

# **Big Ideas in a shrinking world: encouraging opportunity and innovation in the workplace**

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## **Abstract**

*Libraries are an exciting environment in which to work. Developments in information access and technology require members of the profession to actively participate in a variety of ongoing professional development activities. As movement of staff within the library profession is currently more static than previously, professional development resulting from regular job changes is largely lacking and these other professional development activities may be the only source of continuing professional education available, particularly in a regional setting.*

*The authors manage a diverse group of staff undertaking professional, paraprofessional, clerical and administrative duties. With such a diverse workgroup, professional development needs vary significantly. Staff at regional campuses experience very different professional development opportunities than their colleagues in a metropolitan setting. Meeting the continuing professional development needs of a workforce at different stages in their career cycle is also challenging.*

*The authors identify issues associated with providing continuing professional education opportunities to a diverse workgroup and explore how these issues can be addressed.*

## **Introduction**

La Trobe University has been in operation since 1967 when it opened as Victoria's third university. It currently provides higher education to 26,575 students at its main campus at Bundoora, Melbourne, and across six regional campuses.

La Trobe University is a multi-campus university. Its campuses across Central and North-East Victoria – at Bendigo, Albury-Wodonga, Shepparton, Beechworth, Mount Buller and Mildura – enable regional students to access a University environment with the resource and infrastructure support of a large metropolitan campus in Melbourne.

This model is made possible by employing academic staff and tutors based in these regions, and also having academic staff travel to deliver lectures personally or via remote delivery technologies, such as video conferencing.

The La Trobe University Library has also adopted a multi-campus model, with its main library at Bundoora (Melbourne) and large regional libraries at Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga (150 km and 300 km respectively from the urban centre). A Library presence is also maintained at three additional smaller centres although this paper will focus on the experiences of the three main campus libraries. Each library employs its own staff, operates within its own budget and is responsible for all aspects of technical and professional services. The library maintains a 'one library' service focus by the development and application of consistent policies and procedures across all its campuses, with input from staff at all sites. This includes provision for staff development and continuing professional education opportunities and initiatives.

## Identifying the Issues

Providing effective professional development to a group of 137 (EFT) staff dispersed over the state of Victoria, presents its own challenges. The following section of the paper outlines the main issues faced by La Trobe University Library in confronting these issues.

### *Minimal Career Mobility*

In common with other large organisations, the staff within the library at La Trobe University cover the full spectrum of professional, paraprofessional, clerical and administrative positions, and their continuing professional development needs vary significantly. Like many public sector organisations whose staff experience an average tenure of 12 years (Department of Industrial Relations, 2001, in Jorgensen, 2004, p.7), the staffing of the Library has been relatively static. As illustrated in Table 1, 62% of staff have been employed for more than 10 years, with 41% employed for a period greater than 15 years. This is particularly marked amongst the general staff who, perhaps, have fewer options for career mobility.

**Table 1 Staffing Profile – Length of service [General staff and Academic staff]**

Years of Employment at La Trobe University Library	Professional Staff (Librarians)		General Staff		Totals for all staff
	No of staff	Percentage	No of staff	Percentage	
More than 15 years	19	41%	43	41%	62 (41%)
10 – 15 years	10	21%	19	18%	29 (19%)
5 - 10 years	8	17%	21	20%	29 (19%)
Less than 5 years	10	21%	22	21%	32 (21%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>152</b>

Staff do not generally receive the stimulation which results from regular career moves or from working with new colleagues. In reporting the benefits of a library graduates' trainee program, Wilson (1996 p.12) noted staff in the libraries with such programs often mentioned how valuable the fresh ideas or young approach of the trainees was and how important this was "when faced with an older group of professionals and a low staff turnover". Individuals and the Library therefore need to work together to find creative ways of building skills and experience and maintaining staff motivation.

