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## Introduction

**Ross Harvey**  
*Charles Sturt University*

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RAILS 2, the second Research Applications in Information and Library Studies Seminar, was held on 16-17 September 2005 in Canberra at the National Library of Australia. It was organised by Charles Sturt University's School of Information Studies, and supported generously by the National Library of Australia who provided the venue and all facilities.

RAILS 2 built on the success of the first RAILS seminar held at Queensland University of Technology in September 2004. It continued the theme, established in RAILS 1, of building partnerships among educators, researchers and practitioners to ensure that a culture of informed and innovative practice is nurtured in the provision of library and information services (LIS). Specifically, its theme of *Linking Research with Practice* aimed to raise the profile of research in the information professions by:

- continuing to build a list of research required by Australian practitioners;
- making practitioners aware of university-based research that is currently underway and encouraging debate about it;
- making educators and researchers aware of practice-based research that is currently underway and encouraging debate about it; and
- promoting the research agenda of Australian LIS peak bodies.

Research students, recipients of research awards, research-active practitioners and research leaders were particularly encouraged to consider presenting papers.

In his introduction to the published proceedings of RAILS 1, Middleton noted its genesis and also noted the limited role of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in determining research priorities (Middleton 2005, pp. 1-2). It is pleasing to note that a re-energised ALIA Research Committee is currently addressing these comments. Middleton also noted that the research agendas of university-based LIS groups are often determined by faculty specialisation and the availability of grants and research students, rather than specific needs of practising professionals. RAILS 2 attempted to focus on practitioner research, although in the event this was not fully successful and the academy was also strongly represented in the papers presented. One participant noted in her blog that while 'one of the aims of the seminar was to bridge the practitioner-academic gap ... I'm not sure that was achieved' (Bradley 2005).

Middleton further noted that 'researchers and library administrators alike are continually striving to bridge the gap between research and practice. At times there is frustration with lack of involvement by practitioners in academic investigations or with irrelevant lines of research by academics' (Middleton 2005, p. 2). The range of papers presented at RAILS 2 also reflected this gap, despite attempts by its organisers to bring practitioners and academic researchers together.



Prompted in part by the location of RAILS 2 in Canberra, the organisers invited representatives of major national cultural heritage institutions to describe their roles in commissioning and encouraging research in the sector. Stephen Ellis described some of the research interests that the National Archives of Australia (NAA) is currently focusing on: archival management, information retrieval, recordkeeping theory and practice, metadata

implementation, conservation and preservation. He noted potential areas of research interest that NAA would like to see pursued either in collaboration or through other initiatives. Meg Labrum from the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) noted its new directions which intend that a high-level strategic and operational focus be given to scholarship, research and archival practice through the establishment of a Centre for Scholarly and Archival Research, based in Canberra. It is intended that this Centre will be a focal point of access to the NFSA's collections and will act as a driver of scholarship and research at both national and international levels. Fellowships will be available to facilitate this. Tony Boston described the National Library of Australia's role in supporting the National Research Infrastructure through the provision of services and infrastructure to support research and scholarship in Australia, its leadership role in the Australian library sector, and by undertaking research to develop content for its services.

Other papers were from practitioners engaged in research, many of whom were enrolled in or had recently completed research degrees, and from library and information studies academics who tended to present joint papers which reported on team research. The papers fell roughly into five broad themes, although they were not presented in these groupings at the seminar: the research process; information literacy; library history; improving services to specific groups; and understanding the needs of LIS professionals.

### **The research process**

Four presentations were concerned with aspects of the research process. Kerry Burgess (State Library of New South Wales) neatly bridged the gap between the invited papers and practitioners' presentations with her description of the establishment of the State Library of New South Wales' research program. Particularly apposite was her emphasis on the importance of communicating results. Michael Middleton (Queensland University of Technology) examined and drew conclusions from the processes that have advanced the emergence of a university research group, based on an information technology faculty, focusing on information itself and its effective utilisation. Gaby Haddow (Curtin University) linked her doctoral research with experience of evidence-based medical practice to draw outcomes about how to improve the communication of research and its application in practice. In a coda to this theme Kerry Smith (Curtin University) briefly noted the role of ALIA's Research Committee in fostering research.

