

ALIA HLA Competencies Review 2018

Ann Ritchie
ÀLIA/HLA

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National Manager ALIA/HLA

What is a health library and information professional? What do they do and why do they do it – now and into the future?

The initial response to these types of 'who?', 'what?', 'when?', 'where?', 'how?' and 'why?' questions might be that a health librarian is any librarian who works in a health library and finds information for clients in a timely way. But does that define our role sufficiently? Does where we work differentiate us from anyone (or thing) performing a quick internet search on a health-related topic?

There is no doubt that AI (which in many cases refers simply to machine learning) is challenging many transactional and repetitive processes in all fields of work.

So in the not-too-distant future, will there be any need for information professionals who design and execute literature searches, or create metadata schema and text mining techniques for retrieving information and data hidden in multi-layered, opaque electronic documents and databases? In an 'internet of things' ehealth information environment, will anyone need the human communication skills to connect with health professionals to quiz them about the real intent of their queries?

Health professionals in a variety of roles are highly skilled at treating patients; they have great depth of knowledge and their teaching skills have been honed through a long tradition of professional learning and specialist education; and many have expertise in conducting research, including systematic reviews. Will they need to talk to someone to refine their clinical queries or translate their research topics into answerable questions? Will they also be adept at or have the time to update their knowledge about sources of health information and the intricacies of literature searching?

We grappled with these types of future-oriented questions in the process of revising HLA's Competencies.

We envisioned that the health library professional of the future would be a dynamic, innovative, tech-savvy, evidence-based practitioner with advanced health information knowledge, skills and attributes.

Our challenge was to describe as comprehensively as possible, the competencies that health librarians need to do their jobs now, as well as fashioning a template that would frame emerging roles and evolving job descriptions, and direct the education of our future workforce.

Definition of competencies

Competencies are generally described as integrated sets of Knowledge, Skills and Attributes (KSAs) that are needed to perform tasks in a particular field or circumstance. Competencies are also said to be observable, measurable and able to be taught. Some competency frameworks have basic and advanced levels of practice, and performance measures by which these can be measured.

HLA's eight Competency Areas describe the KSAs that health library and information professionals need to perform in their jobs in the health sector.

The Competency Areas cover:

1. The health environment
2. Reference and research
3. Resources
4. Leadership and management
5. Digital, ehealth and technology
6. Health literacy and teaching
7. Health research
8. Professionalism

Each Competency Area provides a general description, a statement about the level of proficiency that may be demonstrated, as well as an expandable list of dot points which comprise that area. It is not expected that everyone will be highly skilled in all of the areas, but at least have a basic understanding of them. It is likely that job descriptions will define the scopes of practice and depth of knowledge of particular roles and focus on a few key areas.

For a full description of each of the Competency Areas see https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/HLA%20Competencies_0.pdf

ALIA/HLA Competencies. History

Before 2009, there were no Australian health librarianship competencies and no specialised education pathways for health library and information professionals to follow. The HLA Competencies were created as part of HLA's Workforce and Education Research Project (ALIA, 2011). The project team adapted the US Medical Library Association's (MLA's) set of seven competencies (2007) to suit the Australian environment. At this time, HLA designed the eighth Competency Area relating to 'being a health professional' as this was recognised as an essential domain of competence for all health professionals.

The HLA Competencies review was conducted in 2018, and led by Ann Ritchie, with the support of the HLA Executive and many others from the health library community.

The main objective was to update the initial HLA Competencies in line with the changing health services environment in which health library professionals practised, and to compare and learn from equivalent international and national health information professional competency sets.

It was intended that the revised competencies would provide a comprehensive and future-oriented framework that could inform strategic workforce planning as well as guide the development of post-graduate education and professional development for the specialist health library and information profession.

How did we do it? Method

The first stage in reviewing the HLA Competencies was to compare the current set with those of our international equivalents, including the health/medical library associations of the US, UK, New Zealand, Ireland, and Canada. This was done using a literature review, desktop research and personal communications.

In May 2017, MLA published their newly revised *Competencies for Lifelong Learning and Professional Success*, the result of a two and a half year consultative review project by a special task force (Medical Library Association, 2017).

The MLA Competencies were reduced in number from seven to six (the specific competency areas covering 'technology' and 'the health environment' were removed, and following the lead of HLA, the domain of 'professionalism' was added).

In examining the full set of MLA competencies, it appeared that the technology competency area had been absorbed into several other areas. The HLA Executive decided that with the growing importance of digital and ehealth (especially following the 2018 release of the Australian Digital Health Agency's *National Digital Health Strategy*) we needed to strengthen the informatics/technology-related competency area as an essential skillset for all health information professionals, rather than diminish its prominence.

In the UK, the Health Libraries Group of CILIP and the NHS Health Education England endorsed a health version of the generic librarian competencies, known as the Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (2014). Comparing these with the HLA Competencies, it was found that information resources and collections featured prominently in many of the UK competencies. The HLA Executive's view was that our corresponding 'resources' competency area needed to be maintained as a single, essential skillset. It was recognised, however, that the trend towards 'library as service' rather than 'library as collection' or 'library as place' meant that the health librarian's professional expertise (rather than the resources themselves) is the *sine qua non* of the service.

