

# *inCite* 7

Newsletter of the Australian Library & Information Association

## New statements on library and information education And fresh tasks for the profession

ALIA's hard-working Board of Education has suggested a redrafting of the introduction to the several 'Statements' which provide the framework for education in librarianship and information work in Australia. The revised introduction 'Library and Information Service Work' is being circulated to Divisions and library schools for comment; the latter will have the task of translating the statement into curricular form, with all that that entails: assessment criteria, course structure, and skills inculcation. There will also be an enlarged requirement in the field of continuing education and professional development, a responsibility jointly shared by ALIA and the educators in bridging the gap between the old criteria and the new.

At the heart of the revision is a new summary of tasks to be carried out:

'In facilitating the transfer of information from the point of origin to those who need it, tasks carried out by library and information service personnel include:

- diagnosing information needs
- designing information products and services
- selecting information
- evaluating information
- synthesising information
- structuring information
- organising information
- preserving information
- packaging information
- educating clients to access and use information
- advocating the provision of information services.'

This is far more pro-active than the statement it is intended to replace. It might be helpful to work through this revised list of tasks exploring possible ramifications as we go.

'Diagnosing information needs'. The connotations of the verb 'to diagnose' are

powerful; the profession in which the act of diagnosis most typically occurs is obviously the medical one. I have long argued that the provision of information as a social transaction will not be properly valued until there is a proper diagnosis of the enquirer's needs, carried out in an appropriate context which

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*'Evaluating information... begins to take us into the area of enhanced responsibility...'*

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allows for privacy, confidentiality and the careful evaluation of the enquirer's needs. In most libraries, this transaction occurs in circumstances roughly parallel to those which obtain when buying a train ticket.

The act of diagnosis (and much of what is said under this heading will apply to other aspects of the revised statement) is a **skill**; it cannot be learned solely in the academy, although an understanding of its basic elements may well be conferred. Necessarily, the bulk of contemporary education for the profession is content-based, rather than skill-oriented; it follows that either the curriculum will have to be lengthened to allow for the inculcation, development and assessment of skill, or some of the current content will have to be compressed (still further) or dumped. It may also be necessary to train the trainers, in view of the widening gap between the academies and the work-face.

'Designing information products and services'. Hitherto, the bulk of our work has

been involved with the acquisition and use of information products and services which have been designed elsewhere, and which are bought off the shelf. Some of us have actually designed products, ranging from guides to collections to relatively sophisticated tools such as the OPAC. Technology, in the form of desktop publishing, is setting a small but significant part of the agenda here, but paradoxically, the average technician knows more about design than the professional, if only through the bulletin-board aspect of his/her training. If we are to be seriously involved in the design of information products and services, we are all going to have to go back to school, perhaps starting with ALIA's Board of Education itself.

'Selecting information' is a perhaps less pregnant term, or more familiar to us. Book selection is touched on, if not taught, in most curricula, and we all think we can do it. But perhaps we underestimate its complexity, or scamp it, if the dearth of published selection policies is anything to go by. 'Selecting information' may be as difficult or more so. Certainly the impact as between the requester and the selector will be more immediate, and may require an exploration of need in the depth implied by diagnosis. It will no longer suffice merely to provide an armful of books, or a list of references, leaving the enquirer to select from what is often an overwhelming excess of information.

'Evaluating information'. Perhaps this should come before the act of selection? At any rate, it is a powerful ('to determine the value of') verb, and like the other tasks, begins to take us into the area of enhanced *responsibility*, something which will require very careful consideration.

'Synthesising information'. 'Building up; putting together; making a whole out of parts...' Up till now, the act of synthesis has

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another attempt at a library policy, the Victorian Branch welcomes this opportunity to comment. The profession can present its view to government keeping in mind its responsibility to the public served.

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*Branches are only as effective as the office bearers and Branch Council make them.*

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The draft document is seen as the initial step in the policy development process. The draft emphasises planning and coordination between the different sectors. The document begins by defining the primary role of the different library services, which in principle the Branch supports. Looking back at the reviews and debate during the last 4 years on library service provision, public library funding, the setting up of the Council of the State Library of Victoria and the Libraries Board, this draft document can be viewed as an important achievement.

The political, economic and educational changes in Victoria over the last 18 months have been dramatic and far reaching. In the last 4 years there have been six Ministers for the Arts, three in the last 18 months. The

proposed re-development of the State Library of Victoria has finally begun but the Queen Victoria Hospital site which was to fund the project has not been sold. Economic disasters have created a climate of uncertainty with reduction in spending and Government cut backs across all sectors. Educational change has come with the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) replacing the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

The VCE, with a resource based learning approach and emphasis on student independence in learning, is having a dramatic impact upon all library services in all sectors, with the heaviest burden upon public libraries and the State Library of Victoria. Major curriculum changes in post primary education were made with inadequate planning for resourcing in a period of severe cutbacks.

