ALIA Course Accreditation and the Library Technician workforce: meeting in the middle

Dianne Walton-Sonda
Australian Library and Information Association
Content list

1. Abstract 2
2. Introduction 2
3. The Goal! 4
4. Criteria for ALIA course accreditation 5
5. Preparing for the 16 site visits 6
6. The ALIA accreditation site visits 7
7. Performance measurement 8
8. Some initial findings 9
9. State of the Nation report 10
10. Where to from here 12
11. Conclusion 14
12. With thanks 16
13. Reference list 17
14. Appendices 18

Appendix A: Diploma in Library and Information Services – core and elective units
Appendix C: ALIA education statements
1. Abstract
Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) works with library and information services (LIS) education providers and consults with other stakeholders, including students and employers, to ensure LIS courses equip graduates with the ALIA core knowledge, skills and attributes to work effectively in the industry. ALIA accredits courses at both the professional (librarian) and paraprofessional (library technician) levels. This paper will report on how ALIA monitors the quality and relevance of courses delivered in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in order to ensure that library technicians (LT) meet the standards required for current and emerging library and information practice.

There is a particular focus on the issues of course accreditation, where the Association’s role is complicated by the need to work alongside the national quality assurance processes that have been established by the relevant technical education authorities (Hallam and Genoni:2009:233). This paper examines how LT educators, ALIA standards and national training packages attempt to work on this issue acting as one voice that represents the standards required of LTs in the workforce.

2. Introduction
In the 1970s the first paraprofessional course for LTs was developed. The formation of this was in response to changing dynamics of the workforce and the shortage of professional librarians. The curriculum content focused on practical skills (Hallam and Genoni, 2009:234) rather than the theory. To date members of ALIA rank the accreditation of qualifications of courses as the most important activity undertaken by ALIA and that it is well performed in this area. ALIA has continued to offer course accreditation by aligning it directly with the membership categories. Graduates from ALIA accredited courses are eligible to become, respectively, an Associate member or a LT member. As well, ALIA hosts events for employers, affiliated associations and education authorities to work closely on shared interests and concerns regarding the future and direction of education in library studies in Australia.

In 2006 a number of institutes were reaching the end of their course accreditation period. Accrediting programs that use a national training package is a unique challenge for ALIA. Currently, institutes that use the national training package are subject to multiple forms of accountability and quality assurance processes put in place by:

- the national body responsible for educational quality - Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)
• the state-based education authorities, the individual registered training organisations (RTO)s operating both within and outside the TAFE framework
• ALIA as the professional association representing the industry (Hallam and Genoni, 2009:234).

The Education Reference Group (later the Education and Professional Development Standing Committee) began working on revising the course accreditation process to improve its efficiency. Since 2006, ALIA has hosted annual professional development days for LT educators. It was through these forums that ALIA worked closely with the educators to better understand the processes and activities that are mandatory as part of the AQTF. It was hoped that less effort in duplicating audits would be made apparent. Due to several reasons, including confidentiality and the random basis for which AQTF audits are undertaken, ALIA took a more proactive position and in agreement with the LT educators scheduled a series of course accreditation site visits to be undertaken to most RTOs in early 2009. This paper discusses the process, recommendations and outcomes from these visits and discusses the ‘state of the nation’ on LT education in Australia.

The success of the site visits was due to the LT educators applying practical and sound applications mirroring the current and future needs of the workforce. Some courses set the benchmark in vocational education for inspiring new generations of leaders and change agents. The LT industry face enormous challenges and with true inspiring spirit the educators in this sector have being working on continual development.

3. The Goal!
Affectionately nicknamed, ‘around the TAFEs in 80 days’, the ALIA course accreditation panel visited 16 institutes that offered the Diploma in Library and Information Services program. This encompassed 14 TAFEs, one polytechnic and one RTO. The programs were located in all capital cities and a number of regional areas. The site visits commenced in February 2009 and were completed mid June 2009. To ensure consistency in the national review the Chair of the panel was Associate Professor Gillian Hallam and Dianne Walton-Sonda, ALIAs Education Manager were central to 16 site visits. Twelve enthusiastic and experienced LT practitioners were recruited as volunteers to be on the course accreditation panel.

