Understanding the impact of national library association membership: strengthening the profession for sustainability

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Abstract. This paper provides an overview of a recent doctoral research study of the impact of national library associations. The study adopted, with slight modifications, the impact assessment framework provided by ISO 16439:2014 Methods and Procedures for Assessing the Impact of Libraries. Being a phenomenological study it used a qualitative methodology including semi-structured interviews to gather data from 53 members of four national library associations: ALA, ALIA, CILIP and LIANZA. The study identified twelve perceived impacts across the three categories of the study: impact on the individual (4 impacts); impact on the employing organization (3 impacts); and impact on the profession (5 impacts). It also identified three perceived causes of impact: association participation, professional community and leadership.

1. Introduction

Impact assessment has emerged over recent years as the tool that enables us to understand the difference that our products, services and spaces make to our various communities (Markless & Streatfield, 2013; Poll & Payne, 2006; Streatfield & Markless, 2009). Based on social impact assessment methodologies, the framework presented in ISO 16439:2014 Methods and Procedures for Assessing the Impact of Libraries (International Organization for Standardization, 2014) (hereafter referred to as the *Standard*) provided a model that used both inferred evidence (data gathered for other purposes) and solicited evidence (subjective data gathered from community members) to determine impact. Although developed for establishing the impact of libraries and library products and services on their communities, it was adopted for this study as it provided consistent terminology, descriptions and definitions, data collection and analysis processes and guidance regarding the development of thematic concepts to aid the interpretation of the data that until the development of the *Standard* had been lacking.

As many of our library associations struggle to remain aligned with the needs and expectations of their members they face declining strength and influence, and possible demise, through declining membership, participation and engagement, and through financial uncertainty(Henczel, 2014; Henczel & Macauley, 2013). This is particularly important in the case of the national library associations that are regarded as the peak bodies for the profession of librarianship in their respective countries, with responsibility for the accreditation of education for the profession, national advocacy and lobbying and national representation of the profession to government, funders, employers and to society in general. In order for the national library associations to survive and to achieve growth and sustainability through appropriate vision and strategies it is important to consider their value in terms of impact, that is, the difference they make to those who choose to become members and to retain their membership over time. This study, conducted between 2013 and 2015, applied a modified form of the framework provided by the *Standard* to the national library association environment to explore and gather evidence of perceived impact. To align with the ISO model, impact was explored in three categories:

1. Impact on individuals - explored changes in skill and competence; changes in attitude and behaviour; career success and individual well-being.
2. Impact on the employing organization - explored enhanced corporate reputation, professional awareness and the understanding of the value of the profession to the organization.
3. Impact on the profession - explored the impact of the associations on the profession of librarianship including social inclusion and cohesion; information and education; promotion of the profession and sustainability of the profession.

This study comprised 55 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of national library associations in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. The study identified twelve ways in which membership of a national library association was perceived to impact on individual members, their employing organizations and the profession of librarianship.

2. About the study

The aim of this study was to elicit from national library association members their perception of how membership of the national library association has made a difference to themselves, their employing organizations and to the profession of librarianship. This study focused on four national library associations: the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), the American Library Association (ALA), the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) and the UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The central research question for the study was "*What impact does national library association membership have on*

members, employing organizations and the profession of librarianship?" The central question was broken down into three subsidiary questions with the first two aiming to identify and describe the impacts within each category (individual, employing organization and profession), and the third subsidiary question aiming to identify and describe the perceived causes of impact. The subsidiary questions were:

(1) What are the elements of impact that relate to each category (individual, employing organization and the profession)?
(2) What is the nature of the impact that relates to each category (individual, employing organization and the profession)?
(3) What does the association do that causes the impact?

The study was phenomenological with the focus on obtaining rich and detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences to facilitate the development of an in-depth understanding of the perceived impacts and their causes. In line with the criteria for phenomenological research, the participants were engaged because of their lived experience with the phenomenon, that is, their association membership. Participants were members, or past members, of one or more of the four national library associations covered by the study. In total 53 national association members participated in this study, with two participants responding about their experiences with two different associations making a total of 55 interviews which was considered large enough to provide the breadth of experience necessary for the study. The total participant cohort comprised 20 ALA members, 14 ALIA members, 13 CILIP members and eight LIANZA members. This number of participants was not predefined, but reflected the point at which theoretical saturation was reached, that is, the point at which no additional new data was being presented. The study used solicited evidence in the form of qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Data was managed using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, which aided the analysis process through coding and the interpretation process through the development of network views.

Twelve perceived impacts were identified from the analysis of the interview data. Four related to perceived impacts on the individual, three to perceived impacts on the employing organization and five to perceived impacts on the profession. Three related perceived causes of impact were identified.

3. Perceived Impacts – On the Individual
Four of the perceived impacts related to individuals. They were skill and competence, attitude and behaviour, career success and individual well-being.

Impact statement 1 – Skill and competence
Association participation had a positive impact on the skill and competence of individual members. Association participation included volunteering for association activities, professional development (attending training and other

professional development activities, and conferences provided by the association) and through accessing information provided by the association through its publications, e-lists, website and other communications.

