

# Workwatch

## Australian library workforce: the institutional perspective

From 2006 to 2008 a two-part survey sponsored by ALIA and the National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) gathered extensive data covering the Australian library workforce. The research is entitled *neXus*, based on the connections between education, recruitment, retention, and staff development. The first part of the *neXus* survey concerned the individuals who comprise the library and information (LIS) workforce and was published early in 2008. The second part obtained data from more than 100 library institutions, providing the institutional and employer overview. Both reports are at <http://www.alia.org.au/employment/workforce>.

Conclusions drawn from the *neXus* data confirm several perceptions of the LIS workforce in Australia, although providing a more focused perspective. Some trends, such as the ageing of the library labour force, may be slightly less acute than previously thought. Other trends give cause for a greater degree of concern that may have existed before the availability of hard data. One such concern would be the increased blurring of the roles of professionals and paraprofessionals, thus threatening the concept of 'professionalism' within the sector.

### Demographics

The age cohorts among library workers were considered in conjunction with retirement patterns in NSLA, public, academic, and special libraries throughout Australia. Statistics provided by Australian Job Outlook show just over 63% of librarians as being in the over 45 age group, while the *neXus* survey found a figure of 49.9% for the same cohort. While these figures suggest that the ageing of the sector has eased, the rate of retirements continues as an issue to be addressed, especially due to the superior superannuation schemes covering larger library employers. This factor applies particularly to State and territory public libraries and academic libraries where retirement before age 60–65 is likely to remain attractive, even amid global economic downturn.

The need to 'replenish' the profession was reflected in the patterns of recruitment in the period covered by the survey, with NSLA and academic libraries in particular reporting steady rates of hiring of new staff. These recruitment levels did not translate to high levels of recruitment of new graduates, with more than two-thirds of respondents not having hired recent graduates. Among special libraries, 92% had not employed new graduates, suggesting that the most common path for newly-qualified library personnel is to gain broad experience in a larger library before moving to a more specialised environment.

The Australian library workforce remains highly feminised. One quarter of institutions surveyed reported that 96–100% of staff were female, these institutions being mainly special and school libraries. Male staff were more likely to be employed in academic and TAFE libraries.

The *neXus* survey also sought information as to cultural and linguistic diversity of library staff. Less precise information was available on this point, but staff with non-English speaking backgrounds were more likely to be found in larger libraries. Only 3% of respondents had more than 10 staff

members from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The report concludes that "these figures support the argument that the Australian LIS profession remains a female dominated, Anglo-Saxon career".

### Professional issues

The *neXus* survey reports that "one significant issue that should not be ignored focuses on the lack of clarity between professional and paraprofessional appointments". The survey found a disturbing number of responses indicating that employers would appoint paraprofessional (library technician and, in some cases, library assistants) to professional (librarian) roles and vice versa. While libraries rely on different areas of knowledge and skills among staff, ALIA distinguishes carefully between levels of appointment and qualifications required and recognised in the higher education and vocational pathways into the profession. These distinctions are drawn to ensure that staff undertaking particular library roles are appropriately trained to discharge those roles, thereby ensuring necessary standards of service to library users. Blurring of roles or dilution of qualifications deemed essential for posts of librarian or library technician can have the effect of undervaluing the LIS profession as a whole.

### Teacher librarians: Northern Territory and New South Wales

Members of the Northern Territory branch of the Australian Education Union have accepted the terms of a Collective Agreement covering 2008-2010, which includes substantial backpay and salary increases for the next two years. Details of the new salary schedules are at <http://www.alia.org.au/employment/salary.scales/teacher.librarians.html>.

In New South Wales agreement has been reached between the Teachers Federation and the State Government on salary increases for school and TAFE teachers. The agreement is subject to ratification but provides for a cumulative pay rise of 12.48% over the next three years. The employment pages of the ALIA website will be updated to show the new salary levels once the formal vote is taken by members of the Teachers Federation. Teachers within the Catholic school system in New South Wales have been granted the same level of pay rise as their counterparts in Government schools.

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