

**TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR LIS¹ IN THE EAST and SOUTHEAST (SE)
ASIAN REGION: some preliminary thoughts.**

DR KERRY SMITH

Head, Department of Information Studies

School of Media, Culture & Creative Arts

Curtin University of Technology

GPO Box U 1987

Perth Western Australia 6845

Email: k.smith@curtin.edu.au

Abstract. The International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) Library Theory & Research (LTR) Section's proposed Open Session at the IFLA 2010 Brisbane conference will be on research agendas in library and information science/studies (LIS). The role of research in LIS in Australia has now been recognised by the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) and some of the activities of ALIA's Research Committee are reported. Nevertheless of the significant international research literature in library and information science/studies (LIS), few Australian LIS researchers use or contribute to it (Genoni, Haddow & Ritchie, 2004). Are there similarities in the Australian situation for the East and SE Asian region? The paper discusses some of the issues that might arise in contemplating the need for a research agenda for the region. If there is general agreement from this conference on the need for setting a research agenda for LIS in the East SE Asian region, then it is suggested that a way to enable it be discussed and acted upon.

Introduction. It is disappointing but not surprising to sense that strong elements of pragmatism pervade the library landscape today. It is not surprising because libraries and their librarians operate in the world described by Brewerton (2003): a world which includes management speak and accountability, employer demands and organizational relevance; a world of practice and service delivery; a world that does not encourage or give much time for reflection.

Nevertheless education for professional librarians is undertaken globally at university level in schools of librarianship. So this in itself should indicate that an underlying theme of attention to research matters would pervade. But does it? And why should this be important? Since the LTR open session at the IFLA 2010, Brisbane conference is proposed to be on LIS research agendas, it is useful to contemplate what might be the implications, if any, for LIS professionals in the East and SE Asian region should they decide to set one.

What is a research agenda? In the broadest terms, a research agenda "is a set of properly selected themes or topics that have been prioritized for research purposes" (Msuya, 2002, p. 251). Undertaking this task assumes a predisposition towards research in LIS. The discussion of LIS is taken in its broadest sense to include allied information studies fields of archives and records and document management with librarianship and its related sub disciplines.

LIS practitioners seem more attuned to practice rather than research although some are being drawn into the evidence-based research net. As well, there is a significant international research literature in LIS and in the case of Australia, few Australian LIS researchers use or contribute to it (Genoni, Haddow & Ritchie, 2004). So the questions need to be asked:

- do we need to encourage LIS research in the first place?
- Should we contemplate a research agenda, first in our own country, and then through global collaboration?

¹ While the term "library and information science" tends to be used internationally, "library and information studies" appears to be the preferred use in Australia.

We can reflect on the first of these questions by considering the current situation in Australia. Australian academic colleagues in LIS have pondered the dearth of published LIS research for the country and the establishment of a concerted interest in LIS research by the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) has placed LIS research on the professional agenda.

ALIA has another important role in the LIS educational process: it recognizes courses in LIS education in Australia. However, since a research qualification is not always necessary for recognition as a professional librarian, the question needs to be asked: why should librarians bother to undertake the rigours of such study to achieve it?

At the professional education level, i.e. university level, the relationship between education and research is now intertwined with new research directions being set by the Australian government for its universities. Because of the assumption that all education for library professionals would/should be offered at university level, schools of LIS in Australia need to demonstrate that they are research active.

Until the advent of a new Labor government in November 2007, the Research Quality Framework (RQF) was the proposed new funding model for Australia's university research. The then Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) maintained a comprehensive website² on developments and the initiative was taken very seriously by most of Australia's universities.

The RQF exercise was formalized in May 2004 when the then Australian federal Liberal government announced the formulation of a quality and accessibility framework for publicly funded research, to replace prior guidelines. This arose out of a significant number of recommendations stemming from an earlier federal government enquiry *Backing Australia's Ability – Building Our Future through Science and Innovation* and was because of the government's belief that:

there is no robust and consistent way to measure the quality of research conducted in universities and publicly funded research agencies and its benefits to research and the wider community [and] (n)or is there a mechanism through which a researcher or member of the community can be sure that he or she is aware of all the research that has been done in a particular field and how to access it. (*Quality...*, 2004, p.1).

Added to this was the belief that the RQF would drive change in the patterns of published outputs (whether in print or electronic form) of research teams. The RQF negotiations made considerable progress until the Australian federal election at the end of 2007 and Australia's LIS university researchers and educators participated in these discussions through ALIA and its Research Committee (Smith, 2008). Since then the RQF has become the Excellence in Research for Australia initiative (ERA), which is still in its infancy (ARC, 2008). It is hoped that the library sector will continue to be consulted as the new ERA dawns. Will the governments of East and SE Asian countries follow a similar research funding direction to that in Australia?

