

Why You Need A PhD



Geraldine Barkworth

Bold Women Big Ideas



Dr Peter Macauley

Library manager,
Deakin University

Transformation. Opportunity. Future trends.

...a new series of interviews with library and information professionals rising to the challenges of the modern LIS sector.

Suggestions for interviewees are always welcome. Please contact Geraldine Barkworth via e-mail. ■

Introduction

Dr Peter Macauley has plenty to say about the impact of gaining a doctorate to enhance identity, credibility and viability of the library and information profession. He has worked for more than 25 years in public, special and university libraries. Currently Peter is the library manager at Deakin University's Waterfront campus and Faculty Librarian, Education. He is a chief investigator on two Australian Research Council funded projects: 'Research capacity-building: the development of Australian PhD programs in national and emerging global contexts' and 'Working students: reconceptualising the doctoral experience'. He tells Geraldine Barkworth that library professionals need to 'get out more', to undertake research and take advantage of emerging trends.

What do you do?

Sitting at a dinner party, my neighbour asks me that question and I answer, 'I'm a librarian.' They respond, 'Great', but 30 seconds later their eyes glaze over and they start talking to the neighbour on their other side.

So when I'm asked that question again, I reply, 'I'm an information scientist.' They respond: 'Oh that's really interesting'... one minute later... 'does that mean you're a librarian?' Once again, the eyes glaze over and 30 seconds later they are talking to someone else.

Next time, I'm prepared. When I'm asked, 'What do you do?', I say I'm a pro bike rider. 'Wow!' they say and the conversation goes on for hours. I used to be a pro bike rider. Now I'm a librarian who loves research. There are lots of preconceived ideas about librarians and we get pre-judged. Not everyone knows what a civil engineer or pro bike rider does, so they ask questions and the conversation keeps going.

What future trends do you see for LIS professionals?

I believe library and information people need higher order research and information literacy skills. They need to spend more time turning information into knowledge, not just acquiring or regurgitating it — librarians tend to use a linear information seeking process — but based on my research, clients use a much more *ad hoc* approach. Higher order information literacy involves critical analysis, interpretation, repackaging and value adding. However, I'm not sure the library profession will change much as the focus remains on predetermined library-related information skills and not so much on turning the acquired information, in whatever form, into knowledge.

Professionally, I'm concerned about the need for practitioner research to be based upon genuine research rather than rhetorical opinions, the skills needed by modern day library and information professionals in relation to practitioner research and the issue of credential creep.

I believe librarians need to get out more; if you make yourself invisible, you may well disappear. There are no stand-alone library schools in Australia. They've all merged with other schools or faculties. Undergrad courses appear to be on the decline. The majority of librarians in Australia got their qualifications as a post-grad.

Really?

Yes, really. The trend worldwide is for post-graduate library courses. Australia is pretty much the only country with an undergraduate entry-level LIS course. I think that's a positive thing. It's better to have a more rounded focus and a multi-disciplinary grounding. I think that the library profession can be too insular at times. That's why I say it's probably more useful to gain a broader grounding as a post-grad librarian. You don't know what you don't know.

New grads can find it difficult to get a job, as many have minimal library experience and employers want at least a couple of years. It can be harder for someone with just a post-grad.

Yes. That's why we need to create training positions and continue with active mentoring for new grads. A lot of us in long-term employment started at the bottom and had to study part-time and/or shift interstate to get a job. And there is an age thing happening — there will be a lot of librarians retiring within 15 years so training positions need to be created to anticipate future needs.

So what trends might influence a library graduate getting a job?

They need to demonstrate the broader skills they have acquired and in particular, high-level research skills. They also need to make themselves extremely visible and be perceived as valuable. They can do this through using their specialist skills working collaboratively on organisational projects external to the library. Librarians who remain invisible might survive the next budgetary crunch but could disappear in the crunch after that. You need to develop a profile so people know who you are and what value you offer. Librarians need to look beyond the library. Librarians don't exist to keep the institutions of libraries alive. We are here to support the purpose of the organisation that funds us.

There's a trend in the USA toward librarians gaining doctorates and it's starting to happen in Australia. Librarians have a great depth of knowledge and a raft of research skills and those types of skills are the ultimate in CPD (continuing professional development). There's also a trend worldwide for multidisciplinary research.