Staff, with many years of experience in delivering Library services, are often looking for challenges in continuing professional opportunities to maintain interest and vitality in their roles. Others are happy to participate less actively during their final working years. Staff who are relatively new to the profession are often eager to learn as much as they can and experience a variety of professional development opportunities, and can also become frustrated if their youthful enthusiasm is not appreciated.

DeLong (2004, p.49) states that career development processes are needed to retain and build long-term workforce capabilities. In a profession with little movement, staff development programs are essential to develop necessary capabilities in the library and information sector. La Trobe University Library commenced the implementation of an automated system to manage and co-ordinate the interlibrary loan system in 2000. Staff involved in the existing service required tailored staff development opportunities to bring their skills to a necessary level to plan and implement the new system which was fully launched in 2004. Recruiting new staff with the necessary skill set was not an option – working with the existing staff ensured a client-focussed system which met the needs of the University community.

### ***Role diversity***

Library staff at La Trobe University are either general staff or if they work in positions requiring a library degree, they have academic equivalency. Table 2 demonstrates the diversity of staff at the three campuses of Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo and Bundoora. The diversity of roles and classifications presents a challenge to offer continuing professional education which is appropriate to the individual and the requirements of the staff member's role. This is particularly relevant for the Higher Education Officer 3 – 5 cohort who represent approximately 50% of the Library staff. Without professional qualifications, the opportunities to be promoted beyond this level are limited. Their position description may not officially require more of them and yet they have developed very strong personal skills and have a desire to grow professionally.

**Table 2 Classification of Staff Across Campuses (EFTs)**

	<b>Albury-Wodonga</b>	<b>Bendigo</b>	<b>Bundoora</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Lib Level E</b>			1	<b>1</b>
<b>Lib Level D</b>			2	<b>2</b>
<b>Lib Level C</b>		1	3	<b>4</b>
<b>Lib Level B</b>	1	3	17.4	<b>21.4</b>
<b>Lib Level A</b>	2.8	3.8	6.07	<b>11.67</b>
<b>HEO 9</b>			1	<b>1</b>
<b>HEO 8</b>				
<b>HEO 7</b>			2.1	<b>2.1</b>
<b>HEO 6</b>	0.4	1	3.8	<b>5.2</b>
<b>HEO 5</b>	2.07	2.6	12.09	<b>15.76</b>
<b>HEO 4</b>	3.8	4	18.5	<b>26.3</b>
<b>HEO 3</b>	0.12	5.7	21.03	<b>26.85</b>
<b>HEO 2</b>	0.14	1.11	16.45	<b>17.7</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10.33</b>	<b>22.21</b>	<b>104.44</b>	<b>136.98</b>

*Lib = Librarian - academically-equated classification*

*HEO = Higher Education Officer*

In common with many professions, the library and information sector has witnessed a technological revolution in recent decades. Tools are now available to provide services previously only dreamed about. For example, university libraries provide access to previous years examination papers for students and today these are available digitally which means students can read them on screen, save them, or print them. To fully utilise such new technology, library staff have needed to develop greater and greater skill in using digital tools. Some of this training need has been met by external providers, such as the suppliers of digitisation tools, but a significant level of the training has been developed in-house as peer-to-peer training.

As described by Joint (2003, p.417-19), there is a need to rethink aspects of traditional learning and training models for developing staff working with the challenges of the digital library environment. He highlights that in today's library environment it is much more difficult to create library-wide training programs that will provide skill sets to meet overall needs. Joint suggests taking on a range of approaches including self directed learning with real tasks and utilising staff appraisal to facilitate a more 'constructivist' approach to staff development.

The challenge faced by managers is to offer continuing professional development opportunities which are meaningful to the individual but also meet the requirements of the workplace.

### ***The Aging Workforce***

Like many other professions, the library and information sector can be characterised as aging. Teece (2005, p.32) notes that librarians are close to being the oldest of any major occupational group in Australia. He quotes Australian Bureau of Statistics data which show that currently 52.1% of librarians are over 45 years of age, compared to 34.2% of the Australian workforce overall. Only 19.1% are younger than 35, compared to 41.9% of the entire Australian workforce. This is evidenced at the La Trobe University Library, where the average age of the staff is 49.