Should we contemplate a research agenda, first in our own country, and then through global collaboration? To consider this question, it is useful to visit the UK, once a bastion of funded LIS research and with a strong research agenda. Goulding (2007) reports on a meeting held at the British Library in 2006 where those present searched for a research agenda for the (UK) LIS community. The workshop aims were to:

- reflect the past successes of LIS research;
- re-establish the importance of LIS research for professional practice in the UK;
- propose priorities for the research agenda; and
- seek to engage both established researchers and the next generation of up and coming professionals from across the whole LIS community (p. 124).

² All website information for the RQF was removed by the newly elected Australian government in December 2007

It is worth noting that the seminar was held in memory of Brian Perry, a highly regarded former Director of the former British Library Research and Development Department (BLRDD) and that this Department did more than research. It nurtured research talent, supported travel, organized conferences and meetings to debate and develop policy, and it played a leadership role (p. 124). Additionally “Bob McKee’s presentation...talk(ed) of ‘major gaps’ between the needs of practitioners and the needs of researcher” (p. 124). Funding regimes were discussed as was the difficulty in carrying out practice-lead and serendipitous research under the current UK research funding models. This reminds us of the Australian research funding environment. The outcomes of the UK meeting included suggestions for the establishment of a body or organization to set the research agenda and choosing someone/body to lead it and be instrumental in its establishment (p. 124).

It is also worth noting that despite the relatively recent flurry of LIS research policy work in Australia, the Australian LIS community has yet to establish its own research agenda.

Why a Research Agenda in LIS? In order for us to contemplate a research agenda for the region, it is necessary to ask further questions, some of which are prompted by the aforementioned UK discussions.

1. Is there a history of research in the LIS sector in the region? It would be expected that much of the LIS research undertaken in a region would emanate from LIS schools. Southeast Asia or Southeastern Asia, often abbreviated to SEA or SE Asia, is a subregion of Asia, consisting of the countries that are geographically south of China, east of India and north of Australia. The countries in this region are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam. Eastern Asia includes China, Democratic Republic of Korea, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Macao. Taiwan is not listed under these UN groupings (presumably it is considered a part of China). However it has been separated out in the analysis that follows. Australia is not included since it belongs in Oceania (United Nations, 2008). The data in Table 1 below report the number of LIS schools in the countries of the East and SE Asian regions, whether they offer PhD program, and if any of their staff have a PhD. This information was gleaned from the latest IFLA (2007) *World Guide to Library, Archive and Information Science Education*. It is possible that some of the figures will be incorrect since the data is only as good as that submitted to the editors of the publication. It also needs to be noted that some of the requests from these editor/s were not stated in a clear manner and were thus open to misinterpretation.

Country	Number of LIS schools*	With PhD program/s*	With staff with PhDs?*
Brunei Darussalam	Not listed		
Cambodia	Not listed		
China	95	11	13
Hong Kong SAR	5	nil	nil
Indonesia	12	nil	nil
Japan	11	3	2 + 1 with staff “research activities”
Dem. People's Rep. of Korea	32	13	3 + 1 with staff “research activities”
Lao People's Democratic Republic	Not listed		
Macao	Not listed		
Malaysia	3	2 + 1 honours	1 + 1 with staff “research activities”
Myanmar	Not listed		
Philippines	37	1 + 1 thesis masters	4 + 4 with staff “research activities”
Singapore	1	Nil	1
Taiwan	8	3	2
Thailand	17	Nil	7

Timor-Leste	Not listed		
Viet Nam	5		Nil 1

*taken from IFLA. (2007). *World Guide to Library, Archive and Information Science Education*

Table 1: List of countries and LIS research in SE and Eastern Asia.

As the *World Guide* reveals, LIS education is almost a global phenomenon and the East and SE Asian region is no exception. Some of the schools without a PhD program do have PhD qualified staff so it could be expected that these staff ought to be researchers in their own right. Some LIS schools have a PhD or research masters, and in one case an honours, program and this infers that it is extremely likely that the students studying this way will be researching topics in the broad fields of LIS.

Steuart (1997) identified the need for research to encourage international cooperation amongst libraries: “by transborder groups working together” (p. 130). He believed that “(r)esearch, in this international arena, can relate to a whole spectrum of activities ranging from information theory through information technology to service-oriented functions” (p. 130). The core issue in Steuart’s paper is that in order to deal with international sensitivities in undertaking international cooperative ventures, library professionals should undertake research on differing national structures, in the chosen areas, first. He termed it “cultural borrowing” (p. 130). One could “observe and test in a systematic way, the diversity that needs to be appreciated and explained” (p. 132). This could be one component of a research agenda since he reports on “action research”, i.e. reporting problem solving and historical research. He remarked that global cooperation in LIS research has been achieved through bodies like IFLA.

