Australian Library and
Information Association

# FUTURE OF THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE PROFESSION:
## SPECIAL LIBRARIES

# CONTENTS

## ABOUT SPECIAL LIBRARIES

Special libraries comprise government, association, health, law, corporate, consulting firm, ICT, engineering, religious, science and technology, art, museum, agriculture, media and other libraries that serve departments, institutions, not-for-profits, charities and businesses. The word library doesn't always appear in the title, instead some are called information services or research units, terms which also describe their main purpose and function.

**Current services for users include:**

- Fast and thorough searches, presenting the latest, most comprehensive and accurate information to executives and practitioners.

- Training to enable library users to carry out their own searches of electronic databases more efficiently and effectively.

- Filtered, evaluated and packaged search results.

- Relevant, tailored, current information from national and international sources.

- In some cases, there will also be assistance for people who are studying for a tertiary qualification and training to achieve a higher level of competency.

The role of library and information professionals:

- Manage a dynamic collection of physical and online resources, so staff can access up-to-date, authoritative resources, and make well-informed decisions.

- Negotiate with publishers of books, journals and online resources, to achieve the best value for the organisation.

- Curate and preserve unique physical collections.

- Ensure all materials and the ways they are used are copyright compliant.

These are just some of the specialist skills library and information professionals bring to their roles:

- Specific experience managing subject-related journals, books and ebooks.

- Knowing what to look for and where, for literature and database searches and advanced searches.

- Specialist knowledge supporting cataloguing, abstracting and thesaurus constructing.

- Embedded awareness of the dynamics of the sector.

- Networks and contacts that enable resource-sharing with colleagues nationally and internationally.
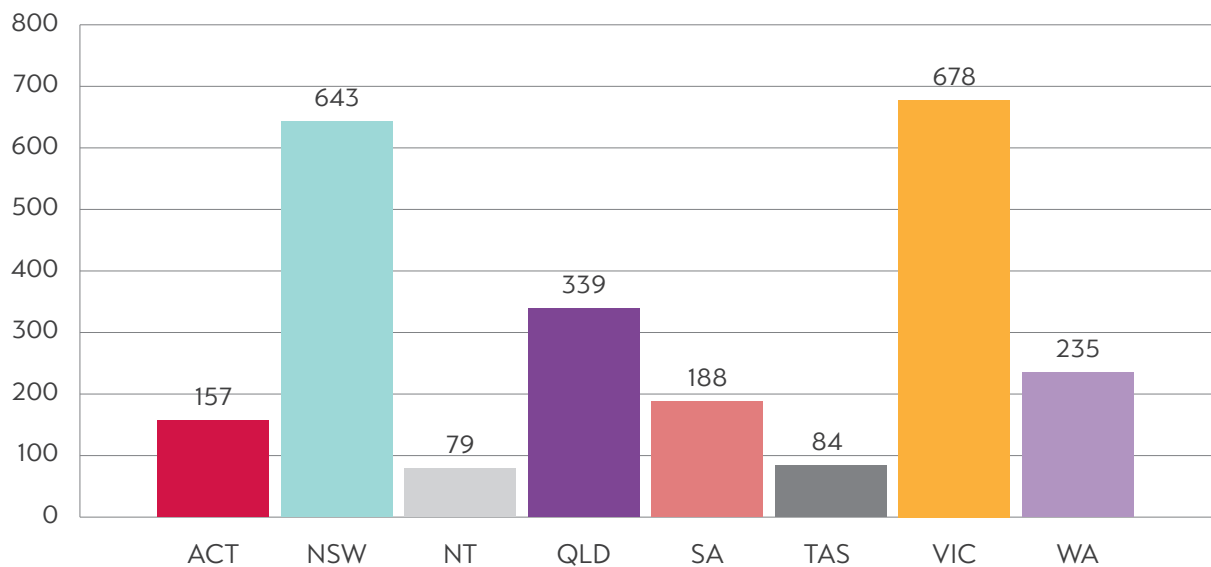
The value of these services

In 2013, we undertook research into the return on investment of special libraries (in partnership with the Australian Law Librarians' Association, ALIA Health Libraries

Australia and Health Libraries Inc) and reported an indicative return of $5.43 for every dollar.

## Statistics

It is hard to pin down an exact number for these libraries. Many are small and most are hidden within the organisations they serve. Best estimates, based on the Australian Libraries Gateway database, are from 2200 to 2400, depending on which types of library and information services are included (the definition can cover everything from volunteer-run historical society collections to libraries in large teaching hospitals).