Following each site visits institutes received a report presenting the findings and recommendations from the review. There was also a ‘state of the nation’ report summarising different perspectives on LT education in 2009. These outcomes opened the opportunity to work more closely with industry skills council, IBSA, to encourage ongoing improvements. These
outcomes will be discussed at the next LT educators’ professional development day which will be held in September 2010 (Hallam, 2009:19).

The course accreditation had the following goals:

- Ensure that the programs offered by providers, ie colleges of technical and further education (TAFE) and (RTOs), meet the appropriate standards of quality and integrity
- Maintain the quality of education these institutions offer to ensure that students and graduates meet the workforce needs of the sector.

A number of programs emphasised a range of assessments that included pedagogical frameworks. These assessments effectively met the diversity of learner needs, with the use of web 2.0 technologies, group work, peer review, case studies, online chats, marketing projects and report writing.

4. Criteria for ALIA course accreditation
The course accreditation process is informed and guided by a series of education policy statements (see Appendix B). ALIA undertakes the accreditation of a course at the invitation of the institution offering the program. The conceptual framework for the desired learning outcomes is provided by the policy statement on core knowledge, skills and attributes, with the expectation that students will graduate with the necessary knowledge and skills to begin practice at an appropriate level, with ongoing professional development supporting progression and growth.

The ALIA course accreditation focuses on seven key criteria’s:

- Course design
- Curriculum content
- Assessment
- Staffing
- Resourcing
- Quality assurance mechanisms
- Infrastructure.

Each criterion encompasses a number of subcriteria. The variations in current practice were examined and recommended best practice was based on the information gathered during the
2009 course accreditation program. The overarching principles of course accreditation declare that the Association seeks assurance that courses (Hallam, 2010:11):

- Are offered in a number of delivery modes and through flexible delivery options across the institutions providing library and information management courses
- Are appropriately resourced by the providing institution in the number and levels of staff qualified to teach and administer the course and in the infrastructure available to support the course
- Have appropriate quality-assurance mechanisms set in place by the providing institution
- Are advised and supported by industry through mechanisms which enable consultation between course providers and practitioners
- Encourage and facilitate teaching staff exchanges into industry and practitioner exchanges to the teaching environment
- Provide workplace experience as an integrated component to link theory to the practice of the profession
- Offer opportunities for students to engage in authentic learning activities [for example, fieldwork, project work and access to resources in libraries and information agencies].

5. Preparing for the 16 site visits

In recent years ALIA has hosted annual national professional development opportunities for LT educators. These courses explored the opportunities for introducing a model for course accreditation, focusing on the process of peer review to benchmark good practice and stimulate continuous improvement in LT education. These evaluative activities seek to actualise the Association’s paraprofessional education policies within the context of contemporary pedagogies, using strategies that encourage collaboration amongst the diverse stakeholders (Hallam and Genoni, 2009).

These annual forums were designed to discuss the concepts of quality teaching and the opportunities for a peer review process for the programs, enabling educators to meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern and to share ideas and expertise. It was hoped that this would facilitate the establishment of an active community of practice that could potentially enhance the quality of LT education across the country.

In 2008, course coordinators participated towards the development of meaningful and relevant course accreditation criteria for LT courses with ALIA. The forum focused specifically on the content and structure of the course accreditation questionnaire and site visits. It provided an
opportunity for the educators to work collaboratively and discuss strategies to help implement a uniformed accreditations process whilst considering diversity across the different institutions. Several issues were highlighted, specifically those associated with the importance of ALIA maintaining the quality of standards for the industry. This provided the LT educators with greater opportunities to work more closely with the Association, colleagues and other stakeholders to maintain highest standards for education of LT (ALIA, 2008).