The staff profile at the three campus libraries at Albury Wodonga, Bendigo and Bundoora demonstrates the need for close attention to the needs of an aging workforce with little career mobility.

The increase in “age diversity”, a phenomena described by Belout, Dolan and Saba, (2001, p.208) can create challenges in developing staff development opportunities which will be of benefit to all staff. The “Baby Boomers”, “Baby Busters”, and the “Echoes”, three distinct groups, have very different career and staff development requirements. Belout, Dolan and Saba (2001, p.208) describe the Baby Boomers as achievement-oriented, displaying a tendency to be preoccupied with climbing the corporate ladder. Baby Busters believe that family commitments take priority over work priorities and so Baby Boomers perceive they are not committed to the job and the Busters believe the Boomers are opposed to change and less capable than they of doing a good job. The Echoes, due to their young age, may want a well-paid job which funds their lifestyle choices.

Despite these perceived stereotypes, the reality is that suitably qualified persons are not entering the professions at the same rate as those retiring. Jorgensen (2005) predicts a shortage in qualified staff in the next decade, which places greater emphasis on existing staff to develop the necessary skills to adapt to new workforce expectations.

### ***Geographic Diversity***

Any organisation which spans both a metropolitan and regional setting will face many challenges in providing continuing professional education opportunities fairly to both the metropolitan staff and staff from the regions. Providing such activities for staff based in rural areas brings its own set of challenges. There are limited opportunities to attend local professional development activities and the cost of travelling to major centres to access such training can be prohibitive, both in time and direct impact on budgets.

Most formal professional development activities are offered in the major cities and for rural staff to attend, there is considerable outlay of time and associated travel expenses. For example, if a staff member at Albury-Wodonga wished to attend a single day activity at the metropolitan campus, an additional \$600 would be added to costs to cover transport, overnight accommodation, and lost staff time due to travel.

As the number of staff in regional libraries tends to be smaller, the absence of an individual to attend continuing professional development activities can have a greater impact. The Albury-Wodonga Campus library for example, employs 13 equivalent full time staff so the absence of one person means almost 10% of the available staff is lost. The difficulties in recruiting trained casual staff means such absences are often covered by the remaining staff assuming a larger workload. Consequently, the decision to release staff to attend continuing professional development is more complex than perhaps it would be in an urban centre, where the absence of an hour or two can be covered by the existing team.

Because of the relatively small number of staff at regional campus libraries, there is also less opportunity for professional development amongst colleagues. Whereas in a large centre, there may be a team of skilled people, in a regional setting there is greater isolation, with an individual working in areas as the single ‘expert’ in that area – the only cataloguer, finance

officer, web developer. There is not generally access to the normal exchange of ideas that may occur in a larger organisation. The Internet has assisted greatly in overcoming isolation because of the proliferation of mailing lists and email links to professional organisations, but it is not as stimulating as regular face-to-face interactions with colleagues.

Opportunities for managers at the regional campuses to employ staff with new skills and experience are limited by the static nature of the workforce. For employees, opportunities to move to similar positions within the region or establish opportunities for career building in their profession are limited. Many staff have made a choice to live in the region and are committed long term to the locality. If staff wish to expand their experience or accept a promotion by working in another workplace, they may need to relocate or travel long distances from home to work. This makes short-term staff exchanges, which are a very useful way to reinvigorate staff and to bring new ideas into the workplace, almost impossible as the entire family must relocate to accommodate the exchange. Regional managers are therefore under increased pressure to establish local programs which effectively develop a culture of continual learning to maximise staff potential.

### **Strategies to Address Issues**

In this second part of the paper the authors, who are managers at the three main campuses, will outline some of the strategies adopted by La Trobe University Library to address the issues identified. They offer their reflections on the current continuing professional education program as both participants and change managers.

