Jobs in the tertiary education sector

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In recent years there has been a number of pronouncements from senior members of the library profession in Australia that the employment prospects in the years ahead for those in the field of librarianship are promising. We have heard that the library and information sector is one that will experience substantial growth and one that could capitalise on the information revolution.

How then have these well-publicised pronouncements on job opportunities been realised and translated into real jobs? To answer my own question, 'not very much' — at least in respect of the tertiary education sector. An analysis of the AARL library statistics for the years 1992 to 1995 reveals some interesting trends, as well as some sober news for professional librarians and library technicians seeking jobs in Australian university libraries.

Methodology

The library staff figures for each institution were aggregated for each year from 1992 to 1995 inclusive, and then these in turn were aggregated by State. The exception was the Australian Catholic University, which is afforded its own statistical compilations at the head of each annual AARL statistical collection. For convenience, the Northern Territory and the ACT have both been classified as a State.

The figures were based on staff establishments at 31 March each year, in common with the Department of Employment , Education and Training, and Youth Affairs statistical data gathering requirements. It is this data, along with teaching and research output figures, which determines the level of an institution's operating grant each year.

The library staff figures analysed include: professional positions; para-professional positions; support staff (administrative and clerical assistants, secretarial and word processing staff, and attendants) and; 'other professional staff' (such as accounting or IT staff).

Instructions to institutions compiling the statistical returns require figures for all full-time, as well as full-time equivalent and casual staff. The survey is of *positions* on a library's establishment, and is not necessarily a body count.

Of course there is a multitude of factors that can influence the staffing figures. These include the total level of library funding, whether the library is single or 'multi-site', the subject focus of an institution's teaching and research, the influence of automation and information technology generally, as well as each library's unique policies and practices.

Having said that, these figures tell us something very real. They show the 'bottom line' in respect of job prospects for library personnel, interested in and seeking work and careers in university libraries.

Note that this analysis uses the phrases 'job positions' and 'numbers of staff employed' synonymously, that is, no account is taken of unfilled positions. Of necessity, the analysis is based on the figures provided to AARL by the universities themselves.

Summary of trends

As one could expect, there are variations in trends from State to State, but nationally the trends are not encouraging. The figures for Western Australia, my home State, were particularly disturbing.

It is also interesting to note the shifts in the percentages of professional and para-professional staff being employed in university libraries, as well as the overall totals of library positions.

Note that the number of professional positions declined in real terms, while para-professional positions increased. To state the obvious, the percentage shifts, while not large in themselves, indicate there are fewer jobs for librarians in tertiary libraries today than there were five years ago. Para-professionals fare better, while the 'other' category increased its 'share' of the library-based positions by almost eighty per cent.