6. The ALIA course accreditation site visits
Each institution was visited by a panel consisting of three members: Associate Professor Gillian Hallam (panel chair), a local LT practitioner (panel member) and the ALIA Education Manager, Dianne Walton-Sonda, (executive support). The role of the chair was to preside over the panel ensuring that it completes assessment of the course content according to the ALIA policy on the core knowledge, skills and attributes. The role of the LT practitioner panel member was to provide local knowledge as a practitioner and knowledge and experience of the immediate LT community. The role of the ALIA Education Manager was to provide executive support and ensure alignment between educational policy and practice.

As a lead up to the accreditation site visits and to streamline the process for key stakeholders, ALIA organised a range of activities and events:

- A series of teleconferences: To enable LT educators to pose questions for ALIA and the panel members related to the accreditation process.
- LT educators’ wiki: To assist in streamlining communication between ALIA and LT educators. It is a space to share issues, concerns and resources.
- A LT educators’ bulletin: To provide answers to frequently asked questions and to provide a channel of open communication about the accreditation process.

The ALIA course accreditation process has been a valuable learning process for all involved, including the staff of ALIA, LT educators, panel members and other participants involved in the visits.

ALIA reviewed 16 programs whilst meeting with key stakeholders including, industry representatives, employers, students/graduates, teaching staff and the Head of School/Campus Manager. Following each site visit an evaluative report with key recommendations for the institution was provided.
Building a national perspective of LT education in Australia has involved the dedication and commitment from volunteers, institutional staff, course coordinators/teaching staff and ALIA staff:

1. The Chair of the panel contributed 360 hours in volunteer time.
2. The Education Manager and Chair of the panel travelled over 60,000 kilometres.
3. Panel members dedicated between 30-160 hours to participate in the process. Some panel members participated in 4 accreditation site visits.
4. 340 participants were involved in the process.

In 2009 the cost for course accreditation was extensive and will continue to impact on ALIA as new courses emerge and existing courses are restructured. LT programs undergo accreditation every five years, so in 2014 the programs that participated in the accreditation process in 2009 will once again require ALIA course accreditation.

7. Performance measurement
ALIA aims to continually develop and strengthen its services for its members. Course accreditation plays a vital role as part of ALIA’s aim to continually strengthen the professions ability to provide excellent library and information services for the nation and individual clients. Accrediting courses opens the opportunity for educators, employers and training providers to work collaboratively with ALIA to promote and encourage continuous improvement in the education of library and information professions (ALIA 2005).

The panel initiated its own quality assurance mechanisms, with all course coordinators and local panel members invited to complete an online survey about the effectiveness and value of the accreditation processes. The data was collated to augment the final national report on LT education in Australia and made available for LT educators in October 2009.

ALIA’s aim is to work more openly and more collaboratively with all key stakeholders in the accreditation process. The issues and challenges to be discussed at a national level are likely to encompass:

- The amount of time and human resources it takes to prepare for accreditation site visits (on the part of the educators, the Association and the panel members).
- Communication with students and graduates to encourage them to participate in a site visit.
Strategies to formally engage the educators and the Association with the industry employers.

The relevancy and currency of the National Training Package to articulate the current and emerging industry needs.

It has been acknowledged that the process is unique and to date no other Professional Information Association has embarked on a whole of sector approach to the quality of education. ALIA itself has begun to meet with related Information Associations to discuss the issues inherent in course accreditation.

Partnerships between information associations have the potential to lead towards the development of best practice in course evaluation (Hallam and Genoni, 2009). The findings from these surveys were evaluated and included in the end report which will show the state of the nation perspective of LT programs in Australia. Additionally, site visits have also been a useful tool to view the state of the nation’s current issues and perspectives. From the panel’s perspective the site visits indicated that benchmarking is a useful and appropriate tool for improving programs, processes and services. Throughout the institutions there is naturally a large perception of competitiveness for students yet building a national or state based approach between institutions can offer students with greater access to areas in elective subjects and greater access to technology.