#### ***Staff Development Policy at a Strategic Planning Level***

The Library's staff development policy (<http://staff.lib.latrobe.edu.au/wol/policies/jmc-stdevguide.html>) places primary emphasis on the provision of training which directly relates to key library objectives and tasks, as identified in the Library's Strategic Plan. Senior staff meet annually to identify strategic priorities for the coming year. Progress on these priorities, including staff development, is regularly monitored.

#### ***Coordination and Organisation of Staff Development***

The Library has appointed specific staff and teams to oversee staff development. A Senior Librarian position has oversight of human resource management and development across the Library. There is a specific budget allocated to staff development and this absorbs the costs associated with staff from regional campuses participating in a range of professional activities.

Each campus library also has its own Staff Development Committee, with the Manager: Library Human Resources as a member. These committees meet regularly to plan and monitor training activities. In addition, the Library Research & Development Committee (LRDC) encourages and supports staff to initiate and conduct research relevant to the profession, as well as offering support for Program Improvement Programs (PIPs), which are short term projects of a more practical nature.

#### ***Whole of Library Activities***

In 1997 the Library contracted the services of consultants who reviewed the human resources within the Library and made a number of recommendations for strengthening staff skills. The Library has, in response to these recommendations, identified several major areas of training. These include programs in which all staff have been invited to participate including: Customer Service Skills, Managing Change and most recently Optimising Team Work. Such a large scale commitment to training has enabled regional staff to enjoy the same opportunities as their urban counterparts, particularly as the training has also been delivered in regional centres.

### ***Group and Individual Programs***

At the same time the policy recognizes the need for library staff to have opportunities for training which assists their personal and professional development. This has resulted in a large number and variety of staff development opportunities.

Local activities, often initiated from within staff and overseen by the Campus Library and section managers, also contribute to providing staff with learning and developmental experiences. All campus libraries have a varied program of professional development activities organised throughout the year, which utilise the skills available locally and within the Library staff. (Appendix 1: examples of Continuing Professional Education activities for 2005). All library staff are invited to attend these activities and casual staffing support is utilized to assist in relieving staff from service desks so they can participate. In-staff training has the added advantage of building training skills and confidence in the local staff, while extending the opportunities for all staff to participate.

A more formal method of identifying individual staff development needs is handled within the performance planning and development scheme. In conjunction with their supervisor, professional and general staff identify their professional development needs for the coming year as part of their annual performance review. This allows them to talk with their supervisor about their goals and aspirations and to identify the training and support they will need to achieve their professional development.

Staff within the Higher Education Officer 3-5 band, who often hold key roles in the delivery of services, are equally encouraged to participate in a range of training opportunities offered. This is particularly important in regional areas, where this group of staff are required to be multi-skilled, often across different sections, and involved in various working groups. In addition, there is support available for further study, for those who wish to upgrade their formal qualifications. The Process Improvement Program, which supports staff to work on short term, work based improvements, was developed to capture the interest and expertise of this particular group.

### ***Activities Relevant to Local Needs***

Meeting the staff development needs of both the organisation and employees requires initiative, variety, and commitment on the part of managers. In addition to the formal programs organised on behalf of the entire Library by the Staff Development Committees, various other initiatives have developed over time. One section at the Bundoora campus for example, conducts a Continuing Education program each year. Staff within the section take turns acting as co-ordinator for a 12-month period and in consultation with their colleagues and supervisor, set an annual program of weekly, peer-conducted, one-hour sessions. Topics vary depending on interests and available resources. Sessions are scheduled at a time when most staff, including part-time staff, are potentially available to attend.

At both large regional campuses, the Campus Librarians coordinate a program of in-staff training that takes advantage of the skills and experience to be accessed within the Library staff and within the wider local community. Because these are targeted to local needs, there is a high participation rate across all levels of staff.