While Steuart (1997) identified barriers to international cooperation, he did cite two examples of international research for Asia and Oceania and there would be more since his paper was written. His proposed research agenda includes studies on:

1. information production, including intellectual property;
2. the effects of mass media and censorship;
3. how to enhance planning for change
4. information access and equity;
5. the provision of information services;
6. ICT issues;
7. educating and recruitment of LIS professionals; and
8. preservation and archiving of information (pp. 134-5).

2. What are the current developments? Xia’s (2006) analysis of scholarly communication in East and SE Asia is useful in assessing current publishing practice. The data in Table 2 below provide a summary of Xia’s findings and note the disparity in research publishing between four East and SE Asian countries.

COUNTRY	Journals?	Research culture	University journal?	Peer review	ICT scholarly publishing challenges
China	1949: 257 periodical titles 2001: 8,725 periodical titles	Research institutes & universities pressuring researchers – promotion in favour of quantity of publication	Almost every university published its own journal to assist with publishing demand	not strong Disrespect for intellectual property	36 electronic publishing units operating with government permission
Japan	many		Yes – Soc Sci & Humanities: quality control by senior professors though this is under question	Strong Prefer to publish in English and no Japanese journals	Electronic publishing rare

Myanmar	scarce		Tend to publish abroad	Government censors;	Very slow
Korea South	- 1980 + Rapid growth	International collaboration in publishing is popular			Rapid development. Government strongly supportive.

Table 2: Research and publishing culture in four East and SE Asian countries (after Xia, 2006).

Xia's findings serve to illustrate the influence of cultural backgrounds in each of the countries he studied. It is not necessarily likely that this activity would be congruent with perceived research priorities for that country. Nevertheless, research culture issues, such as those described by Xia (2006) need to be taken into account in the East and SE Asian situations when setting an LIS research agenda. It might be that researchers in these countries wish to follow the research and publishing paradigm of Western nations (e.g. Japan and Korea), but any LIS research that they carry out will be tempered by local conditions.

Because of the pivotal role of the Australian LIS educator in the promotion and continuation of research in the current Australian LIS context, a small study was undertaken on the professional development of the LIS educator (Smith, 2006). The study sought to establish the types of professional development activities being undertaken by LIS educators in Australia by using an email survey to the discussion list for the Australian Information Studies Educators' Forum (ISEF).

Of the 11 respondents who held a masters qualification, 6 were studying for a PhD. Seven of the 12 respondents who held a PhD had done so for more than 10 years. If they had followed a university research trajectory they should, at this stage of their career, be considered mature researchers. The remaining 5 PhD respondents gained this qualification more recently. However, only 4 of all respondents (there were 23) mentioned that they undertook research and/or were engaged in writing research grant applications as part of their professional development. It is useful to consider this research activity, or lack of it, in light of prevailing conditions in universities within Australia.

Willard, Kennan, Wilson & White's (2008) recent paper on publication by Australia LIS academics and practitioners studied the number of papers, collaborative authorship, and publication by non LIS authors in LIS journal titles. They found an increase in all categories studied. These results give pause to contemplate a study of the types of research activities undertaken by Australian LIS researchers. Such findings should contribute to a map of Australian LIS research activity. Whether the research undertaken in the past leads, or contributes to, a research agenda for future LIS research in Australia, remains to be seen.

The role of practitioner research will also contribute to the formulation of a research agenda. Earlier work by Haddow (2001) revealed that in the Australian context "there is little communication of research to practice through periodical publications" (Haddow & Klobas, 2004, p. 37). The health libraries literature is replete with papers on evidence-based research practice but arriving at a working definition can be problematic. Eldredge appears to be the mainstay for this research initiative and in one of his first writings in 1997 he reported that "Librarians [need] to develop their own version of "evidence-based practice" (Eldredge, 1997, p. 4). A survey of some of the key literature since then indicates that little progress on defining EBL has been made. It seems that Eldredge (1997) developed the term evidence based librarianship (EBL) as a mechanism to encourage the medical library profession to take a serious interest in researching its issues. Lewis & Cotter (2007) report little take up of research issues in medical librarianship between 2001 and their study in 2006.