So this is why you spread yourself across different disciplines?

Yes. Exactly. My topics are information literacy, scholarly communications and doctoral

research. My PhD thesis is titled 'Doctoral research and scholarly communication: candidates, supervisors and information literacy'.

However, I'm a librarian first and a researcher second. I recommend, if you want to choose a research topic, choose an emerging trend and, of course, librarians are strategically placed to identify emerging trends. You want to make an impact; you want to align your topic with the strategic initiatives of your organisation or one you wish to work for in the future. I have noticed you get more credibility when you have a doctorate.

For instance, according to ALIA figures, 1.5 per cent of Australian librarians have doctorates. Using the 2004 ALIA Biennial Conference on the Gold Coast as an example, 15 per cent of papers given were by those with a doctorate, 30 per cent of referees had doctorates and 70 per cent of refereed papers were by those with or undertaking doctorates. What this says to me is:

1. people with doctorates undertake good quality research that is recognised by peers and need places to disseminate their work, and
2. people with doctorates have increased credibility because they are trained in research and creating new knowledge.

When you go to a conference, you want to come away thinking new ideas, so we need new knowledge from research, not regurgitation. I prefer to be challenged by a new idea than not hear any new ideas at all.

But if the image of librarians isn't changing much according to you, won't a trend toward post-grad study and doctorates create a change in public perception?

Yes!

What do you say to LIS professionals with 'Librarian pride' who are happy where they are?

I'm not saying that everyone should get a doctorate. And I know I'm speaking here mainly from a university library perspective. What I am saying is, to move forward, the profession needs more research, development and collaborative publishing to become a more visible and valued profession. I say, get out more and talk face-to-face to our users/clients, get yourself involved in life outside of the library and find out what organisational users really want, rather than pose yet another anonymous questionnaire to evaluate library services.

At the moment changes are being introduced to the research funding model in the Australian higher education sector with the introduction of the RQF (research quality framework). It's a perfect opportunity for librarians to put up their hands and collaborate with academics and administrators before we are overlooked. Part of the RQF process involves using bibliometric measures and librarians have valuable and perhaps underrated skills in this area, in addition to research skills, writing submissions, planning and training staff. This is certainly an example where librarians can make a major impact in the university sector.

What do you feel are your greatest achievements and successes?

Creating new knowledge. I've published and presented about forty papers, been a keynote speaker five times and won two Australian Research Council grants (with two other non-library colleagues), which translates into kudos and hundreds of thousands of dollars for the university.

When others quote me, I know you're making an impact and a difference. Mind you, most of the impact I'm making at the moment is in the broader research area of higher education rather than in librarianship, but I feel that library skills have certainly enhanced my effectiveness. Being multi-disciplinary is a positive thing.

Have you switched from librarianship to become an academic?

Some people think that I want to move into academia. Well, I want to have my cake and eat it too. I strategically worked to-

ward getting research written into my job description. Currently I manage the Waterfront Campus library, and I'm the Faculty Librarian, Education plus the research specialist in the library, I supervise two PhD students and am the chief investigator on two ARC grants. While I do struggle to fit everything in, I believe if it's good for the university and the library, then it's good for me.

What creates meaning and purpose in your life?

Creating new knowledge through research and using my specialist library skills to share it with others. Publishing and presenting really stretches my boundaries and can be scary stuff. Mentoring to pass on skills through the generations and being a protégé myself. My family really anchors me. My son Hamish's school has the 'You Can Do It' program and I believe you can.

Because I'm into multi-disciplinary research, I'm able to go through doors that aren't often open to librarians. I'm happy to be a small fish in a large academic pond. And I'm very happy to be a librarian.

What do the next few decades hold for you?

I want to produce excellent research and share the results with others. I'd like to be recognised by colleagues and clients for the contribution I make to the profession as a librarian and as a researcher.

Finally, if you had a catchcry for the LIS profession, what would it be?

'Get out more!'

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Geraldine Barkworth used to work in libraries and now coaches library professionals to build their people management skills and take their next great leap forward in career and life. You can receive her free e-zine by contacting her at geraldine@boldwomenbigideas.com.au or 02 6685 1917.

Dr Peter Maccauley can be contacted at peter.maccauley@deakin.edu.au

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