

# Trends in graduate employment

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The Information Studies teaching area at Curtin University of Technology regularly surveys graduates in order to assess 'graduate outcomes'. The coverage of the survey includes the type of work currently being undertaken by graduates, the security of tenure in their position, the level of professionalism in their employment, and their general employment history since completing their qualifying course. The survey provides important information regarding the employability of graduates and helps teaching staff with ongoing course development.

The surveys are conducted each five years and the recipients are graduates who have completed courses within that period. The surveys are delayed until approximately 18 months after the most recent course completions in order to enable graduates sufficient time to find relevant work. The most recent survey included graduates from the period 1998–2002. Previous surveys had covered the years 1988–1992 and 1993–1997. A significant characteristic of these surveys is that as closely as possible the same survey questions are asked each time, thus enabling a useful comparison of the data.

The data gathered in this way is incomplete in that not all survey recipients respond (response rates have varied from 37 to 49 per cent), but when the results of the three surveys are compared they do begin to indicate employment trends over this 15 year period. This brief report highlights some of the significant indicators of employment trends over this period. A more detailed account can be found in Paul Genoni and Kerry Smith, 'Graduate employment outcomes for qualifying library and records management courses at Curtin University of Technology, 1998–2002', in *The Australian Library Journal*, 54(4), 2005.

Some of the key findings include an increase in respondents who describe themselves as working full time. This figure has increased from 60.9 per cent for the first survey and 70.5 per cent for the most recent. There has been a corresponding decline in those who were either looking for work or seeking to increase their working hours, from 14.1 to 9 per cent.

There has been a decline in total respondents who described their occupation as 'librarianship' (from 69.2 to 61.7 per cent) and increases in records management (RM) and archives. These figures are a little misleading, however, in that they reflect the development of new RM courses at Curtin. The percentage of library graduates who describe their work as 'librarianship' has increased from 69.2 to 77.1 per cent.

Of respondents to the most recent survey, of the 10.3 per cent who described their employ-

ment as 'other information work', over half included the word 'research' in the description of their current work. Other descriptions included 'project management', 'administration', and 'editing, grant applications, information searches'.

The graduates who have been employed 'continuously' or 'fairly continuously' improved from 60.3 per cent (1988–92) to 83.2 per cent (1998–2002). On the other hand, those who described their employment history as 'long undesired periods of unemployment' or 'continuously unemployed' declined over the same period from 13.5 to 4.4 per cent.

The percentage of respondents describing their work as 'professional' level has been consistent over the three surveys (72.1 to 73.8 per cent); there has been a rise in those describing their work as 'para-professional' and a corresponding decline in those who believed they have found 'unskilled' work.

There is evidence that the profession is resisting trends towards casualisation. Those who describe themselves as 'permanently' employed has risen over the surveys from 70.9 to 81.3 per cent, and this has been offset by a reduction in both 'limited term contract' and 'casual' employment.

Each survey revealed the mature age of the graduates. This has implications for their longevity in the workplace and the ability of the profession to replace retirements. Current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicates that 80.9 per cent of librarians are over 35 years old, as compared to 58.2 per cent of the general workforce (ABS 2005b). This higher ABS figure is to be expected given that it includes all librarians and not only recent graduates. Taken together, however, these two sets of data suggest that

the information professions are not only troubled by an ageing workforce, but a workforce that is already decidedly mature as they enter the profession.

In summary, the results are reporting improvements in most basic indicators of employment outcomes. There are some complicating factors when interpreting the data. Curtin is now producing slightly fewer graduates than during the period of the first survey, and the general employment outlook in most sectors has improved over the past 15 years. On the basis of the results, however, it would appear that the employment outlook for individual graduates has improved over the duration of the surveys.

It is also unclear as to how 'national' these results might be, although it should be noted that Curtin draws students from all states of Australia. ■