### ***Support for Regional Staff***

Some of the difficulties of trying to recruit and retain skilled staff in rural areas are eased by being part of a larger organisation, which is committed to the continuing education of staff, regardless of location. This allows access to a much larger group of skilled colleagues with whom to share ideas and provide greater opportunity for inspiration. It also allows economies of scale to provide training opportunities which would not be possible if each library was a separate entity.

To overcome the problems of professional isolation inherent in a small staff, the Library encourages participation in cross-campus committees and is supportive of regional staff holding leading positions on these committees. They also support the regular travel of staff between campuses, to participate in meetings and training seminars, and to offer training at other campuses.

### ***Use of Technology***

Teleconferencing is regularly used by committees and cross campus working groups and this facility has been enhanced recently with the use of Tight VCN Server software which allows staff to remotely view the screen of another computer workstation. This technology is becoming widely accepted as evidenced by the recent training offered by an American vendor where clients from around the world participated simultaneously in a demonstration of their new product.

Videoconferencing is also available although not yet widely used, and staff who offer training at the main campus make their electronic presentations and notes available to all staff via the Library's intranet.

### ***Opportunities for Younger Professionals***

Newly graduated library professionals can find it very difficult to gain the experience to land that first professional position. This is not uncommon in a range of professions where recruitment committees are faced with job applicants who are experienced and who can demonstrate that they meet all the selection criteria. The recruitment committee invariably selects the experienced applicant rather than a new graduate with little or no experience. La Trobe University Library has recognised this difficulty and recently supported a policy to develop graduate trainee positions which will be fixed term contracts for one or two years. The trainees will have two primary placement areas during the year and will be encouraged to participate widely in professional activities to maximise their experience and learning opportunities. In addition to providing valuable experience to the trainees, the existing library staff will have the opportunity to working with new graduates with potentially new and fresh ideas.

In addition to this very specific initiative, the Library is very active in providing placement opportunities for students completing their library degree or library technician diploma. Both courses have a significant practicum component for students to complete prior to graduation. Each year, La Trobe University Library provides placement opportunities for these students to experience how a large academic library operates. At the larger metropolitan campus library, they have a primary placement in one section of the Library with day-long "visits" to other sections so that they have the opportunity to develop and full picture of library operations. At regional campuses, the work placement program includes experience in all sections, as it is a reality in rural areas that staff may be required to be work in more than one area.

This commitment to student placements is seen as another way of presenting opportunities to new entrants to the profession. At times a student placement has led to casual or other forms of work in one of the campus libraries.

### ***Encouraging Innovation***

A more static workforce with limited opportunities to move to other organisations for career advancement and development has created an environment where staff will seek to explore new and innovative ideas within their existing position. As Jorgensen suggested in his discussion on The Ageing Population: implications for the Australian workforce (2004, p7),

“Given forecast workforce and skill shortages, members of the ageing workforce – knowledgeable, skilled and experienced – may have to be relied upon as an important creative force for the future.”

Managers can play a leading role in encouraging the exploration of new ideas and innovations. In 2003 a subject librarian at Bundoora initiated a trial of chat reference to test its viability and the resources which would be required to support such a service at La Trobe University Library (Porter, 2003). Over the past three years, subject librarians at the three campuses have worked together to deliver part of a first year unit in Nursing, that required them to develop skills in the use of new technologies, including the mounting of course material in WebCT and the creation of online quizzes. While none of these skills would have been relevant when the staff undertook their professional training, the requirements of the position demand an acceptance of continual learning. The support available from the Library Research & Development Committee encourages this atmosphere of enquiry and research.

## **Conclusion**

In order to address the diverse professional development needs of an ageing geographically dispersed staff, the La Trobe University Library has developed strategies to promote a culture of continual learning at all levels of the organisation.

