni events are also able to gain CPD points under the presentations and papers category. The chapter has already had one alumnus as a guest speaker and this is another area where the alumni chapter can support members undertaking CPD, by further drawing on the expertise of its members to speak at events and by creating opportunities for members to develop their public speaking and professional writing skills. Again, proof of participation could be provided by the alumni chapter to assist with members' CPD record keeping.

In 2004, *The Information Professionals* were able to offer one new graduate (in his/her first year post-study) the opportunity to attend the ALIA Biennial conference through a generous and anonymous donation to cover registration costs. This was repeated in 2005 with a registration awarded to a new graduate to attend the Third International Evidence Based Librarianship Conference and again in 2006, a bursary will be offered to send an alumni member to the New Librarians' Symposium in Sydney. This type of philanthropy is one area where the alumni chapter can extend its support of new graduates and distinguish itself from other professional associations and professional development providers. Currently the chapter has not actively engaged in fundraising activities but avenues do exist within the university's framework to support sponsorship of alumni at events and to provide financial assistance for current students through scholarships and bursaries. Complementing the bursary initiatives, the chapter held a popular "mini-conference" in 2005 which allowed members to hear some of the papers presented at the Third International

Evidence Based Librarianship Conference. This successful event, held in conjunction with QUT and ALIA, allowed members who were not able to attend the full conference for financial or other means to engage in a scaled down version of the event. Providing members with access to events which would otherwise be financially prohibitive is certainly one area where the alumni chapter can seek to excel and provide practical support, particularly for new graduates.

Interview 1: Those things can cost a fortune and as a reference librarian entrance-level I am not getting sent to stuff like that.

Like ALIA, *The Information Professionals* alumni chapter relies on the contribution and commitment of its volunteers. However the success of the chapter has been underpinned by the strong support of QUT's Alumni Office and the access to the resources and infrastructure of the university. This support includes access to venues at QUT campuses, hosting the chapter website, invitation mail-outs to promote events and maintaining a database of event RSVPs and attendances to track membership participation. This support affords the chapter access to a greater membership base than could otherwise be achieved through email and word of mouth advertising. The alumni chapter can repay this support by recruiting its members to participate in the development of future LIS professionals by acting as mentors to current students, as guest lecturers, as research participants, by attending QUT student and alumni events and in recruiting new students or returning themselves to study at QUT.

Interview 3: I've also been considering going back and finishing the Masters and now that there are people going through doing the Masters, you can go (to events) and maybe there are people there who have updated their qualifications and I can talk to them about it and see what they thought of it.

Interview 1: The benefits I like are that you have the backing of the university to organise things. And suddenly it makes things happen so much better. It gets people to come who aren't just in your usual circuit.

By engaging in these types of activities, alumni will not only be contributing to the ongoing success of QUT's LIS courses but developing their own personal and professional skills.

The missing link?

The evidence from this pilot study shows that alumni chapters can contribute to their members' continuing professional development. *The Information Professionals* chapter at QUT offers a valuable opportunity to create stronger links between librarianship educators, students, new graduates and experienced practitioners. "Alumni can provide the missing link by way of resources and assisting universities to remain in touch with the changing demands of the industry and society" (Sharda & Butler, 2004, p457). But alumni can engage and be engaged in more than this. By building on graduates' existing university loyalties, alumni chapters can aid library and information professionals in their ongoing skills development and lifelong learning while reconnecting them with the university community and current LIS education. By building on these loyalties and emotional ties to QUT, *The Information Professionals* chapter is uniquely positioned to engage QUT graduates in

professional development activities, particularly in cases where graduates may not be members of ALIA or other industry associations.

Professional development ultimately depends on the commitment and motivation of the individual but alumni chapters, as well as employers and professional associations, can create opportunities and events to encourage members to engage in developing their skills and abilities throughout their career. Alumni chapters can also create opportunities that may not be available to members through other means, by providing financial assistance and providing access to expertise available through the resources of the university. Creating opportunities to financial aid new graduates in participating in professional development events which would otherwise be out of reach is one area where this alumni chapter can distinguish itself from other industry groups and professional development providers. To further enrich the profession and acknowledge the achievement of individuals committed to CPD, learning activities conducted by this alumni chapter should be formally and easily recognised by ALIA's and other professional associations' CPD programs. ALIA should embrace new and innovative providers of professional development and work with them to collaboratively strengthen the imperative for library and information professionals to engage in continuing professional development and to cooperatively build the membership of both groups. The challenge for *The Information Professionals* alumni chapter is to build on their initial success and to continue to increase their value to members by being seen as a provider of professional development and a key contributor to their members' lifelong learning.

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