Figure 1:Librarians (as a percentage of total staff employed nationally)
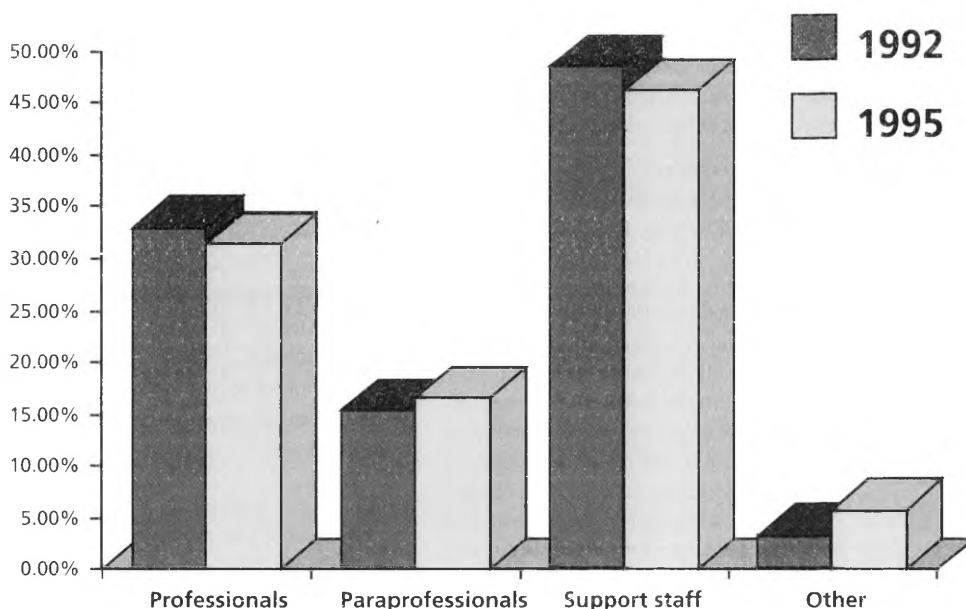
ACU   ACT   NSW   NT   Qld   SA   Tas   Vic   WA
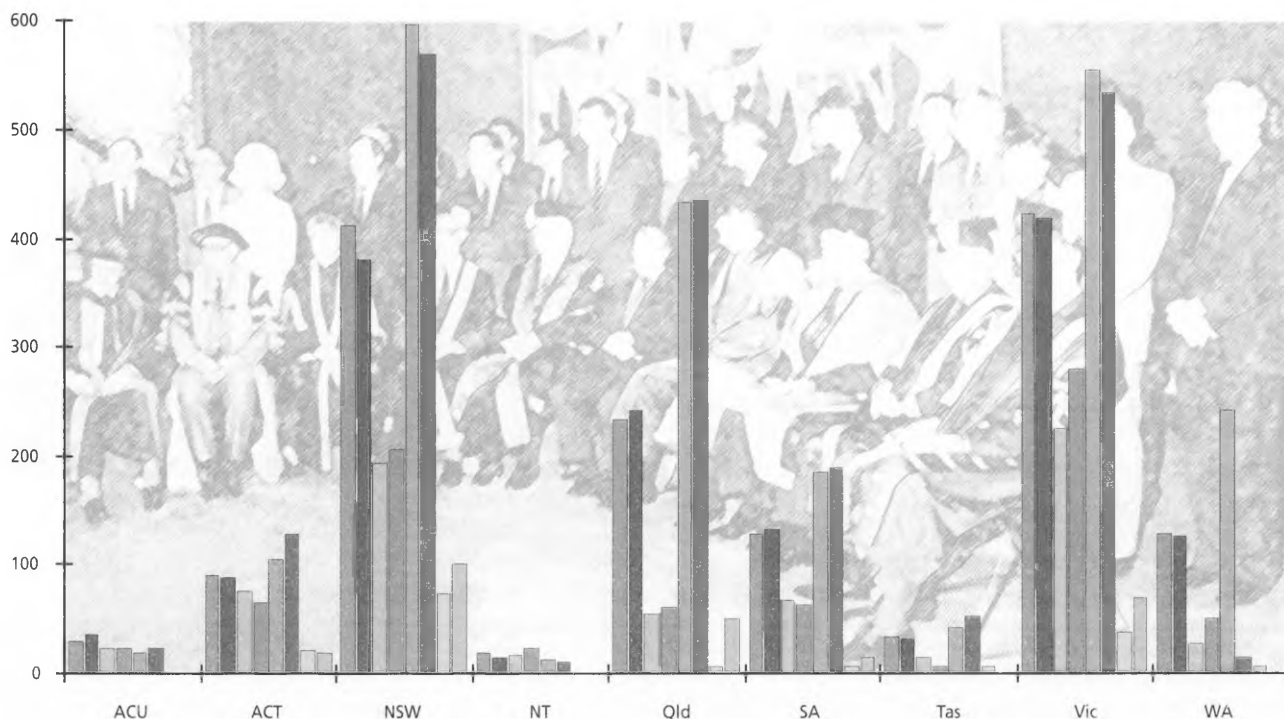
The total number of all library positions (the 'Australian university library workforce') grew from 4524.8 FTEs to 4668.4, that is, up 3.2 per cent over the five-year period.

State figures

Above is a chart showing the variations in library positions in 1992 by each Australian State, the Australian Catholic University figures being charted separately.

It can be seen that the percentage of professional librarians on libraries' staffs are fairly similar. What is worth noting is the large variations in the number of library technicians' positions. The figures for 1995 are also worthy of investigation.

Comparisons between 1992 – 1995
Professional positions

With the exception of South Australia and Tasmania, all States showed a decline in the number of professional library positions in university libraries.

Para-professional positions

No standard or consistent pattern emerged here. Three States (ACT, SA, Tas) plus the Australian Catholic University libraries showed a decrease in the number of para-professional positions and four States (NSW, NT,

Vic, WA) showed an increase.

Support staff

Again, no set pattern emerged, although four States (NT, Qld, Vic WA) showed a decrease in support staff positions, two showed an increase (ACT, Tas), with NSW and SA remaining fairly steady.

Summary

As mentioned earlier, the reasons for such variations in figures across States and across the nation are many and various. They could include the more obvious, such as:

- the wide impact of information technology, including remote access to OPACs and CD-ROM networks;

- the wider use of bureau services such as ABN;

- the demand of library users, especially in universities to have information delivered to their desktop PC;

- higher degrees of computer literacy and information retrieval skills of users; and

- the opportunities for information access and retrieval provided by the Internet

All of these factors are a matter of concern to those seeking careers in tertiary libraries. But as pointed out by Ross Bowerman

in the November 1996 issue of *inCite*, people seeking careers where library skills are relevant are going to have to look further than 'L' for librarian. He makes the point that about thirty per cent of the jobs managed by Library Locums do not have librarian in the title.

Commonwealth Education Ministers in recent years have urged educational institutions to be 'industry responsive'. Putting it a little clumsily, perhaps thirty per cent of library training courses should reflect these changing demands of the 'information industry'. No doubt many 'library and information schools' are adjusting their course content accordingly. I trust they are also modifying that content of the courses which educates students about job-seeking skills, mindful of Ross Bowerman's comments. ■

Above: Library staff in Australian Universities by State