8. Some initial findings

The course accreditation panel makes recommendations to the ALIA Board of Directors on existing coursework and subjects. The panel is also responsible for advising the Board on how the program aligns itself with the ALIA core, knowledge, skills and attributes, this is presented in the format of a report. The report consists of a summary of the documentation provided by the institution and the panel’s findings and recommendations. In accordance with the course accreditation policy institutions must submit an annual course return responding to the recommendations outlined in the course accreditation report. There were considerable overlaps between institutions found by the course accreditation panel.

To date there are some broad characteristics of the site visits which are worth noting:

1. Market trends: developing skills and capabilities for LT to meet the current industry needs, eg. using web 2.0 tools and understanding current issues in intellectual property and copyright.
2. Staff and student ratios: are calculated to ascertain the numbers of staff available to ensure students are receiving quality of access to staff and resources.
3. Resourcing and facilities: site visits have brought together employers and staff to share their aspirations and ideas. The site visit will result in partnerships between the two
groups to better equip students with resources and facilities to effectively work in the industry. For example, to better provide students with access to online facilities including a sandpit to a library management system so students can have hands on practice.

4. Whilst institutions are competitive a number of the course coordinators have developed partnerships with other programs to better offer their students with access to elective subjects.

There were a number of positive but unintended consequences resulting from the site visits, these included:

- Continued support of dedicated quality assurance staff.
- The ALIA course accreditation visit provided leadership for programs undergoing change and transformation.
- Exposure of the program within its own institution to higher level staff and business practices.

9. State of the Nation – LT education in Australia

This unique opportunity provided the industry to view LT education and develop it into a framework that identified variations in current practice and recommended best practice. The findings are listed according to the course accreditation criteria. Not all the ALIA criteria for course accreditation are examined here, due to confidentiality, but a few of the best practice recommendations are noteworthy. These fall under the categories of criteria that relate to course design, entry requirements, curriculum content, work placement and staff and resources.

Some best practice recommendations have included (ALIA, 2010):

- Enrolment processes: encourage the use of literacy and numeracy tests and/or interviews in order to assist staff with the identification of individual students’ suitability for the course, as well as students who may be at risk and require learning support.
- Cross-institutional enrolments: facilitate the enrolment of students into elective subjects of interest that may not be available at the ‘home institution’.
- Practical experience: in addition to the industry placements, tailor site visits to a range of library and information agencies to help develop the students’ understanding and knowledge of the diversity of practice in the LIS industry, as well as to highlight the relevance of specific employability skills.
• **eLearning champion**: explore the opportunities offered by eLearning; provide advice, guidance and peer support to other staff; and, encourage consistency across the electronic resources provided to students.

• **Authentic learning activities**: offer students regular opportunities to relate the theoretical knowledge to workplace. Teaching staff are encouraged to work with industry practitioners through the Course Advisory Committee to identify opportunities for authentic learning and workplace projects.

• **ePortfolios**: use ePortfolios to provide a stronger, broader collection of evidence of learning for assessment purposes, to demonstrate the learning outcomes over an extended period of time, and to enable students to reflect on the employability skills required in the workplace.

• **Guidelines for employers**: ensure that all students are offered an organised program so that they receive a consistently valuable and relevant industry experience. This may be achieved through an information kit, a resource manual, a website and/or an annual meeting of industry supervisors.

• **Community of practice**: encourage partnering between similar institutions to compare practice across the different programs and to establish collaborative approaches to teaching. Communities may be based on regional or state connections, or on similarity of programs.

• **High level advisory committees**: ensure that there is an influential representative from the LIS sector on a faculty or school advisory committee.

• **Establishment of the CAC**: ensure the involvement of key stakeholders, with broad representation from the different sectors of the LIS industry, with a formal structure, agreed terms of reference and a scheduled program of meetings each year.

• **Communication with industry**: ensure strategies are in place for regular two-way communication with LIS employers.

• **Industry forums**: hold an annual event where students can showcase their work and for employers to provide feedback on work placements completed during the year.