### **Information literacy**

Another four presentations addressed the theme of information literacy (broadly conceived). Jenny Berryman (University of Technology Sydney) discussed her ongoing doctoral research into how people assess when they have enough information. Jenny Fafeita (William Angliss Institute of TAFE) presented interim findings from research for a masters program reporting the results of a survey into the information literacy practices of Victorian TAFE librarians. Victoria Redfern (University of Canberra) reported on her doctoral research-in-progress into the value of a prototype subject-based contemporary-language thesaurus to help overcome the difficulty students experience using databases, library catalogues, on-line journals and the Internet. Steve Wright, Kirsty Williamson, Vivienne Bernath and Jen Sullivan (Monash University) noted research students' understandings of how they manage and use information they collect during their research.

### **Library history**

Two papers explored aspects of library history. Don Boadle (Charles Sturt University) examined the historical interests of Australian librarians and archivists during the past thirty

years and explored the different ways in which they have used historical research and publication to advance professional agendas. Jean Preer (Indiana University School of Library and Information Science) noted, using examples from her research in U.S. library history, the importance of library history for providing powerful precedents for today's practitioners in the digital environment.

### **Improving services to specific groups**

Kerry Burn (Melbourne College of Divinity) noted her masters research in the area of theological librarianship, focusing on the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of Australian Baptist-related publications, as a basis for cooperative ventures between the various institutions and custodians of Australian Baptist resources. In an entertaining exploratory presentation Ben Hinton (Playford Library) proposed a counter to the inaccessibility of the public library to train commuters working standard business hours: the Travelling Librarian, who can assist the 'Lost Tribe of Train'. He described the process and problems of attempting to trial such a service on the TransAdelaide train system in Adelaide, South Australia. Kirsty Williamson, Marion Bannister, Lynne Makin, Graeme Johanson, Don Schauder and Jen Sullivan reported on a Monash-based pilot project to investigate the likely impact of the retirement of the baby boomers on the public library.

### **Understanding practitioners' and professionals' needs and tools**

Mary Anne Kennan, Fletcher Cole, Patricia Willard and Connie Wilson (University of New South Wales) described two studies which analysed job advertisements in the LIS field to determine the knowledge, qualifications, skills, competencies and personal traits that employers seek from LIS job applicants, concluding that examining semantics of job advertisements allows different perspectives to be developed from this data. Brian Lloyd (Northern Territory Library) applied literary criticism, document analysis and reception studies' techniques to determine what characteristics of library policy documents are useful to their audiences. Stuart Ferguson, Philip Hider, Anne Lloyd and Tricia Kelly (Charles Sturt University) described research-in-progress that aims at a clearer understanding of the relationship between knowledge management and LIS managers, including awareness of the LIS domain by knowledge management practitioners.



Not all of the papers presented at RAILS 2 are published here. Those that are published in this collection have all, with one exception, been through the peer review process. (Stephen Ellis's paper is reproduced in full but at the author's request did not undergo peer reviewing.) For a range of reasons some papers were not available for publication and for these the abstract is provided.

In his introduction to RAILS 1 Middleton notes that it 'was initiated with the aspiration of going some way towards an investigation of the research agenda in this country. We did not expect to create such an agenda, but to stimulate the questions that must be raised in order to formulate one' (Middleton 2005, p. 4). RAILS 2 and RAILS 3 (to be held in Perth on 22-23 September 2006) are evidence that this stimulation is starting to take effect and will 'foster further linking of research and practice, a wider awareness of research projects and continuation of the framing of a research agenda in the discipline', as Middleton hoped. Those who attended RAILS 2, and those who read the papers presented at it, will be left in no doubt that LIS research in Australia is in capable hands.

## References

Bradley, F 2005, 'Off the rails', <http://blisspix.net/index.php?p=120>

Middleton, M 2005, 'Seminar Introduction: applying research to practice in information and library studies' in *Research Applications in Information and Library Studies Seminar (RAILS): proceedings of the Research Applications in Information and Library Studies Seminar, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 20 September 2004*. Wagga Wagga, NSW: Centre for Information Studies, 2005.  
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