The study described the impact of association membership on skill and competence levels as the acquisition of basic and more complex skills as well as the improvement of existing skills. As competence requires skill and knowledge as well as the capacity and capability to apply the skill and knowledge, the impact included awareness, or cognizance, and the development of knowledge. Participants felt that their national library association membership had a positive impact on their skill and competence.

Impact statement 2 – Changes in attitude and behaviour

The professional community created by the members of the association had a positive impact on the attitude and behaviour of individual members. The professional community caused the development of professional values, which caused changes to attitude and behaviour.

Participants regarded changes in attitude and behaviour such as higher self-confidence, independence and increased motivation to be caused by the professional community created by association members as they participated in association activities. Changes were caused by contact with others, learning from them and collaborating with them within the professional community of the association. Participants felt that their national library association membership had a positive impact on their attitude and behaviour.

Impact statement 3 – Career Success

Association participation had a positive impact on the career success of individual members. Association participation provided professional networks members, the development of public equity and a professional focus that contributed to career success.

Participants described career success as career enhancement and career advancement through improvement in skills, critical thinking and currency of skill and knowledge. It also included career success that came about through professional networks and other connections made through association participation. The impact of career success was perceived by the participants to be a positive one.

Impact statement 4 – Individual well-being

The professional community created by the members of the association had a positive impact on the individual well-being of individual members. The professional community caused the development of personal growth, which contributed to individual well-being.

Participants described well-being as the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. Their responses associated this closely with the connectedness they felt through the association membership, describing the aspects of well-being as having a safe and comfortable place to congregate; to have access to the information they need; to be able to connect with others and participate in group

activities; to experience a feeling of equality and a sense of belonging. This study regarded the association, the workplace and the profession as communities within which the individual existed. Participants felt that their national library association membership had a positive impact on their individual well-being.

4. Perceived Impacts - On the Employing Organization

Three of the perceived impacts related to employing organizations. They were corporate reputation, professional awareness and understanding the value of the profession to the organization.

Impact statement 5 – Corporate reputation

Association participation enabled members to have a positive impact on the reputation of their employing organization.

This study describes corporate reputation as a perceived impact on the employing organization resulting from having employees who are members of their national library association. This includes the reputation of the organization within its community and industry. Participants felt that their national library association membership had a positive impact on the reputation of their employing organization.

Impact statement 6 – Professional awareness

The development of professional awareness through association participation enabled members to have a positive impact on their employing organization.

The study describes professional awareness as being cognizant of the profession in terms of best practice, new developments, issues and trends, and innovation. It also includes increased awareness of the industry in which the organization operates. Participants felt that the increased professional awareness they developed through association participation had a positive impact on their employing organization.

Impact statement 7 – Understanding the value of the profession to the organization

Association participation enabled members to have a positive impact on how well their employing organization understood the value of the profession. Through association participation they were able to establish respect for the profession of librarianship and trust in themselves as professionals.

By establishing an understanding of the value of the profession to the organization, the organization can leverage the knowledge and skill of the professionals to its benefit. Participants felt that an impact of professional association participation on employers was the increased respect and trust for the profession and an increased understanding of the scope of professional skills. Participants felt that their national library association membership had a positive impact on how well their employer understood the value of the profession to the organization.

5. Perceived Impacts - On the Profession

Five of the perceived impacts related to the profession. They were social inclusion and cohesion, information and education, promotion of the profession and the sustainability of the profession.

Impact statement 8 – Social inclusion and cohesion

Association participation had a positive impact on the social inclusion and cohesion of the profession. Association participation caused the communication and engagement that in turn caused social inclusion and cohesion of the profession.

The study describes social inclusion as embracing groups and individuals within the profession and supporting them equitably within the profession. It describes social cohesion as strengthening connections between the individuals and groups within the profession. Participants felt that the association impacted on the profession of librarianship by facilitating the social inclusion of members of the profession and the social cohesion of the profession. Participants felt that the social inclusion and cohesion of the profession was an impact of association membership.

Impact statement 9 – Information and education

Association participation had a positive impact on the information and education available to the profession. Association participation contributed to events and programs that created the information, education and resources, and caused knowledge and skill acquisition and transfer that contributed to the information, education and resources available to the profession.

Participants felt that the provision of access to information and education to the profession was an impact of national library association membership. Within the impact of access to information, education and resources there were two elements resulting from association participation that emerged from the interview data. They were events and programs, and knowledge and skill acquisition and transfer.

Impact statement 10 - Education

The leadership provided by the association had a positive impact on the education for the profession.

Participants felt that an impact of the professional association on the profession it supports is the shaping of formal education that leads to professional qualifications and accreditation. This was regarded as an element of the leadership role that the association has with regard to the profession.

Impact statement 11 – Promotion of the profession

The leadership provided by the association had a positive impact on the promotion of the profession through marketing, standards and guidelines and advocacy and lobbying.