I represented the Branch at a meeting called between the Ministry for Education, the State Library of Victoria, and the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Board to address this urgent issue. The VCE is a matter on which the Branch will continue to work in 1991.

The continuing objectives for the Branch in 1991 can be summarised as Membership and Marketing: service to members, active recruitment, promotion of the benefits of belonging to ALIA, a Branch program to meet members' needs and follow up with members who leave.

The Branch has appointed a Recruitment Officer to assist the Professional Development

Officer. Following the very successful Student Recruitment night in September last year, another is planned for 1991. Final year students will meet a panel representing the different sections to discuss opportunities for employment, the benefits of membership, and the importance of the professional network. Students are encouraged to join up on the night.

Another initiative is the compilation of a speaker's kit for members of Branch Council to use when invited to meetings, library schools, etc. As well, the Branch continues to produce Branch Watch, a monthly newsheet publicising all the forthcoming activities. This is distributed by Branch Council to Sections and as wide a distribution as possible encouraged. All members receive a copy of Vibra, an annual list of office bearers of the Sections, Regional and Special Interest Groups in Victoria.

At the last General Council Meeting membership was identified as one of the National Office's priorities in the implementation of the Strategic Plan. The Victorian Branch strongly supported this; it will complement the Victorian Branch's efforts.

Branches are only as effective as the office bearers and Branch Council make them. Commitment, participation and feed back to the Sections will ensure that the Branch objectives are met. The Victorian Branch has made a good start in 1991. □

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been left to the enquirer, who selects what is felt to be wanted from the undifferentiated mass of information supplied. To a certain extent, technology will call the tune here, as it does in other areas of practice; nonetheless, there will remain a significant degree of discretion in what to leave out, what to supply, and perhaps most importantly, in the indication of omissions.

'Structuring information'. 'Construction; arrangement of parts; manufacturing...' In a sense, what we do in collection-building, but this is an activity relatively remote from actual need, and indeed, the collection-builders themselves will not always be faced with the consequences of their efficiency or otherwise. Building information into a construct is rather more specific and immediate.

'Organising' and 'Preserving information' are already on our agenda, and are things which, given the resources, we already do very well indeed. The future organisation of information may call for us to address micro-issues in more detail, especially if, as is happening elsewhere, the information industry moves further into specialised or niche marketing.

'Packaging information'. 'Packaging' is a term with some negative connotations, but since very little of information packaging finds its way into landfills, we can perhaps ignore these. Certainly the process of packaging is one of the keys to marketing success; this is

evident in the use of specific 'packaging' formats, such as the employment of what used to be called comic strips to convey information of considerable seriousness. Military manuals use this format with great success. Textbooks are also evolving to reflect more effective ways of packaging information, witness the evolution of cooking books over the last decade; and while we're on this point, one of the runaway successes of information packaging has been the *Australian Women's Weekly* series. Very few of the 50 or so recipes in each volume is new, but the packaging is fresh, original, cleverly priced, and sales are in the tens of thousands.

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'Educating clients to access and use information'. Otherwise known, somewhat crudely, as 'information literacy'. For a few practitioners, this may be difficult, as some aspects of the end-user debate indicate. It would be provocative to suggest that there is a tendency for some practitioners to obfuscate this aspect of their work, but, as one or two letters which I have received on the subject of

mentoring reveal, there exists a real reluctance to devolve what are seen as the 'inner mysteries' of the profession to others, even to our own apprentices. Further, not every librarian is by nature an educator, and some further qualification of this tenet may therefore be called for.

'Advocating the provision of information services'. And their retention? 'Advocacy' calls for particular skills, and characteristics; it is not for the faint-hearted, or those with short time horizons. Nevertheless it is the keystone on which all our achievements so far rest. Information services are not provided gratuitously by farsighted and benevolent governments. They never were, even though in the past there were as many advocates outside the profession as from within it. The virtual disappearance of the lay advocate is one of the less desirable side-effects of our professional maturing.

Well, that's the revised statement; it is one of the most important documents of the last decade, with enormous implications; the challenge for us — practitioners, educators and the Board, is to explore these concepts more fully. The looming ELISS Conference in Melbourne (25-26 June) will no doubt address these issues.

The advance, for the revised statement does indeed amount to a major step forward for the profession, carries with it some major implications, challenges and risks, and these should be widely discussed by all Divisions.

*John Levett*