The Library makes a serious commitment to staff development in its formal policies, including it as a key component in each strategic plan and identifying major training priorities each year. The Library appoints specific staff and committees to achieve this purpose and allocates a budget to ensure that continuing education opportunities are offered regularly. Senior managers also demonstrate their commitment to regional staff by encouraging and facilitating their participation in staff development activities and in funding intercampus travel. This is supported by impetus at the local campus level to develop programs to suit local needs, tapping into the potential that exists within each work group. The Library encourages development of the individual via the annual performance planning review and development scheme, and by supporting those individuals who demonstrate initiative and professional curiosity through the Library Research Development Committee.

This level of commitment and the diverse opportunities it offers succeeds in producing a workforce that is equipped to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Major innovations over the past three years have been managed and implemented by existing staff.

Jorgensen (2004, p.20), in the conclusion to his paper on the ageing workforce, recommends that what is needed to ensure that the Australian workforce remains competitive is "...a sustaining structure and culture that supports the ongoing development of core skills, according to the needs of individuals and those of the organisation ...". The development of such a culture has, and will continue to, assist the Library to meet the challenges of an ever changing educational and workplace environment.



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## **Appendix 1: Examples of Continuing Professional Education activities 2005.**

### **La Trobe University Library:**

Selected examples of Staff Development activities undertaken during 2005. The examples demonstrate involvement by library staff at all classification levels and the variety of staff development opportunities supported by the library.

#### **1. Supported Formal Study.**

Support can include approved study leave and funding to assist with cost.

##### **Examples:**

- Diploma of Library and Information Services (General Staff -Higher Education Officer 3)
- Diploma in University Administration (General Staff – Higher Education Officer 3)
- Masters of Information Management & Systems (Librarian)
- Masters of Education (Librarian)

#### **2. Conferences**

Staff are supported to attend conferences and to participate as presenters and/or organisers. On returning to work staff members who have attended conferences also deliver report back sessions that all Library staff are invited to attend.

**Examples** of conferences attended by a number of staff during 2005

- Information Online Conference (Librarians)
- Educause Conference (Librarians)
- ALIA National Library & Information Technicians Conference (General Staff - Higher Education Officer 4 & 5).

#### **3. General Staff Programs**

**Examples** of the range of programs attended by staff.

- Optimizing Team Work (1 day) - multiple delivery of program so all library staff could attend.
- Changeability Workshop (1 day) – multiple delivery of program so all staff could attend.
- Job Application and Interview Skills (2 hrs)
- Stress and Relaxation Session (2hrs)
- First Aid – CPR update (3hrs)
- Dealing with distressed and difficult clients (2.5hrs)

#### **4. Research Projects**

Individual staff and groups of staff have the opportunity to apply to undertake a research project. This is supported through the Research and Development Committee. Opportunity is also provided to seek support financially for example to assist with staff release to undertake such projects. Staff members who complete research projects are encouraged to present the results at relevant conferences and/or publish the results

##### **Example:**

- *Ebooks - cost, benefits and quality of digitization of whole works* (4 project members Librarians and General Staff)
- *Measuring effectiveness: pre and post testing* – Librarian

## 5. Campus Library Programs

In house programs are organized at the larger regional campuses (Albury Wodonga & Bendigo) and the Bundoora campus library each year. These programs provide a range of activities that can be attended by all staff at all levels.

### Example:

Bendigo Campus Library Activities for 2005.

- Talk for staff “Trends in library buildings and design”
- Research Project Report – “The Sandhurst Collection”
- Conference Report “A Peek at the Near Future”
- Audio Visual Equipment demonstration
- New Library Website demonstration
- Training session: Outlook – Introduction & Advanced
- Workshop: Health & Wellness – Tai Chi
- Talk for staff “IFLA: Opportunities for involvement and action”
- Library staff visits to other libraries

## 6. Workgroups & Committees

Librarians and General Staff are provided with the opportunity to be involved in various workgroups and committees, some are local to the campus library and some have cross campus membership.

### Examples:

- **Staff Development Committee** – calls for expression of interest to be a member result in access for all library staff.
- **Task oriented workgroups** – University Open Day workgroup calls for expression of interest.
- **Library Web Team** – Cross-campus members – calls for expression of interest.