

FRONT LINE



Lynn Allen, President, ALIA

Last year at IFLA in Paris, the second International Meeting on Research in Information Science was held, known as IMRIS2. It was a small meeting but enthusiastic and international in its representatives from Australia, Canada, the US, the UK, Senegal, Israel, Poland and France. In Stockholm this year it is hoped to hold IMRIS3 as a formal part of the IFLA program proper and I certainly support such a move. Andy Exon, Carmel Maguire and I participated as the Australian contingent and we all enjoyed a most challenging day.

You may be wondering what this has to do with ALIA but there has been some discussion among several IFLA attendees on the role ALIA might play in the promotion of research skills and projects, not only in Australia but linking into the international research community. We also need to resolve what our IFLA commitments are to be.

The topic of ACLIS's role in research was the subject of some discussion at a forum of ACLIS members in Perth this year. Unlike ALIA, ACLIS has a clear vision of its role in research activities, namely that the organisation will fund and support projects which relate to its action plan and will confine itself to projects within Australia's borders.

Thus the theoretical research, longitudinal studies or research which cannot demonstrate tangible ACLIS related results in an agreed reasonably short time frame, become those areas which could be supported by ALIA. Of course this does not prevent joint ventures with organisations like ACLIS as well. One view is that this work should be left to tertiary institutions, to practising information scientists/theorists or institutions such as state and university libraries or government department funded agencies.

ALIA's place in this research continuum needs to be defined, even if we decide in the end we have none, although this could be a difficult position to justify, given the role of the Board of Education. The Board is actively looking at its role and will make its recommendations in due course.

So, for the sake of discussion, what could ALIA do? Here are some suggestions:

- sponsor projects
- encourage discussion on the issue at our conferences
- publish research reports
- distribute research reports from other countries, operate as a clearing house
- run courses on research skills
- lobby for a system similar to the British Library R & D Department.

A potential major initiative would be to suggest to the IFLA organisers that a mid-winter (their mid-winter) regional meeting on research be held in Australia in 1992. Some of us are exploring this possibility with Perth as the location.

Some people may well argue that 'pure' or 'theoretical' research is difficult in the field of librarianship. However, by combining our theory and skills with some of the work being done by information theoreticians and by picking up management theories and methodologies (it can be argued librarianship is a branch of management?) we could focus on some issues. These would include how our clients phrase questions for information seeking, how they identify possible solutions and thus how successful they are in using libraries or other information sources. The level of information skills in the community is important to and how this relates to literacy questions.

Recently I have read a large proportion of British Library R & D material as well as a publication called *Rethinking the library in the information age: Issues in library research, proposals for the 1990s*. The possibility of establishing formal links with US and UK government researchers is an interesting one. It probably happens already in the library schools but how many in the profession have access to this material? How much of what we do in our institutions could be reinventing the wheel? Maybe nothing, but I'm not sure that administrators necessarily have access to such findings.

It is too easy to suggest that all this be left to our overworked academic colleagues. Clearly some of this work can be done by postgraduate students and by practising academics but we all know how little resources are available

for these areas. Some way of making research a part of library administrators day to day operations and making theoretical research relevant to the needs of information seekers is needed. That is what the discussion is all about and that is what needs to be pursued. The role of ALIA in all of this awaits definition.

Some of these topics will be addressed at the Perth conference — hope you've all filled in your early bird registrations and I look forward to continuing this discussion.

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