The study describes the promotion of the profession as provision of information about the profession to ensure understanding of the purpose and scope of the

profession and the expertise that the profession provides to organizations, communities and to society at large. The promotion of the profession fosters pride and professional identity. Participants felt that the association impacted on the profession of librarianship by promoting the culture and identity of the profession. Participants felt that the promotion of the profession was a positive impact of national library association membership.

Impact statement 12 – Sustainability of the profession
The leadership provided by the association had a positive impact on the sustainability of the profession by developing respect and trust for the profession, recruitment, ensuring that the terminology used within the profession is appropriate and consistent, establishing a vision for the profession and supporting the profession in its unification as it achieves the vision.
Participants felt that the association impacted on the sustainability of the profession by ensuring that it survives to serve future generations. Some had concerns that the profession is not sustainable in its present form, while others felt that the associations are not geared up operationally to ensure their sustainability. Participants felt that the sustainability of the profession was an impact of national library association membership.

6. The Perceived Causes of Impact – Association Participation
The analysis of the interview data identified three causes of impact: association participation, professional community and leadership. In working with the interview data through the analysis processes it became evident that one of the themes, association participation, was pervasive across the categories as well as within them while professional community and leadership sit within individual categories.

Association participation was described by the study as participation in association activities and events and through volunteering, attending events and programs and accessing information through association publications and reports and through its social media channels, website and other communications.

Association participation in relation to the individual
Participants regarded association participation through volunteering, professional development and accessing information as causes of changes in skill and competence. Through participation the members found role models and mentors who provided them with informal learning opportunities that influenced the development of confidence, pride, motivation and professionalism. Professional identity and engagement, combined with increased skill, competence and confidence influenced their professionalism (performance levels and decision-making) in the workplace. They felt that it increased their professional credibility and empowered them to operate as professionals within their workplace. The establishment of personal friendships created a feeling of

strength through being part of a larger group and influenced their desire to retain association membership over time.

Association participation in relation to the employing organization

Association participation through volunteering, professional development and accessing information impacted on the corporate reputation of the employing organization. It improved the employers understanding of the profession and enhanced the professional awareness of the professionals in terms of their professional literacy, that is, their understanding the profession in terms of its structure and constraints, its scope as well as its vocabulary, employment and career opportunities.

Association participation in relation to the profession

Association participation had a positive impact on the social inclusion and cohesion of the profession by providing volunteer and other participation opportunities for members at all levels of the professional hierarchy, all career stages, all activity levels and all specialties in terms of their sector affiliation. How well the association engaged members through communications and products and services influenced members' willingness and desire to participate and retain their association membership. Their level of engagement was influenced by the communications provided by the association with members feeling that the effectiveness of the communication influenced how closely tied to the association they felt and whether or not they chose to retain their membership over time.

7. The Perceived Causes of Impact - Professional community

Professional communities share values, reflective dialogue, information, practice and knowledge, focus on professional learning, and collaboration and contributes to the development of professional values, professional focus and personal growth. By taking on volunteer roles and by participating in association activities, members created the professional community within the association. The support provided to individuals by the professional community caused members to feel that they were not alone and part of a greater force, enabling them to further develop their confidence, and gain in strength and emotional energy. The professional community was described as a 'safe haven' where issues could be discussed and debated away from the workplace and as a 'safe testing ground' for new ideas. It was regarded as the conduit that provided an opportunity for participants to think beyond the workplace and to engage with, and become active in, the profession. The professional community influenced participation levels by motivating members to participate in the association activities and events, which enabled individuals to maintain their professional awareness and learn, grow and connect.

8. The Perceived Causes of Impact - Leadership

Leadership was described by the study as the ability to make sound decisions on behalf of the profession, to inspire others to perform, to set and achieve goals

and willingness to embrace change. It includes the leadership of the association. Participants felt that the leadership role of the national associations comprised education, marketing, standards and guidelines, advocacy and lobbying, nomenclature, recruitment, respect and trust and vision and unification.

9. **Conclusion - A Sustainable future for the Profession**

The profession of librarianship will be sustainable if it attracts appropriate people to it and if those people can be employed once they have completed their formal education. To attract people to the profession it requires a clear disciplinary body of knowledge and clear boundaries (or at least acknowledged shared boundaries with other fields or disciplines). It also needs to be valued alongside other professions in society and valued within the organizations in which the members are employed (Henczel, 2015). Each of these influence the professional identity that individuals develop, as they are educated in indoctrinated into the profession, and consequently the professionalism reflected by their behaviour and attitude in their workplaces and within the profession. This study has identified twelve perceived impacts that the national library association membership has on individuals, employers and the profession itself, each of which has the potential to contribute to the sustainability of the profession.

The study has contributed to research methodologies by testing the use of a qualitative assessment tool in a way that could be transferable to other associations both within and external to the library environment and to enable it to be adapted more broadly for other purposes within the library and information environment. Although focusing on national library associations, the study and its findings are relevant across a wide range of associations supporting the LIS profession and also those supporting other professions.

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