The variations have stimulated enthusiastic debate. Understandably the debates surround the interpretation of the national training package, for example, delivery of programs and the quality of graduates entering the LIS workforce (ALIA, 2010:25). Other interpretations of interest include (but not limited to):

• **Subjects, learning activities and resources**:

Interestingly, this area had a number of variations in the way that subjects were designed and delivered. As noted, the Diploma of Library/Information Services encompasses 10 core competencies and a wide range of elective subjects. In practice, it was found that most institutions offered students the core subjects plus a narrow choice of electives. In some cases, the electives could be described as ‘mandatory electives’, as the students could only study the specific subjects on offer in the given year. On occasion, two units of competency were combined as a ‘cluster subject’ (ALIA, 2010:23).

In a recent study of issues associated with quality assessment, the need for clustering was linked to the fact that “individual units of competency may not adequately describe a complete work task and this means that assessors must cluster units to ensure that assessment is focused on realistic workplace activities” (Learning Australia, 2008, p.3). Clustering was found to be interesting, and often more relevant, to students (and staff), but could also hinder learner mobility between institutions, especially when core and elective subjects were clustered in different ways. It was notable that the ‘flavour’ of the LT qualification inevitably varied around the country, depending on the local course offerings.

• Grading or merit based

The greatest consternation amongst staff, students and employers, was associated with policies around the status of Competent/Not yet competent. It was commonly felt that, despite the thrust of competency based training, the status of ‘Competent’ did not adequately reflect the merit of the work submitted by students, especially when significant differences in commitment to learning and in the amount of effort put into the assessment activity resulted in the same outcome of ‘Competent’. Employers indicated that it was difficult to determine the quality of job applicants when there was commonality across all students who completed the Diploma. It was noted, however, that some institutions had their own policies which allowed staff to mark to a graded schema.

10. Where to from here

A final report has been presented to the LT educators with tailored recommendations for enhancing their programs. The course coordinators came together in October 2009 to share their accreditation experience and to consider how they might work together not only of their own course but the benefit of the future of LT education in Australia (ALIA, 2010:38). The state of the nation report provides a unique format encompassing the evidence, research and summary of the issues facing not only the educators but as well the wider industry. It has been designed to embrace change and empower movement.
Beyond this, a number of emerging issues were identified during the site visits, which are likely to impact on LT education in the future (ALIA, 2010:42). Preliminary discussions have commenced between ALIA and the library technician educators some of which include:

- **Strategic approach:** coordinating a strategic approach that helps prepare graduates with appropriate library skills that incorporate an IT focus to work as, Public LT, Corporate LT or School LT.

- **Moderation meetings:** some course coordinators participate in collaborative moderation meetings to review the national training package, its content and the way in which it is delivered on an ongoing basis. At these moderation meetings, the group agreed on an ongoing review of the subjects offered. The process involves identifying the need for revision, developing recommendations and communicating with IBSA.

- **Productivity Placements Program:** ALIA and the LT educators have been working closely with IBSA to have the Diploma in Library and Information Services added to the Productivity Placements Program (PPP). This is a Federal government initiative that provides subsidies for current workers wishing to gain a qualification or upgrade their skills. ALIA represents the interest of 6 000 members and 12 million library users. The PPP offers the unemployed a pathway to employment in the library and information industry and addresses the skill shortages in the LIS sector.

- **Contestability:** The issue of funding to the VET sector is high on the Federal government agenda. The new model for VET funding shows significant changes in the level of fees charged to students and their eligibility for subsidies or loans. A fully market driven sector, where funding is directly related to student numbers, will potentially have an impact on low-enrolment courses, especially in non-metropolitan areas. One particular issue is the availability of loans to students who have already attained a university degree, but are seeking a vocational qualification. It is understood that these students may not be eligible for a loan through VET FEE-HELP as the course is at a lower AQF level than their current qualifications. As a number of people choose to study to become a LT rather than becoming a librarian through a postgraduate university course, the increase in fees for the Diploma course and the opportunity for support though higher education FEE-HELP arrangements may well result in different study choices, with fewer people with university degrees opting for the VET qualification.