The earlier mentioned UK seminar (Goulding, 2007) sought to reflect on past LIS research, yet it does not necessarily follow that such historical research practice will continue in a research agenda of the future. However we can hope that an analysis such as that in the UK will recognize a country's research strengths and weaknesses and assist in pointing the way to the future.

3. Where is the leadership to establish a research agenda and drive it forward? In the Australian context, it became evident from the detail included in some of the ALIA's award activities and the Association's desire to establish a research fund, that the Association needed to take a serious interest in professional

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research activities. This interest was encouraged during the Library and Information Science Education for the Knowledge Age (LISEKA) project of 2001-2 (ALIA, 2002) aligning this work with Object (c) of the Association's Constitution: "To ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations" (*Constitution...*, 2006, p. 7).

One outcome from this project was the establishment of the ALIA Research Committee by the ALIA Board of Directors. The Committee's role is to promote the value of research, to provide advice on the development of REAP and ALIA's role in research in general, to have oversight of the research fund and to recommend recipients of research awards and research activities to be supported by the research fund (*ALIA Research...*2006, p.1).

The early activity of this Committee was based around the research award process, seeking taxation exemption for potential donations to a research fund, and early steps towards encouraging a research culture amongst Australia's library professionals. The activities have been more focused in recent times and were driven by the Committee's belief that if LIS research was to be encouraged then LIS research needed to be a part of the Australian government's research agenda.

If we assume that professional associations might facilitate LIS research agendas in each of the countries in the East and SE Asian region, are there any to undertake this work? The significant body coordinating professional activity in SE Asia is the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) and there are only two library associations (the Library Association of Singapore and the Brunei Darussalam Library Association) listed on the CONSAL website (CONSAL, 2008). The list in Table 3 below shows those library associations and their web addresses as located using the Internet.

Country	Library Association	Web address (at September 26, 2008)	Association Journal/s?
Brunei Darussalam	Brunei Library Assn	http://bruneilibraryassociation.wordpress.com/	?
Cambodia	Cambodia Library Assn		
China	Library Assn of the Republic of China		
Hong Kong SAR	Hong Kong Library Assn	http://www.hkla.org/	Hong Kong Library Assn Journal - ? last issue 1996.
Indonesia	Indonesian Library Assn		
Japan	Japan Library Assn;	http://www.jla.or.jp/index-e.html	Library Journal, Toshokan Zasshi
Dem. People's Rep. of Korea	Korea Library Assn	http://www.korla.or.kr/	
Lao People's Democratic Republic	Lao Library Assn		
Macao	Macao Library & Information Assn	http://www.mlima.org.mo/	
Malaysia	Persatuan Pustakawan	http://www.ppm55.org.my/node/6	Jurnal PPM

	Malaysia		
Myanmar	Myanmar Library Assn		
Philippines	Philippine Librarians Association of the Philippines, Inc.		
Singapore	Library Assn of Singapore	http://www.las.org.sg/about_us.htm	Singapore Journal of Library & Information Management
Taiwan	Library Assn of China Taiwan		
Thailand	Thai Library Assn	http://tla.or.th/	
Timor-Leste	Timor-Leste Library & Information Association (ABITL)	See: http://www.untl.labor.net.au/news/1095648322_15496.html	
Viet Nam	Vietnamese Library Association		

Table 3: East and SE Asian Library Associations

It is heartening to see that each of the countries considered in this paper has a library association, but is it likely that each of these associations will consider that LIS research is one of its priority activities?

4. How might an LIS research agenda be set? It would seem that professional associations could have a role in establishing the LIS research agenda in each country. It would be highly desirable that if this process were undertaken, that it be done collaboratively with all members of the profession in that country or region. Otherwise the activity might be fractured and be in the interests of particular researchers or research groups, and not the country as a whole.

The responsibility of encouraging a research agenda for these countries will rest either with the academics at the teaching institutions, and/or with significant, energetic and committed library practitioners. How likely is this to happen? It is only likely if there is a perceived need for a concerted research effort in one or more aspects of LIS in each particular country or in the region. Otherwise any LIS research will continue as we see today: in the interests of the researcher/s undertaking the work, for the resolution of workplace driven problem solving at the practitioner level, and/or as evidence based studies mostly carried out at the practitioner level.

Conclusion. This paper has contemplated some of the issues to bear in mind in setting an LIS research agenda, particularly for the East and SE Asian region. It has posed more questions than provided answers. The profession in each country needs to believe that such an agenda is necessary and if so, move in concert to prepare it, prioritise the projects chosen and seek funding and researchers to carry out the work. If there is general agreement from this conference on the need for setting a research agenda for LIS in the East SE Asian region, then it is suggested that a way to enable it be discussed and acted upon.

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