

Leadership roles and competencies of Australian health sciences library leaders

Ann Ritchie

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7453-5345>

This article is based on a presentation delivered at the HLA Conference in Sydney, 21-22 August 2025. It highlights the main insights that emerged from a study that explored the leadership roles and competencies of Australian health science librarians. The full description of the study is published in a chapter of a book entitled *Leading libraries: perspectives from lived experiences*¹. My co-authors are Michele Gaca, Alice Anderson and Gemma Siemensma. In developing our combined perspective about characteristics of effective leaders in health sciences libraries in the context of the Australian health system, we incorporated our reflections on our individual and shared experiences in our professional leadership journeys.

The health and information sciences context

The chapter begins with an evidence summary that sets out what is currently known about the Australian health library and information services workforce, their professional qualifications, and the health environment in which they work. The summary highlights several factors contributing to the increasing complexity and specialist nature of health librarians' roles and the competencies associated with their scopes of practice. These factors include:

- the transformative influence of digital health that has changed not only clinical care, but also the way that library and information services are delivered, and the work and professional development needs of health librarians and health library technicians;
- the diversity of employing healthcare, education and research organisations in the multi-layered health system in which they operate;
- the multiplicity and interconnectedness of client groups that health libraries serve; and
- the disproportionate staffing ratios of the health library workforce when compared with national and international recommended staffing ratios.

In addition to navigating the complex Australian health system, contemporary health library leaders have to stay abreast of developments in both the health and

¹ Ritchie, A., Gaca, M., Anderson, A., & Siemensma, G. (2026) Leadership roles and competencies of Australian health science librarians - a perspective. In Kumaran M. & McNeil, (Eds.) *Leading libraries: perspectives from lived experiences*. (Foreword by T.A. Dawes.) ALA Editions. [In Press]

information sectors, at the same time, taking responsibility for leading their teams through the transformative changes that are occurring in the evolving digital health environment.

Literature review

Five main themes about effective leadership characteristics emerged from a literature review of leadership in international health sciences libraries. These themes were synthesised with an analysis of four small group, structured consultations that the authors conducted with seventeen Australian health science library leaders². In essence these themes were:

1. Strategic leadership – strategic leaders align the libraries’ purpose and future vision with the ultimate goals of their organisations – in the health world, these are ultimately about patient care and population health.

Indeed, according to the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care’s (ACSQHC) Australian National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards, leadership is a key component of clinical governance, which is necessary for achieving safe and high-quality health outcomes (ACSQHC, 2021³). Effective leadership in the health sciences libraries context involves strategic thinking, external engagement with the libraries’ parent organisations, and fostering innovation. Cultivating adaptable skills and a shared vision are seen as key to driving meaningful change both within and beyond the library.

2. Leadership skills development – leadership skills can be learnt. Essential skills include relationship building, advocacy, communication, project management and financial literacy, all of which can be cultivated through targeted development. Leaders have a commitment to Continuing Professional Development both for their teams, where they have a view to succession planning and give their staff opportunities to “have a go”, and also for continuously updating and developing their own knowledge base and leadership skills.
3. Workforce development – effective leaders invest in their staff, and have a strategic workforce development plan. They need to recruit strategically, support professional growth and prepare for leadership succession. This includes fostering non-traditional roles and expanding into the practice environment as evidence-based practice specialists or informationists.

² We thank our leaders who took part in the small group discussions and generously contributed their thoughts and ideas.

³ Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. (2021). The NSQHS Standards (2nd ed.). ACSQHC. <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/standards/nsqhs-standards>

4. Navigating change – change is a central concern, requiring leaders to possess vision and strong change management skills. Change can be stressful. Leaders often have to rise above the everyday processes of management and lead their teams through uncertain times. Leaders need a balance of intellectual and analytical “hard” skills mixed with “soft” interpersonal skills to guide their teams through transitions. Effective leadership involves promoting diversity and maintaining agility to ensure library services remain impactful, relevant and future-ready.
5. Risk taking and innovation – “digital transformation” is the zeitgeist of the health environment. The changes brought about by emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), telemedicine, and data analytics have meant that leaders must be adept not only at change management, but also innovation and risk taking. In libraries this has often manifested as the need to transform traditional services and physical spaces by repurposing them and realigning with organisational goals. Leaders understand that innovation must always be grounded in a deep knowledge and understanding of professional values, a strong sense of purpose, a vision for the future, and a strategy for how to achieve it. Leaders embrace and model risk-taking to foster innovation, engage new stakeholders and collaborations, and embed library services into healthcare practice.

Roles and responsibilities of health library leaders

In the health library and information services context, there are three spheres of interconnected leadership roles and activities where leaders show a highly developed sense of responsibility:

- in a day-to-day context, as services directors, managers and team leaders, leaders have the positional authority to direct others, and make decisions;
- in an organisational context, leaders may use the authority of their position and professional standing to influence others, represent their teams, and “claim a space” for the library as the legitimate authority in specific areas of responsibility;
- within the library profession, leaders work cooperatively with colleagues and associates, and use their leadership skills to influence others in ways that benefit the profession as a whole; leaders forge and strengthen connections with their networks, and collaborate with colleagues in research, marketing and advocacy so the profession speaks with a unified voice; it is in this sphere of activity that professional standards are set and values are upheld.

Thus, health science library leaders operate within three interconnected spheres of functional activity with varying roles and levels of positional authority – in their library services, their organisations, and their profession. As library managers,

directors or team leaders, leaders have an immediate impact on tasks and team dynamics; within organisations, library leaders help shape culture and strategy; and leadership in the professional sphere influences the direction of our broader industry, the development, growth and sustainability of the profession. Displaying a highly developed sense of responsibility in all three spheres is a common factor of effective leadership in health libraries.

Leadership in health sciences libraries brings with it a unique set of challenges including the fact that working in a health organisation is intrinsically a “life and death” proposition. Although health librarians are generally not involved with direct patient care, the culture of caring is pervasive and the stress of occupational burnout is ever present. Being a leader in such an environment brings with it a “duty of care” for the wellbeing of colleagues and staff. As well as caring for others, leaders need strategies for their own self-care so they can continue to enable their teams to deliver evidence-based knowledge services that underpin sound information governance, and ultimately contribute to the overarching goals of their organisations and the wider health system – improved patient care and population health.

Conclusion

There are many different theories about leadership styles that are espoused in countless books and articles, and individual leaders display a wide variety of characteristics. Leadership skills can be learnt, and leadership competencies must be cultivated. It is incumbent on leaders of health sciences libraries to invest in their own CPD and that of their staff. The ongoing viability of health sciences libraries is dependent on the ability of their leaders to continuously update their knowledge, to innovate and drive sustainable change, and to resource, position, empower and motivate their teams.

Because of the complexity of the Australian health system and the collegiate and voluntary nature of the professional environment, health library leaders’ abilities to lead and collaborate in groups that cross disciplines, organisations and sectors, and their cooperative skills that support strategic, system-wide, professional initiatives, are vitally important.

Addendum

The consultations and research undertaken in writing this chapter have helped to inform the revision of the Leadership and Management Competency Area of the ALIA/HLA Competencies (2018)⁴. The revised set of Competencies for Health Librarians and Health Library Technicians will be published in the first quarter of 2026.

⁴ <https://read.alia.org.au/alia-hla-competencies>