### How special libraries are distributed across Australia

# THEMES

## THEME 01
## RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

Special libraries are experiencing significant upheaval and all the signs are that this will continue. In a 2013 study[1], managers of these services reported that budgets, staff hours and physical spaces have all reduced over the last three years.

While cost-cutting has been the principal driver, improved efficiency has also been on the agenda. ALIA has campaigned vigorously on behalf of special libraries, where cuts have been indiscriminate, and we have been diligent in providing support to member libraries going through a review process.

The best reviews may have resulted in some loss of funding and reduction in staff hours, but they have reshaped the library and information service and assured its future as a core part of the organisation. The worst reviews have been rushed through, by executives with no understanding of the value of the service to the organisation, and with no insight into how a library and information service operates. We have seen instances of 'corporate regret' months after such cuts have been imposed, where organisations have had to rehire staff and upgrade systems, but have been unable to retrieve elements of the physical collection that have been dispersed or destroyed.

It is difficult and potentially dangerous to talk openly about change when the axe may be about to fall. The hard conversations can only take place in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation, and where the value of the library and information service is clearly understood.

We can't ignore the need for future transformation in the special library sector, and library staff will need to judge the right moment to engage with senior management. It is vital that library and information professionals help develop the next iteration of their service rather than having a solution imposed.

1   www.alia.org.au/roispecials

In the turbulent times ahead, library teams will need a firm handle on their value proposition and will need to be able to articulate their contribution to the financial bottom line, to client care, to innovative design, to competitive advantage and to minimising risk. However the organisation defines its strategic goals, the library and information service will need to demonstrate its unique role in helping to achieve them. Gathering the evidence will be important, and so will presenting it as a powerful business case.

This is a highly fragmented sector, which makes it difficult to create meaningful data. Like organisations may be hard to track down and competitive considerations can get in the way of benchmarking. Yet comparative measures are an essential part of reporting. Greater collaboration between special libraries will be needed, for example to provide context to claims of superior performance against industry averages, or as evidence for increased investment in services.

Libraries' inability or unwillingness to share information has hampered our efforts to produce effective advocacy tools, but ALIA will continue to work with associations in the sector and through our Special Libraries Advisory Committee to develop useful performance indicators.

THEME 03
## DIY INFORMATION

There's more information available, and a greater need for that information to be managed and filtered than ever before, yet special libraries are experiencing cuts rather than investment. Organisations do not understand the value proposition, and it is being undermined by executives and practitioners seeking out their own information. The Google generation erroneously believes everything can be found on the web, and will not easily be swayed — if they are working to a tight deadline, DIY information is an attractive option, 'near enough is good enough'.

The only way we can counter this perception is to provide the instant gratification of a popular search engine with the quality and integrity of a professional service. In the future we will need to provide even faster, tailored, easily accessed, accurate, comprehensive information, 24/7, in formats to suit every kind of device. Patron driven acquisition will need to be considered.

Users will want to drive their own search experience; it will be up to the professionals to have created a federated search that gives them the best results, and to ensure that the library branding remains strong.

## THEME 04
## READY TO USE

At the same time, clients will be seeking decision-ready information, that saves them time ploughing through the original source material. Increasingly, people will want information packaged in useful, illustrative formats that can easily be shared — charts and infographics rather than text-heavy documents. Library and information professionals will need to stay abreast of formats and develop data presentation skills as part of their ongoing learning.

## THEME 05
## A SEAT AT THE TOP TABLE

A source of much frustration among special library and information professionals is how far down the pecking order they find themselves. Performance reporting, making the case for further funding, stating their value proposition — these things often have to be achieved through a senior manager who may have little affinity with the service. As a sector, we have to find a way to leverage the importance of information to organisations to establish our place at the top table.

Information providers increasingly need to offer more to demonstrate their value. This means presenting information in a way that provides an additional layer of caveats and implications. By understanding the needs of business-users better, information professionals can provide context-specific information and ensure that users do not waste time on content that is not relevant.

— *THE EVOLVING VALUE OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT,* FINANCIAL TIMES, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

In special libraries, the work of the professionals has to be central to the organisation. Knowledge will be even more important and why shouldn't we see librarians at the highest level of management?

— ADELAIDE NATIONAL ADVISORY CONGRESS NOTES

No longer data gatekeepers, information professionals must work hard to demonstrate their value in new ways. Doing this means making a fundamental shift from isolated, technical expert to multi-skilled team member, enabling decisions and proactively integrating into the organisation.

— *THE EVOLVING VALUE OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT*, FINANCIAL TIMES, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

Librarians are becoming research partners, they are co-authors of academic papers and reports. This is becoming an increasingly important role that they play. It's no longer just about searching for the information (librarian as handmaiden, unacknowledged service provider), it is about becoming a partner in the team. There's an expansion of their roles; a blurring of the margins.