- **eLearning:** a number of courses offered in face-to-face mode plan to move to online delivery. This will certainly increase the opportunity for competition between providers, especially if government policy results in national, rather than state-based,
opportunities for competition. The LIS sector will benefit from partnerships that empower cross collaboration of courses to help manage much needed resource and infrastructure requirements.

• Costs: whilst the 2008 ALIA member survey reported that accreditation of qualifications was ranked as the most important work undertaken by ALIA, the cost to the Association is high. The accreditation program in 2009 encompassed 16 site visits, with the need to fund the travel and accommodation costs for the panel members. The program was the main work priority for the ALIA Education Manager, with an estimated six months of full-time work allocated to accreditation activities including receiving and managing documentation, communication with educators, participating in the site visits and drafting, reviewing and editing the 16 accreditation reports. The LT membership represents only a very small proportion of the total ALIA membership. The ALIA Board of Directors will be considering strategies to develop the membership (both professional and paraprofessional) to reflect the high level of interest in and support for the maintenance of professional standards for the LIS sector.

11. Conclusion

The ‘state of the nation’ report creates a framework that can be used to open dialogue between ALIA, LT educators and key stakeholders to improve on education practices and influence workforce change in the LIS sector.

The work on peer review requires LT educators to work collaboratively in developing and applying particular elements of accountability. To date it has been easier to restructure other elements of course accreditation, including the reporting requirements and site visits. The current ALIA Education and Professional Development Standing Committee were convinced that peer review helps to ensure the spread of best practice throughout the sector. It is also a form of quality assurance not being undertaken by other bodies and one which the Association is particularly well placed to implement (Hallam et al, 2009:11).

Like most other VET Professionals the LT educators are increasingly involved in direct activities concerning the development, delivery and assessment of courses and modules. LT educators play a proactive role in the national library technician industry working closely with each other and employers. Since the implementation of the national training package in 1999 the activities undertaken by library technician educators has changed. The most common activity is the delivery of courses and modules (NCVER, 2010:18). The move to online has encouraged educators to form moderation meetings and collaborate widely. The nature of the LT educator
role has shifted following the impact of emerging library and information trends. Therefore, the role of ALIA course accreditation is not only to ensure standards but as well to strive for best practice by advocating on behalf of educators, students and employers that they receive appropriate staffing, resources and infrastructure.

The course accreditation project was a leading example demonstrating ALIAs commitment to gaining support and achieving successful outcomes. If not for the extensive support from the volunteers the sector would not benefit from the projects currently underway and the aspiring projects yet to come.
12. With thanks

With thanks to Associate Professor Gillian Hallam for her guidance and mentoring not just with throughout this project but in my role as Education Manager at ALIA. Gillian Hallam has consistently volunteered her expertise, knowledge and consistent enthusiasm to ensure best practice for the industry. Thank you.
13. Reference list


IBSA. (2010). *Environment Scan*. Innovation and Business Skills Australia: Victoria

14. Appendices

Appendix A - the core units for the Diploma encompass:

- BSBFLM503 Manage effective workplace relationships
- CUEOHS01B Implement workplace heath, safety and security procedures
- CULLB002B Obtain information from external and networked sources to meet customer needs
- CULLB003B Research and analyse information to meet customer needs
- CULLB412C Undertake cataloguing activities
- CULLB506C Catalogue and classify material
- CULLB508C Monitor and enhance information access
- CULLB509C Select and acquire information materials
- CULLB602C Use, evaluate and extend own information literacy skills
- TAADEL402B Facilitate group-based learning.

Elective units of competency are grouped into various areas of activity:

- Information and Computer Technology
- Information Organisation and Management
- Library Customer Service
- Library Practice
- Multimedia
- Preventive Conservation
- Public Programs
- Recordkeeping.

(Hallam, 2010:7)
Appendix B - The course recognition process is informed and guided by a series of education policy statements:

- **ALIA’s role in education of library and information professionals**

- **Courses in library and information management**

- **Library and information sector: core knowledge, skills and attributes**

- **Employer roles and responsibilities in education and professional development**

(Hallam, 2010:9)