

The image of the profession: school-leavers attitudes towards careers in librarianship

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Many stories appear in the media stating that the career for the future will be in information or information management, and it can be assumed from this that students in their last year of secondary schooling would be tempted to consider a career in librarianship. To test this belief a survey was conducted in Western Australia in 1996, whereby school-leavers were questioned about their attitudes towards careers in librarianship. The results indicated a continuance of a negative image of librarians, and also highlighted a shift in perceptions which must occur before librarianship will become a desirable career option for a greater number of school-leavers.

In designing the survey the researchers intended the answers to be 'attitudinal' in nature. The researchers wanted data which would answer the following questions:

- What perceptions do school-leavers have of the personal characteristics of people who work in libraries?
- What perceptions do school-leavers have of the range of places where librarians work and the nature of the work they do?
- What perceptions do school-leavers have of the educational qualifications needed to work in libraries, and of the salaries received by librarians?
- How do school-leavers rank librarians against other professional/career groups on a range of factors which will help determine their future career choice?

Two-thousand questionnaires were distributed to twenty-five secondary schools across the state. Seven-hundred-and-sixty-six valid responses were returned to the researchers, with 63.9 per cent of the respondents being female and 36.1 per cent male (perhaps indicating a greater willingness to participate on the part of female students).

Personal characteristics

School-leavers perceptions of the personal characteristics of people who work in libraries were quite positive in that they believed that librarians belong to a 'helping' or service profession. However, there was a negative perception that librarianship is not interesting or creative. It can be speculated that for most seventeen- or eighteen-year-olds,

these would be the very characteristics which they would be most likely to look for when choosing a course of study and career.

Students believed that over ninety per cent of librarians are women and that the predominant age-level was in the range of 30–49 years. A major concern was the respondents perception that there are few library and information workers in the age group 20–29 years, and it is clear from this response that librarianship is perceived as being a profession dominated by (much) older people — a problem because young people are likely to wish to work and associate with others of a similar age. The other concern is that the respondents have identified a lack of role models who are male, as well as in the '20–29' age group.

Work characteristics

This section aimed to determine the perceptions of the range of places where librarians work, and the nature of the work they do. Educational institutions received a high-level of identification in places of work. Respondents also identified libraries with institutions (museums and archives) which would typically be associated with storage and preservation of written material or other cultural artefacts. It is evident, however, that school leavers do not have a full appreciation of the many different environments in which librarians can potentially be employed.

Respondents were provided with a list of fifteen tasks and asked to identify those they thought librarians would perform. While they did show a high level of recognition regarding tasks that would usually be considered 'professional' and 'non-professional', the results showed that respondents had little recognition of the difference between librarians and others who work in the libraries — an 'everybody who works in a library must be a librarian' attitude.

The students did not identify tasks that would be identified as being of a managerial nature ('supervise staff', 'budget control') with a librarians' work. While it is true that these tasks often take place away from the public gaze, it would also seem to indicate that school leavers do not associate li-

brarians with workplace management or autonomy.

Professional characteristics

The third question set aimed to determine school leavers' perceptions of educational qualifications and salaries received. A substantial concern to the profession should be that from a sample group of Year 12 students in the process of applying for admission to university courses, only twenty-eight per cent believe that a university qualification is a prerequisite for working as a librarian.

However, the respondents had a reasonably accurate understanding of the current salary conditions of librarians, particularly of the salaries available to those commencing their careers.

Comparison of professional characteristics with other careers

Respondents were asked to rank ten professional career groups, including that of librarian, according to five criteria — earning capacity, community leadership, educational requirements, career prospects, community status. These factors were chosen as they were likely to determine the desirability of these careers for the respondents.

Results obtained were quite disturbing in that not only was 'librarian' ranked last according to the criteria of earning capacity, but the mean score showed an extremely strong negative response. The other concern generated from the responses to the ranking of educational requirements is that of the ranking of 'librarian' below 'electrician', the only occupation in this list which is not usually entered through a university course. The implication from this ranking would seem to be that the respondents have not perceived the difference between those staff in libraries who have achieved a qualifying tertiary degree, and those who have some other form of qualification (such as a library technician's diploma) or no formal qualification at all.

The respondents ranked librarianship last on career prospects. From these results it is evident that librarianship is unlikely to attract the ambitious school-leaver. ■

For a full coverage of the results obtained of the survey, see the Australian Library Journal, Vol. 46 No. 3. for the article 'School leaver attitudes towards careers in librarianship: the results of a survey' written by Paul Genoni and Neil Greeve.