— ALIA HEALTH LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA GROUP SURVEY OF HEALTH PRACTITIONERS 2011

THEME 06
## CENTRALISE AND EMBED

One way to move higher up the food chain is to combine a number of services, creating a department with bigger numbers for budget and head count. There has been much concern expressed about government library and information services being centralised, and there are certainly issues when subject specialists are removed from frontline interaction with clients, but increased visibility in the overall hierarchy is one of the benefits.

We may fear the results of centralisation, but we can't be blind to the fact that governments, international firms, multi-site businesses and others are looking at a pooled library and information service as a financially astute alternative to multiple service points with some duplication. Our goal for the future is to convince organisations that a move to centralising collection management, cataloguing and other technical services, should be accompanied by a policy of embedding library and information professionals in areas that require a steady flow of high quality information and a high degree of subject expertise.

## THEME 07
## BIG DATA

Organisations are both excited about the prospect of big data and daunted at the challenge of turning zettabytes of free-form, unstructured information into meaningful insights that make their operations more efficient and improve their bottom line. Big data is seen principally as an IT issue, but library and information professionals also see a role for their skills in sourcing data from external sources and making information generated by data analysts discoverable across the organisation.

We will have to manage the possible conflict between the profession's support for individuals' right to privacy and the potential for organisations to generate valuable insight and knowledge from websites, social media and other digital content sources.

## THEME 08
## DIGITISATION

While the organisation's focus may be on big data and other forms of electronic information, library managers need to be thinking about the future of their physical collections, both the content — historic records can be vitally important in developing long term trend reports — and the artifacts. Digitisation of priority items will be costly, and can be framed in the context of disaster management and business interruption planning.

There will be a shortage of talent necessary for organizations to take advantage of big data. By 2018, the United States alone could face a shortage of 140,000 to 190,000 people with deep analytical skills as well as 1.5 million managers and analysts with the know-how to use the analysis of big data to make effective decisions.

— *BIG DATA: THE NEXT FRONTIER FOR INNOVATION,*
*COMPETITION AND PRODUCTIVITY,* MCKINSEY

Sir Muir Grey, Chief Knowledge Officer of the NHS, England, has said 'knowledge is the enemy of disease'. As knowledge agencies, health libraries are an essential component in the health sector's goals to improve health outcomes for individuals and populations.

— ANN RITCHIE, CHAIR, ALIA HEALTH LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA

Choices will be made and we will not choose space ... The librarians have left the building.

— ALIA FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION SUMMIT NOTES

## THEME 09
## SUBJECT SPECIALISTS

Library and information professionals quickly develop an understanding of the environment within which they operate, and the flexibility to switch between industries has been a useful trait for people on an upward career trajectory. However, there is a counter-movement that is seeing professionals within industries retrain as information managers. It will be interesting to note how this relates to pay and status within the organisation, when engineers, accountants and qualified people from other disciplines join the ranks of library and information professionals. Longer term we can only see this as enhancing the image of our profession.

## THEME 10
## SPACE

For the majority of libraries, the future will mean more space, not less, to accommodate a range of programs, activities and uses. However, in special libraries where the focus was on rapid access to information from electronic sources, participants in the consultation process were sanguine about giving up floor space. The embedded librarians of the future will operate beyond the walls.

# ACTIONS ARISING

It's going to be a rollercoaster ride for special library and information services between now and 2025. We will see the biggest changes in government, law, health, research and other libraries that are more about information supply than physical collections. Arts and heritage libraries will be somewhat protected. There are actions we can take to support positive outcomes:

## *ALIA*

- Greater collaboration to enable benchmarking of services is required. This will mean the development of standard metrics, and data gathering and analysis by an independent third party such as ALIA.
- We must work with LIS educators and look at how new areas of practice such as big data can be incorporated into our ALIA PD and Training.

## *Advocacy*

- We need to be open to the prospect of centralised technical services, while advocating strongly for embedded subject specialists.
- We have to ensure that we are seen as part of the big data conversation, both at a national level, and within our own organisations.
- We must advocate for investment in digitisation to ensure vital records from the past are part of our digital information future.

*Professionals and their organisations*

- Library and information professionals will need to build on their resilience and adaptability.

- Value propositions must be strengthened and any weaknesses addressed.

- Library and information professionals need to work with their IT colleagues to create a fast, effective federated search, tailored to the needs of the organisation.

- Ongoing learning will be essential for library and information professionals to stay abreast of new environments and new technologies.