In New Zealand, LIANZA's competencies (Bodies of Knowledge) are not specific to health librarianship, and while the *Standards for New Zealand Health Libraries* (developed by LIANZA's Health Special Interest Group, 2008) has a section on Human Resources, the document does not mention competencies.

Lawton and Burns (2014) compared the competencies of international health library associations with the practical experience of health librarians in Ireland. At the time of the HLA Competencies review, there were no updated competency sets for Irish health librarians.

A representative of the Canadian Health Library Association advised that Canadian health libraries used the MLA competencies (personal communication, 2018).

The next stage of the review was to consult with a broad audience of health librarians on a draft of the revised HLA Competencies in light of international comparisons. The draft was structured to maintain the set of eight competency areas, with some re-naming and revisions to the detail of the descriptions. Circulation via e-lists and discussions with key informants took place over the next months, as the Competencies were gradually refined to become more precise, comprehensive and forward-looking.

At the same time that the HLA project was occurring, the Health Information Workforce Alliance (HIWA¹), comprising the five professional groups representing health librarians, health information managers, clinical coders, and various groups of health informatics/systems practitioners, managers and educators, had been mapping the competencies of each group. This will result in a national capability framework for all Australian health information professions.

The results of the comparison of the revised HLA Competencies with the competency frameworks of international health library associations (US and UK) and the HIWA members are outlined in a poster (EAHIL, Basel, June 2019; also presented at the HLA PD Day; Ritchie, 2019) The Tables in the poster show that there are only minor differences in the broad competency areas amongst the international library associations. The comparison of the domains illustrates that health librarians are unique amongst all the health information professions in their provision of reference and research services (HLA domain number 2). While the detailed descriptions reveal that many of the areas are complementary, there is overlap in some aspects of other areas. There is, however, considerable variation amongst the groups in their methods for attaining and maintaining specialist certification or credentials.

What next? Education

Ma et al's (2018) scoping review of emerging roles in health librarianship found that the foremost roles emerged as nine distinct categories. The HLA Competencies can be mapped to all nine of these. The authors are critical of current health librarianship education in the US, stating that 'outdated curricula and nonspecific learning outcomes often neglect current emerging demands and challenges that health sciences libraries face'. They refer to 'the disconnect between the general knowledge base of librarianship and the specialized competency requirements for HIPs.'

As a set of specialised skills, the HLA Competencies build on and extend the basic KSAs that an entry-level librarian or library technician learns in their studies. It had long been recognised that an initial qualification was not enough to work in the health sector as a specialist health information professional. No library schools in Australia prepare graduates to practise in a health sector job in a systematic or competency-based curriculum. On the job

¹ HIWA was formed in 2017 as a forum for sharing and advocating for the health information workforce. It comprises representatives from ALIA/HLA, the Health Information Management Association of Australia (HIMAA), Health Informatics Society of Australia (HISA), the Australasian College of Health Informatics (ACHI), and the Australasian College of Health Service Management (ACHSM).

training has been the only avenue for gaining a health specialist skill set, extending the basic KSAs gained through generalist education.

To bridge this gap, HLA partnered initially with QUT to create the Health Librarianship Essentials online course, which ran in 2015 and 2015 with more than 50 participants. With the unfortunate demise of the QUT library school, we had to find a new home. We have now transformed, updated and added to the original content in line with the newly revised competencies. The Digital Health Information Services unit is now being presented in partnership with the University of Melbourne's Health and BioInformatics Centre (HaBIC). HLA and ALIA have provided scholarships for several deserving health librarians who have demonstrated their commitment to our profession.

Throughout the year, HLA also delivers specially designed professional development events focusing on prioritised competency areas. These have included the 'All about data' PD Day and workshops held in July this year, and previous events focusing on systematic reviews; research data management workshops run in conjunction with the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC), and advanced searching workshops delivered for the past four years taught by Carol Lefebvre and Julie Glanville.

All health library and information professionals who are ALIA members can become certified in the health specialisation. The HLA Professional Development website (<https://www.alia.org.au/groups/HLA/hla-professional-development-education-and-training>) is the source of information about the Competency framework, and tools such as the Skills Audit Checklist and the list of courses mapped to the competency areas.

Conclusion

The ALIA/HLA Competency review project has delivered a roadmap for the future health library and information professional workforce, in which our knowledge, skills and attributes are key components of health information professional teams.

Australia's *National Digital Health Strategy* is a 'framework for action' to 2022. It is critical that health librarians have the digital, e-health, health informatics and data science knowledge and skills base to contribute effectively to the *Strategy*.

We know that simply promoting the HLA Competencies is not enough! To re-invent our workforce and enable individuals to build professional development portfolios for careers that are relevant in the context of the

evolving health workforce, we need to work with educators to offer high-quality micro credentialled education opportunities that develop these prioritised and unique competency areas.

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