

Mentoring in Western Australia

Paul Genoni brings us up to date with developments

The concept of mentoring has achieved widespread recognition amongst professional groups in recent years and librarians have been no exception. Evidence of ALIA mentoring activity at branch level has already been given in *inCite* with a report by Eva Fisch on the launching of a scheme in Victoria in December last year.

The WA Branch has also been active in this regard, and began to develop a mentoring program in 1991. The idea of a mentoring scheme as a means of professional development was first brought to the attention of the Branch Council by the Special Libraries Section, who felt that their members were often placed at an early stage of their careers in situations where they lacked advice and support from senior colleagues. On a recommendation from then Vice-President Janine Douglas a committee was formed, initially chaired by Kay Poustie, to develop and implement a scheme to be conducted under Branch auspices.

Putting the programs into place

The Mentoring Committee considered a number of mentoring programs operated in Perth by other professional groups before putting a program in place for ALIA (WA) members late in 1992. This program is based on a document setting out the objectives of the program, the role of the mentor, and the general conditions applying to each mentoring partnership.

These conditions aim to establish some 'ground rules' for each mentoring partnership, partly to ensure that the relationship does not interfere with the mentor's normal work responsibilities, and partly to

make it clear to the 'mentee' [Paul used 'mentoree', which I find etymologically indefensible. Eva used 'mentee'. There has to be better term. Ed] what benefits they might reasonably expect from the relationship. It is also made clear to all participants that the onus is on them to negotiate the exact details of the relationship.

The scheme requires ALIA members to come forward and volunteer to be either a mentor or a mentee. Prospective mentees are invited to indicate their professional interests, and then every effort is made to match them with a mentor with experience and skills commensurate with those interests.

To mentor or not to mentor

To date the call for volunteers has attracted a greater response from those interested in being mentored than those interested in mentoring. The committee has addressed this problem by approaching established members of the profession and inviting them to become mentors. The response in these circumstances has been extremely positive, with almost all being prepared to give their time to assist the junior members of the profession. To help identify those members of the profession who might be approached in a particular instance, the Mentoring Committee is comprised of members of the major sections, and currently includes representatives of the Specials, Schools, Technicians, UCRLS and Public Library Sections.

Applications to be mentees have come from a wide range of ALIA members. Not surprisingly, a number have been from recent graduates or students nearing the completion of their studies, but applications have also been received from profes-

sionals re-entering the workforce, and from those who have been practising for several years but still feel the need for an independent and objective adviser.

The Mentoring Committee also has a task in monitoring the success of the program. All mentors and mentees are contacted after the relationship has been in place for six months and again after twelve months, in order to determine their level of satisfaction with the partnership.

...and the responses were...

Responses to date have been encouraging. Pairs have reported a range of responses to questions about how often they have met and the precise nature of the advice given, but they have been almost universally enthusiastic about the program and its advantages. Most encouraging has been the positive response of many of the mentors, who have reported that the benefits do not all accrue to the mentee!

The Committee also believes that it also has a role to play in developing the skills of participants in the mentoring program—it is not sufficient simply to put such relationships in place and assume that the mentors have the necessary skills to conduct them to optimum effect. As a result the Mentoring Committee (in conjunction with the Branch Training and Development Committee) has already held a seminar to discuss some of the issues involved in effective mentoring.

It is hoped that this can be followed by a training session for all those who are currently involved in the program, which will build on some of the issues identified at the seminar. ■